

The Housing Opportunity Planning Grant Program

New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority
Special Achievement

HFA Staff Contact

Etienne LaFond

elafond@nhhfa.org

New Hampshire Housing
Housing Academy
Special Achievement Category

Background:

Like much of the nation, housing affordability and availability is a challenge in New Hampshire. According to the 2023 Statewide Housing Needs Assessment, NH needs nearly 90,000 new homes by 2040. In response, as part of Governor Sununu's \$100 million InvestNH initiative, New Hampshire Housing received \$7.9 million to provide grants to municipalities across the state to analyze and update their land use regulations with the goal of increasing opportunities for housing.

Tasked with building a grant program from the ground up, New Hampshire Housing partnered with Plan New Hampshire, a nonprofit with a mission of fostering excellence in planning, design, and development of New Hampshire's built environment, and Cooperative Extension at the University of New Hampshire. In summer 2022, the Housing Opportunity Planning (HOP) grant program launched. This grant program includes the support of key partners at the Office of Planning and Development at the Department of Business and Economic Affairs, the NH Municipal Association, and the Community Development Finance Authority.

Over 70 cities and towns across the state are using these grants to train local leaders, hire planning staff whose sole focus is housing, conduct local housing needs assessments or analyses, update the housing sections of their master plan, identify zoning or other regulatory barriers to the development of housing, and amend or adopt housing-friendly regulations.

Housing Academy

In New Hampshire, local control is a key value. The majority of communities are small and rural; for these communities, capacity and a lack of staff and resources is a serious challenge. Because so many communities don't have any planning staff, these technical assistance dollars are critical to success! New Hampshire Housing recognizes that working directly with municipalities is the most important opportunity.

Recognizing the value of strong community engagement and citizen participation in local zoning reform, community engagement was purposefully and thoughtfully woven into every aspect of the grant program. Here, community engagement means community members are informed, participating in, and influencing local decision-making.

Applicants were required to submit an initial community engagement plan and send local leaders from their community, including volunteer members of their land use boards, committees, commissions, local elected officials, and planning staff, to Housing Academy.

The aim of Housing Academy was to address the challenges faced by NH communities and increase the impact of the funding. The program successfully addressed these key barriers:

- Limited staff capacity at the local level to create and execute community engagement activities;
- Misunderstandings around housing topics and community engagement; and
- Lack of expertise or comfort related to community engagement and/or facilitation.

New Hampshire Housing
Housing Academy
Special Achievement Category

New Hampshire Housing enlisted the support of Cooperative Extension at the University of New Hampshire. UNH Extension's mission is to strengthen people and communities in New Hampshire by providing trusted knowledge, practical education, and cooperative solutions. UNH Extension works in all ten NH counties developing vibrant communities and municipal leaders and an informed and engaged citizenry. Extension's commitment to solving the housing crisis in NH and its strong track record of hosting effective trainings and workshops for leaders across the state, made it an ideal partner.

The first class of Housing Academy got underway in winter 2022. Housing Academy aims to support local leaders as they further develop their community engagement strategies and equip attendees with the tools, knowledge, and confidence needed to execute a strong, inclusive public participation plan. In addition to the gatherings, staff from UNH Extension and New Hampshire Housing met with participants one-on-one, as needed, to provide tailored support and troubleshooting.

Community engagement wasn't just encouraged for grantees but required. In addition to submitting an initial community engagement plan and attending Housing Academy, applicants were required to include in their budget at least \$2,500 for community engagement activities and related costs. In addition, volunteers from local planning boards, housing committees and commissions, governing bodies, and other local boards, committees, and commissions are eligible for stipends of \$250 each for up to three volunteers per community for being part of Housing Academy. This was a strategic decision intended to encourage participation from volunteers, in addition to municipal staff, ensure participation from volunteers was inclusive and equitable, and honor time spent by volunteers to fully participate in Housing Academy. Many New Hampshire municipalities have little to no staff and are often limited by this lack of capacity. Empowering volunteers is key to expanding capacity for planning efforts in NH.

Structure:

Each Housing Academy class included five sessions: two in person and three virtual. The hybrid class format offered the advantages of both virtual and in-person gatherings. Virtual sessions made it easier for more people to join, especially during questionable winter weather, while in-person sessions allowed individual participants the opportunity to connect with one another, build relationships, and share strategies, challenges, ideas, and success stories. The content of Housing Academy sessions was a mix of community engagement strategies and best practices and housing education. Presentations and activities included:

- Housing Challenges in New Hampshire
- Defining Community Engagement
- Beginning to Understand Housing Terms
- The Value of Storytelling for Change
- Real Housing Stories
- Sticking with Tough Conversations
- Using Data to Understand (and Talk About) Housing Topics
- Bringing All into Engagement
- What Would More Housing Look Like?
- Housing Commissions, Committees, and Task Forces

New Hampshire Housing
Housing Academy
Special Achievement Category

In addition to the five educational sessions, Housing Academy participants are invited to a variety of other gatherings to continue their education, like in-person and virtual community visits, which give participants the opportunity to visit other grantee communities across the state.

Throughout Housing Academy, community engagement tools and techniques were both taught *and demonstrated*. During virtual sessions, participants had the chance to use the chat and poll features on Zoom, as well as other online tools like Jamboard and Poll Everywhere, to demonstrate some simple community engagement strategies to attendees. At in-person sessions, the tables were lined with butcher paper and markers and attendees were encouraged to participate in dot voting, sticky notes, and other forms of “thin” engagement. All of these are inexpensive or free and relatively simple tools that can be used in a variety of settings. Other community engagement tools, like key informant interviews, focus groups, and best practices for community forums, were taught more directly and participants even had the opportunity to practice with one another.

Successes:

The majority of New Hampshire communities are small, with minimal or no municipal staff. Tradition in the granite state dictates that much of the work is done by elected officials and volunteers. Given this, it was important to invite volunteers to participate in Housing Academy and empower them to lead the charge in their communities.

To date, five classes have been through Housing Academy, with over 200 individuals from over 70 communities participating – representing nearly one third of NH’s 234 cities and towns and every region of the state. Participants are split nearly evenly between municipal or paid staff and volunteers and elected officials. Most volunteers come from planning boards, but volunteers also came from housing, master plan, energy, recreation, agricultural, and historic committees; zoning boards of adjustment, select boards, and conservation or housing commissions. As a result of volunteer participation, municipal staff are now supported by volunteers with new skills, expertise, and confidence. This is an incredible win for communities with limited capacity that are relying on volunteer power.

In addition to bringing local leaders together in an inclusive space where they can learn from one another, the program fosters opportunities to bring people together in the greater community. Participants have brought the lessons learned in Housing Academy back to their communities.

Of course, quality community engagement and many of the best practices shared in Housing Academy led to more inclusive gatherings that take into account the needs of a broad range of people. Inclusive gatherings that welcome diverse voices are critical to a community’s health, vibrancy, and equity. Finally, in addition to the extensive benefits to communities of quality community engagement and inclusive community gatherings, there are the immense benefits of potentially moving closer to solving the state’s housing crisis. With a deficit of nearly 25,000 housing units, the need is immense. The most significant, but movable, barriers to housing are exclusive land use regulations and local resistance to change. Changing zoning begins with changing hearts and minds, and as Stephen Covey said, “change happens at the speed of trust”.