

THE CHALLENGE

Could Minnesota Housing's staff of 265 maintain a sense of agency identity when it was suddenly thrust into telework? Yes, but only if the communications team pulled out all the stops to knit staff and agency leadership together. And if communications were done well, staff might even say they felt more connected apart than they did when they were based in the same office. Survey results indicate that's the case, thanks to an internal communications tool created on the fly to address our new reality: The Daily. Having The Daily in our toolbox took on extra importance when George Floyd was killed at the hands of police. It occurred in Minneapolis, our state's largest city, and civil unrest broke out in the neighborhoods where many of our staff live. The Daily took on a new level of responsibility as the primary communications vehicle among staff as content expanded to include staff and community reactions to Floyd's death in addition to COVID-19 coverage. In this way a communications tool born of necessity helped a housing agency stay focused, united, and committed to anti-racism in a time that could have divided and splintered us instead, if done poorly or not at all.

INNOVATION

When COVID-19 reached Minnesota and Governor Tim Walz ramped up the state response to the global pandemic, momentum built quickly. It was a whirlwind time for us and undoubtedly for many across the country as businesses and agencies scrambled to transform in-person offices into remote work settings. On Thursday, March 12, Minnesota Housing staff members received notification from the state's Management and Budget office to plan for the possibility of telework. On Friday, we received an official email from the Governor asking all staff to telework if feasible. Theoretically it was feasible for all staff, so as of Monday, March 16, 95% of our staff was working from home.

On Tuesday, March 17, our communications staff sent an original all-staff email and a five-minute video featuring Commissioner Jennifer Leimaile Ho, explaining the state's move to telework and reassuring all staff that we would work together to make it as seamless as possible. By Wednesday, we saw there was a tremendous need for a way to reach all staff on a regular basis. We sent our second all-staff email and video that night. It was clear from the many replies rolling in that people were hungry for information and communication. We committed then and there to creating the email and video every day for the foreseeable future, so the name of the vehicle came easily: The Daily.

At Minnesota Housing we take the Governor's slogan to heart: We are "One Minnesota." This phrase harkens back to Sen. Paul Wellstone's adage, "We all do better when we all do better." Commissioner Ho brought Governor Walz's phrase home, asking all of us to strive to work together as "One Minnesota Housing." Her aspiration appeared quite lofty when "One Minnesota Housing" suddenly had 265 remote offices.

The Minnesota Housing's Communications Team has sent all-staff emails every weekday since telework was initiated on March 16, 2020, including a 4- to 10-minute video featuring Minnesota Housing Commissioner Ho or Deputy Commissioner Rachel Robinson, and sometimes invited guests. The videos are opportunities for agency leaders to speak directly to all staff on a daily basis, explaining new Executive Orders and how they relate to Minnesota Housing staff, and delivering morale-boosting messages recognizing how hard this new telework environment is on so many.

RESPONSE TO AN IMPORTANT STATE NEED

When our staff went home, there was no end to the content. Our technology division had updates on remote settings, Skype for Business, and whether state cell phones were available for telework. HR had information on COVID-19 leave for those whose daycares had suddenly closed, or had other issues that kept them from working. How should we communicate to our partners about the office being closed, but the agency is still open? When would it be safe to return to work?

But more than tech or HR updates, The Daily provided a personal link among all of us. The tone of it is unlike any state communication. It is human, casual and kind, expressing sincere concern for one another. In it, we have shared poetry and uplifting videos, scenes of residents applauding health care workers when their shifts ended, Zoom videos of musicians performing together, apart. We've included photographs of new babies born to co-workers while we were all home, and hummingbirds visiting their feeders. We've created video compilations of our staff's new co-workers: cats, dogs, and babies. Sunrises, sunsets, vistas caught on morning walks. We shared photos of our new work-from-home desk setups. And every day, we include a video of the Commissioner. Some days she's interviewing a colleague, someone who recently completed a degree through the state program, or our HR director to explain changing guidelines as we settle in for at least three more months of working from home, and likely longer. Most days she's on camera alone, speaking directly to the staff. "Hey, Minnesota Housing, it's day 77 of teleworking," or day 22, or day 100, she starts her videos, giving a daily ticker of how far into telework and COVID time we are. She's wished colleagues farewell as they head into retirement, and introduced new team members to the staff. [Commissioner Ho explained the Governor's Stay at Home order](#) and what it will look like as we continue to work from home. She even [read a bedtime story](#) in the voice of Grover to the children of staff parents adjusting to working from home with their young ones nearby.

ACHIEVEMENT OF INTENDED RESULTS

Staff members say they feel closer to the Commissioner now than when we were all together in the office. The video gives her a platform to express what is known and what is not known about the virus and about our office plans to telework for a long time to come. On a daily basis, she has enabled staff to hear from her far more often than they would have in the office.

Comments from staff in the first week include the following:

"Just to let you know and everyone who helps put these together, I think they are fantastic! They are compassionate, acknowledging, and motivating. Thank you!"

"I wanted to let you guys know that I ABSOLUTELY LOVE the daily emails and Commissioner updates. Thank you for putting this together and keep up the great work."

"I wanted to take a minute to say thank you for all you're doing to keep us up to date and informed about not only the pandemic but also things pertaining to agency operation and our individual obligations/resources, etc. The union meeting yesterday made it apparent that Minnesota Housing is unique in that respect. We are lucky to have you and your expertise during this unusual time."

These were among the 25 unsolicited comments we received by email that first week we started them. We had 50 such comments after the first month. After two months of doing the Daily we conducted a survey to see how people were feeling about it. Publishing the Daily every day felt important, and the

Commissioner was committed to creating them for all staff daily, but we wanted to be sure staff wanted to continue to receive them. We received nearly 100 survey responses, overwhelmingly positive. We asked whether The Daily emails and Commissioner's Video Updates helped them feel connected to the rest of the staff and the agency, with 5 being very connected and 1 being not at all connected. We received an average of over 4.3. Comments were affirming:

“Definitely yes. I didn’t feel connected with the Agency until these Daily emails.... they help me to know what is going on within other divisions than Accounting/Finance group.”

“I appreciate substance and meat to the updates. I like that sometimes the updates are more playful and light-hearted. A good mix of mostly substance with a sprinkle of fun or positive spin is good. Once or twice a week of making the updates upbeat and fun and hearing what our co-workers have been up to, provides a small but necessary lift of positivity to the day.”

“I really like having a daily video/highlights for employees to be aware of. I feel more connected on agency-wide news right now than I did while we were in the office.”

PROGRAM BENEFITS THAT OUTWEIGH COSTS

The costs are simply staff time, and in the beginning of the pandemic, tending to internal communications became our top priority. For the first month at home, the 3-person communications team spent a significant portion of their time on this project. Their goal was to keep up staff morale. And they did.

No one could have predicted how critical it would be to have a vehicle to reach all staff when George Floyd was murdered at the hands of the police, and civil unrest broke out across Minneapolis and St. Paul. The National Guard was called in, a police precinct burned, and protesters were met with tear gas. The unrest in the Twin Cities quickly spread to other cities across the US and event internationally. But it started here, with some staff “living in a war zone,” as Commissioner Ho put it. And our staff of color, in particular, were hurting as they confronted yet another death of a black man at the hands of the police.

The Daily became a critical tool in fostering an anti-racist agency. The [May 27 Daily email included this video](#) of Commissioner Ho talking with consultant [Seena Hodges \(“The Woke Coach”\)](#) about the murder of George Floyd and how they were processing it and grieving. Each of our Daily emails since May 26 has included links to articles and resources on issues of racism, such as on self-care, books on anti-racism, articles about community rebuilding efforts, and recognition of Juneteenth. We shared the Governor’s reflections on laying flowers at Floyd’s memorial, and in our [June 5 video](#), Commissioner Ho talked with two staff members, a leader on our agency’s Cultural Competency Committee and our Community Development Director, about the agency’s equity work with the state. Commissioner Ho regularly includes comments about the agency’s ongoing racial equity work, such as this video from [June 16](#).

This survey comment says it all: “Before the Stay at Home order, as an agency we were sort of siloed. I think this was improving under Jennifer's leadership. Then, when we began to work from home, we also became isolated. In my opinion, these daily emails/videos bring us together in a way that couldn't be done from the office. I think this tool helps create comradery, builds pride in the work that we are doing and creates a sense of common mission: 'One Minnesota Housing.' Thank you again. You are all amazing. I am proud to work for Minnesota Housing.”