

Demystifying Housing Programs: NJHMFA's Data Transparency Initiatives

New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency
Management Innovation: Technology

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Summary: In the past year, NJHMFA has created several interactive public-facing data dashboards and site evaluators to facilitate greater understanding and easier navigation of the complex maze of housing programs which the Agency operates.

Entry Description:

Background:

Financing affordable housing opportunities in New Jersey requires NJHMFA to operate a dizzying array of programs, whose impacts may not be readily apparent to laypersons. Among these programs, the most notable are the allocation of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) for the construction of affordable apartments, the Down-Payment Assistance (DPA) Program for aiding first-time homebuyers, and the Emergency Rescue Mortgage Assistance (ERMA) for preventing foreclosures among pandemic-affected households behind on mortgage payments. Collectively, these programs assist thousands of New Jerseyans every year and enable the construction of hundreds of affordable apartments. To make relevant information more readily accessible, NJHMFA has developed and published several interactive data tools since 2022.

Description:

In 2022, NJHMFA began publishing public-facing interactive dashboards to improve public knowledge and understanding of the Agency's many programs. Using Microsoft PowerBI, a powerful tool for data visualization, these dashboards offer members of the public the ability to retrieve key statistics of their choosing based on what information is most relevant to them. The Agency now operates three dashboards: one for LIHTC, one for ERMA, and one for the DPA Program with dashboards for other programs and resources currently in development.

In forty years of operation, NJHMFA's LIHTC portfolio has expanded to 924 properties encompassing more than 68,000 units. The Agency maintains LIHTC properties in every county, providing a key source of affordable housing for tens of thousands of residents. Rather than relying on annual reports, OPRA requests, or other cumbersome processes, the LIHTC dashboard aggregates useful information on the program in one easy portal. In addition to basic statistics like the number of projects and units, users are able to sort by allocation year, development status, county, municipality, rehabilitation versus new construction, and 9% vs 4% tax credits.

NJHMFA's single-family programs are likewise a vital lifeline for struggling homeowners and first-time homebuyers. Since 2022, the Agency has distributed at least \$181 million through ERMA to over 6,400 homeowners struggling to keep current on mortgage payments as a result of the pandemic. Since 2017, meanwhile, the DPA Program has Agency has assisted a remarkable 10,500 first-time homebuyers achieve the American Dream. This information and more are now easily available through the ERMA and

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DPA dashboards, allowing members of the public to quantify how NJHMFA works for them. In addition to the number of awards, total expenditures, and average award amount, the dashboards are customizable to provide the aggregated income, race, and county data of recipients. This shows the impact these programs have in disproportionately serving lower-income and underserved populations.

In creating these dashboards, NJHMFA has intricately balanced transparency with privacy. To avoid situations where individual residents can be identified, particularly in small municipalities where few are receiving assistance, only the top ten municipalities are identified in the ERMA and DPA dashboards. This protects the privacy of residents while allowing users to gain a greater understanding of the most important impacts of the Agency's programs.

In addition to the production dashboards, the Agency's commitment to data availability encompasses necessary information for prospective or potential projects and program applicants through the publication and maintenance of two site evaluators using ArcGIS Pro software. This tool offers a user-friendly way to visualize the geospatial categories on which the Agency's single-family and multifamily programs rely. Originally organized as a single site evaluator, NJHMFA ended up breaking it into two based on their relevant division. The consumer-oriented Single-Family Site Evaluator is intended to guide first-time homebuyers in their utilization of NJHMFA's DPA and mortgage programs. Most critically, it displays the dozens of Urban Target Areas throughout the state, which have higher purchase price limits as a way to incentivize homeownership in distressed areas. By simply typing in an address, it is possible to see whether a home there may qualify for such incentives.

The Multifamily Site Evaluator informs users of program eligibility and incentives for specific locations at various geographic levels, including municipalities, Census tracts, parcels, and more. It is more complex; with nearly two dozen separate layers, which includes data on school district performance, poverty rates, transit access, senior population, and more. Given the high competitiveness of the 9% LIHTC program, developers are always looking to maximize the points their proposed project can get through NJHMFA's Qualified Allocation Plan. Thanks to the new Multifamily Site Evaluator, finding the perfect spot or calculating a project's potential score before submitting an application has become much simpler. In addition, members of the public can better visualize the methodology of LIHTC awards, helping show how affordable housing has changed the landscape across the state.

With these comprehensive site evaluators, anyone – developers, civil servants, nonprofit staff, community service providers, lenders, and members of the public – can easily see the impact of key Agency programs and consider how these programs play into their own desires. From first-time homebuyers looking to most effectively utilize NJHMFA's DPA Program to seasoned developers exploring potential sites for their next project, the possibilities are boundless.

Implications:

At the 2023 Governor's Conference on Housing and Economic Development, an annual gathering in Atlantic City bringing together the top leaders in housing issues across the state, NJHMFA employees demonstrated these new data tools with a helpful tutorial. Attendees showed great interest in possible applications and offered several comments and suggestions which were incorporated into the tools.

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Despite notable upfront costs in obtaining licenses for PowerBI and ArcGIS, these have proven to be incredibly user-friendly tools for creating and maintaining web applications. As all dashboards and site evaluators are grouped under the new tab "Information Resources" in NJHMFA's website and are accompanied by video tutorials for new users, users' feedback suggests that these tools are extremely accessible.

For other state housing finance agencies, NJHMFA's initiatives offer an easily replicable model for expanding data transparency while protecting recipients' privacy. Depending on the state's particular housing needs, an agency may choose to follow NJHMFA's lead in displaying information on down-payment assistance, LIHTC, and similar programs, or may prefer to lead with their own unique programs. A key benefit of these dashboards and GIS applications is their high level of customizability, allowing agencies to select the most pertinent data. Fundamentally, government agencies have a moral obligation to provide readily accessible information about their programs so that constituents are not left in the dark as to their impact. As demonstrated here, NJHMFA offers a great model for providing such data.

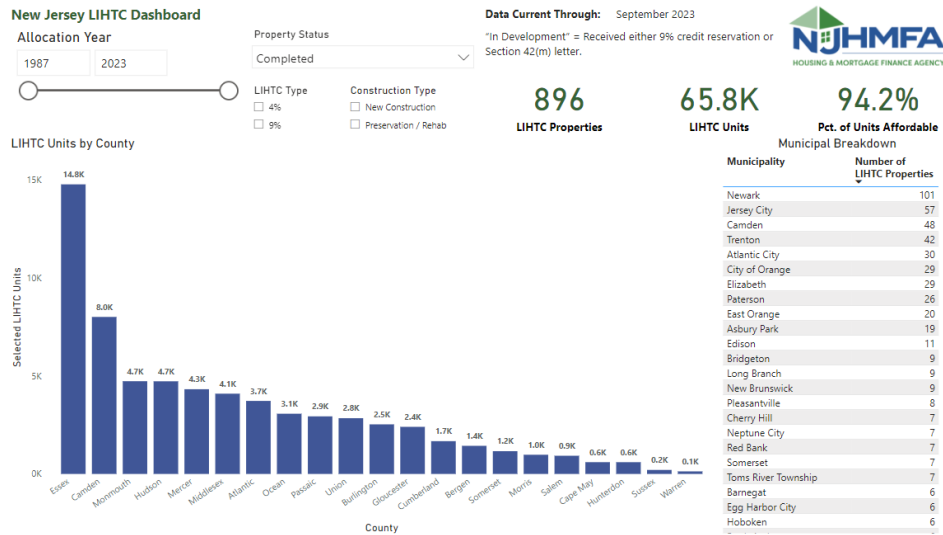
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Visual aids:



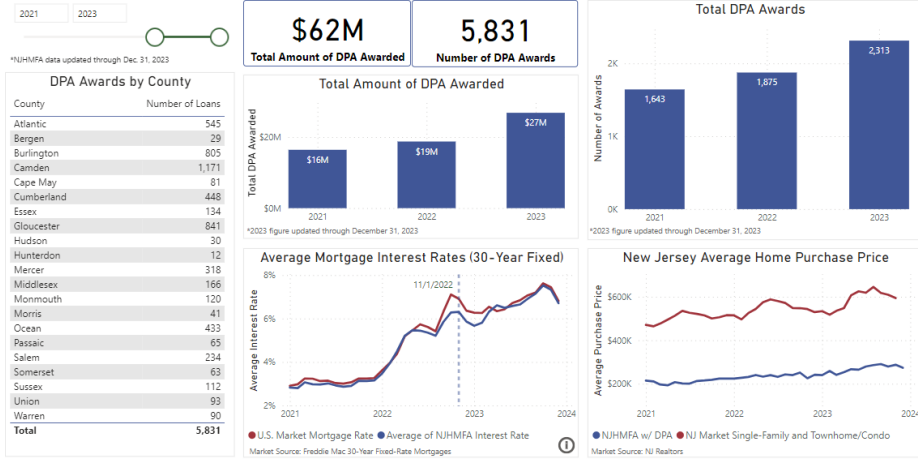
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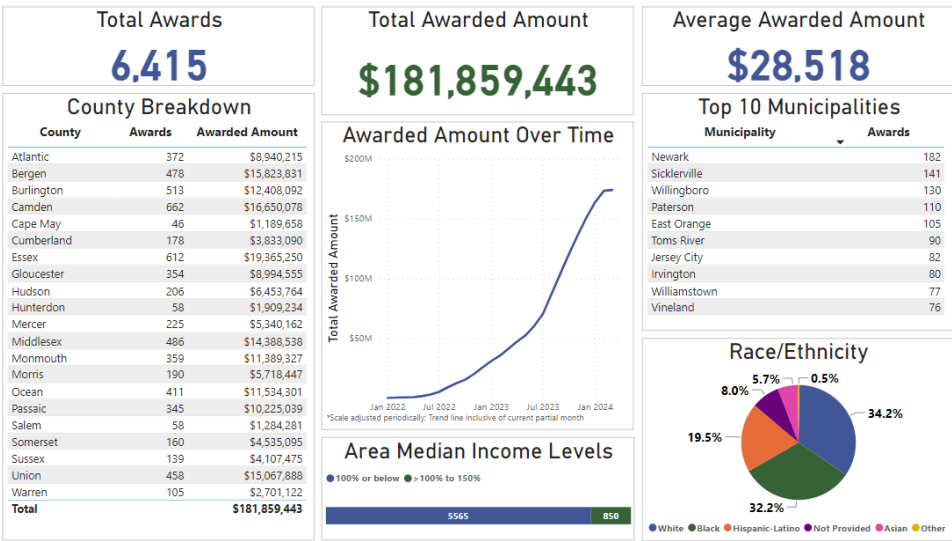
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New Jersey Down Payment Assistance (DPA) Dashboard
Loan-Level Data



NJ ERMA Program Dashboard

Data Source: New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency (NJHMFA)
Last Update: March 5, 2024



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