

2020 Annual Report: Housing First

Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency

Communications: Annual Report

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Introduction

The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency's 2020 annual report marks a major step forward for the agency (available at <https://www.phfa.org/news/annualreport.aspx>). Since the agency's inception in 1972, it has produced its annual report in print. Most were very well done, and several have won awards. But it was time to move the agency into the 21st Century. Creating a web-based annual report offered numerous advantages. Nevertheless, until this year, organizational inertia kept the agency committed to a printed and mailed report. Print was comfortable.

The good news is that 2020 marked a big step forward for PHFA regarding the production of our annual report. We have made the jump to a web-based report. Our agency can serve as an example to other HFA's who are resisting this change, like we did previously. A web-based report offers numerous advantages, which we will discuss. Communications directors at other HFAs can use our example to encourage their agencies to make the jump to digital, as well.

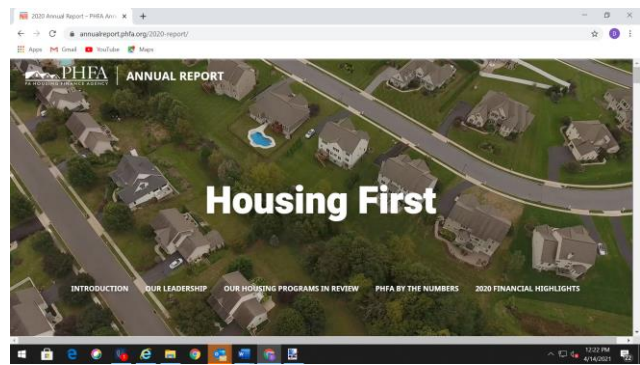
The Process

After making the case early in 2020 for a web-based report, approval was given. Since we had not taken this approach before, we needed a graphic design vendor we could trust to help guide us through the process and help us make the most of this platform. We conducted an extensive Request for Proposals. We received nine excellent proposals. One vendor stood out because of their excellent work and reasonable costs. By June we had made our choice.

The bulk of the work on the annual report was to be done by PHFA. This included conceptualization, messaging, content flow, writing, collection of customer videos, and production of staff videos. The vendor was needed mainly for help selecting a report template for use on the web, graphic design, assistance with site hosting, and guidance on visitor tracking. We want to stress that while the vendor played a critical role, the main communications elements were all managed directly by the agency. We want to emphasize this to let other HFAs know that if we can do this, you can do this.

Work proceeded during the summer and early fall on writing, visualization, and filling in the "wireframe" for the report. The wireframe can be understood as an early design framework. During this stage, we looked for opportunities to make the most of what the technology has to offer. A web-based report supports video and animation. So, we identified elements that could use video to best tell our story. The "cover page" was done with video. We conducted a fun contest with our home loan customers to collect short video testimonials. (The response was outstanding.) We had some PHFA directors videotape messages highlighting divisional accomplishments from the year, complete with b-roll of the housing developments they were discussing. Additionally, sections of the report that could be made more visually inviting with text and graphic animations were identified. Through much back-and-forth with the vendor, the report started to come together.

In late fall, we inserted extensive data into a statewide map of Pennsylvania. This map offers interactivity that lets visitors see the extent of PHFA housing investments in each county in the state. This map truly is the heart of the annual report. It allows us to share data that simply would have been too ponderous to include in a printed report. But in a web-based report, it is simple to navigate and



The report cover has an aerial video background

engaging. Static PDFs offering a higher level of detailed data were also provided with the map. Using the web-based report this way allows PHFA to provide a degree of transparency not possible in the past.

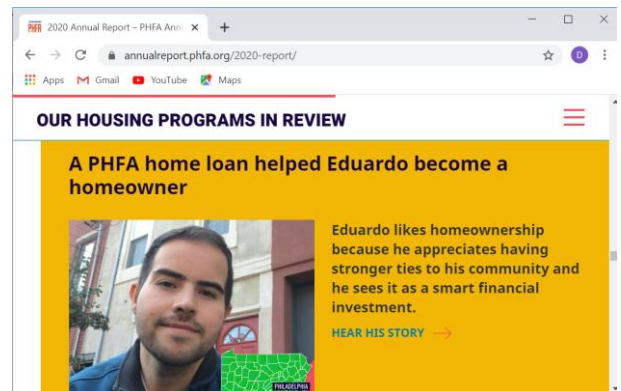
By early 2021, we were ready to publish the digital report. This release date closely matched the timeline we had followed in the past with printed reports. So even though this process was new to us, our publication deadline was nearly identical to that of years past. A huge advantage was that we totally eliminated the cost and effort of fulfillment and mailing needed previously with paper-based reports. That saved us time. That saved us money. That saved the environment by eliminating the paper.

The Advantages

The benefits of going digital are many, which other HFAs should note. Cost savings is a major benefit that should catch the attention of any housing agency executive director. Our printed annual report (quantity of 3,600) was costing us about \$36,000, including original photography, graphic design, printing and mailing. Our web-based annual report cost us less than \$15,000 – a savings of \$21,000. Put another way, the printed report cost us \$10 each to get into the hands of our audience. Our fully online report cost just over \$4 each to reach the same number of people (if not more) – less than half the cost. We should add there is a high likelihood that we will reuse our web report template again in 2021 (making slight revisions to keep it fresh), saving us additional money.

The move to a digital report eliminates steps in the print production processes. Gone is printing, fulfillment and shipping. Now that we have been through the process of creating an online annual report and learned from the experience, this should cut a minimum of 2 weeks off our production process in the future.

A digital report allows us to incorporate the animation of page elements, video backgrounds and video testimonials that simply aren't possible in a printed report. All research we see indicates people want to read less and watch videos more. So, the move to a web-based report lets us respond to the preferences of the public and, by doing so, hopefully boost the readership of the report. Annual reports are not enticing for many readers who see them as ponderous and heavy on numbers. The addition of videos and animated elements allow us to overcome those obstacles for readers. (We confess that our staff videos are not as professional as we would have liked this year. COVID distancing restrictions required us to work remotely on these videos, not face-to-face with our talent. We decided to put health considerations ahead of production values in light of the pandemic. This prevented us from using our teleprompter, which would have helped production values immensely. This should improve in 2021.)



A web link to a customer video testimonial

Many of us at PHFA feel the main benefit of this web-based report is the ability to provide a depth of data not reasonably possible in a print publication. We are especially pleased with the statewide map (See: PHFA by the Numbers) that lets us easily share our main housing investments in each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. This data should be of great interest to local housing authorities, municipalities and county governments. Not only is there a lot of good data there, but the map allows us to present it in a way that is easily accessible and understandable. PDF files found under the map provide additional layers of data that would have been burdensome for readers to wade through in a printed document. A digital document lets us present large amounts of data in a more user-friendly way, promoting broader transparency by the agency.

Finally, a feature that is greatly appreciated by PHFA management and our communications staff is the ability to track how many visitors are using the report and what sections of the document interest them most. As with any webpage, we are able to track visits chronologically, so we can see how interest ebbs and flows after the report's launch. Since the publication of our annual report during the first week of February, it has had 883 unique page views. We have been averaging between 80 and 90 unique page views each week. In order to glean more detailed user data from the digital report, we have also implemented an application called Crazy Egg (recommended by our vendor), which provides something called "heat mapping." This color-coded feature lets us see which elements of the annual report are hot – receiving more reader interest – and which are cool. It also provides a most interesting visual overview of where our customers are clicking on the pages. So far, we're pleased to report that reader interest is evenly spread throughout the report, which means all elements of the web publication are performing well. We will continue to monitor this data as we prepare to start work on our 2021 report. We cannot stress enough how valuable this data is. In the past, the only feedback we got on our printed reports was anecdotal. Now, our web-based report provides hard, actionable data.

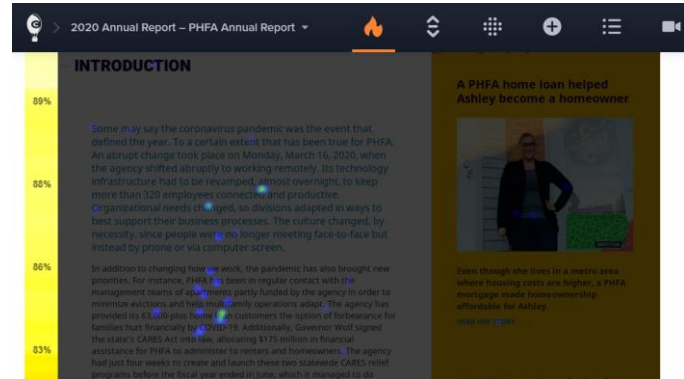


Illustration of some heat mapping insights

Our Messaging

Our award application has focused, so far, on the technology behind our 2020 annual report because it represents such a major step forward for PHFA from past paper-based reports. But we don't want to overlook our messaging, which was conceptualized and written entirely in-house.

The global health crisis that affected PHFA operations starting in March 2020 may have impacted only four months of the fiscal year. But its impact was life-changing for many of the Pennsylvanians we serve. We felt our message of "Housing First" was critical for making the point to legislators and other decisionmakers that any lasting recovery will need to prioritize affordable housing as a primary focus. COVID has been devastating on many levels. But it also has provided an opportunity for educating policymakers on the depth of the affordable housing shortage. So, while we have touted the many advantages of our new online approach to our 2020 annual report, we want to make clear that our report's messaging was not an afterthought. We are seeking to use the theme of Housing First in the report to educate opinion leaders and promote real and lasting change to our state's housing.

Conclusion

Let us end by noting how our report meets NCSHA's judging criteria. Our main goal in applying this year was to encourage other reluctant HFAs to make the leap to a web-based annual report. Not only is our experience replicable, but the advantages far outweigh any shortcoming of the digital format. Our online report allows us to expand outreach to a broader audience since emailing more people adds no additional costs. Webpage tracking and heatmapping allow, for the first time for our agency, measurable results. We have cut our report production costs by more than 58% and reduced the time of the report production process, demonstrating a smart use of resources. Certainly, there are clear strategic advantages that come with the transition to a web-based annual report, as it allows our agency to reach more people at lower cost with multimedia messaging more attractive to today's public.