

PA Housing Now  
**Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency**  
Communications: Annual Report

**HFA Staff Contact**

Scott Elliott

[selliott@phfa.org](mailto:selliott@phfa.org)

## **Introduction**

Several important factors came together to make our 2021 annual report our best one yet. Regardless of how our report is judged by NCSHA, we are proud of this year's report because it is loaded with data about how PHFA programs are serving Pennsylvanians without becoming ponderous for readers. In fact, dare we say our annual report takes great advantage of an infotainment approach: information presented in a multimedia format that resonates with today's audiences. It uses an entertaining user interface and still and animated graphic design to strengthen our chances of imparting serious information to our readers/viewers.

The switch a year ago to a web-based annual report has improved the value of this document to the agency as a marketing tool while adding elements like animations and videos that make strategic use of multimedia visualization. The annual report can be an enjoyable read for the average citizen while also providing tables of data for investors and partners who want to take a deeper dive.

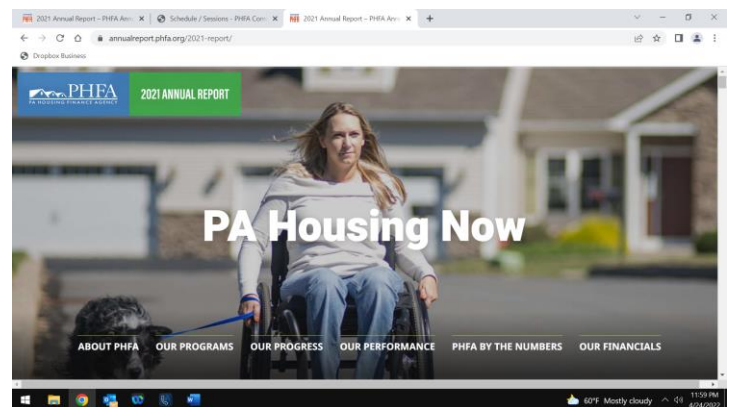
We learned a lot in 2020 about how to best present our message via the web, so this year we think our production values have dramatically improved. The result should be a report that communicates effectively to a variety of audiences while cutting our costs to less than half of what they were just two years ago. Our 2021 report is available at: <https://www.phfa.org/news/annualreport.aspx>.

## **Our Audience and Our Approach**

Unlike some other HFA's, our annual report is not geared primarily to citizens. Our report is used more as a tool to share agency progress with investors, our business partners, and with government officials. It has been our experience that citizens are more interested in brochures and web pages about our housing programs and less interested in data about the agency's performance.

Decades of experience tells us that most of our annual report readers already know who PHFA is. They seek out the annual report for a snapshot of our performance from the past year. Nevertheless, we must come at the report from the perspective that the reader is unfamiliar with our mission and our programs. So, our report provides basic information about the agency while also making available tables of data for those readers interested in performance metrics related to where they live in Pennsylvania. We think our report does a terrific job of introducing new readers and existing partners to the work of the agency without shortchanging either group.

The strongest feature of this year's report is its use of various multimedia elements to hold interest and communicate clearly. Please notice the use of animations to move graphical elements on the page. Notice the extensive use of video messages from our customers and from selected division directors. Pay attention to the use, as much as possible, of shorter text elements in more of a *USA Today*-style approach to information sharing. Readers today will not engage for long with pages heavy with text. So, our goal is to entertain while sharing important information. An annual report about an HFA's accomplishments for the year can be a ponderous slog for the average reader. Our report, we believe, addresses that challenge well by providing useful depth of content while holding our audience's interest.



***The report cover features a rolling montage of customer photos, using motion effects to draw and keep interest.***

### **A Report Largely Crafted by Our Own Staff**

We’re especially proud that the bulk of the work on the annual report was done internally by PHFA. This included conceptualization, messaging, content flow, writing, collection of customer videos, and production of staff videos. A partner 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. This is important to let other HFAs know that if we can do this largely in-house, you can, too.

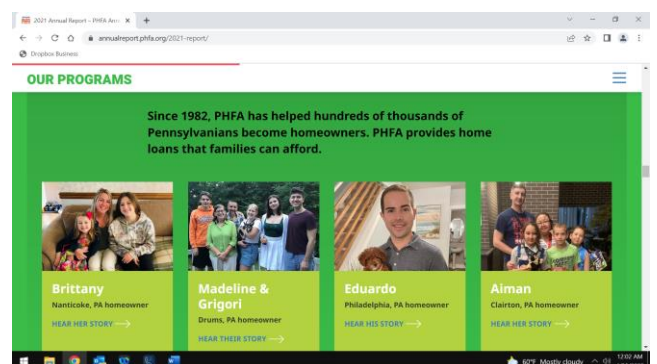
Work proceeded over five months on writing, visualization, and filling in the “wireframe” for the report. The wireframe can be understood as an early design framework. During this stage, we looked for opportunities to make the most of what the technology has to offer. A web-based report supports video and animation, things that clearly aren’t possible with traditional print formats. So, we identified elements that could use video to best tell our story. The “cover page” was created using animated customer photos. We conducted a fun contest with our home loan customers to collect short video testimonials. (The response was outstanding.) We videotaped messages from some PHFA directors highlighting their division’s accomplishments from the year, complete with supporting video and slides emphasizing their main points. The shooting and editing were all done by PHFA staff. 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 by late fall.

At the heart of our report is a statewide map of Pennsylvania that lets visitors see the extent of PHFA housing investments in each county in the state. It allows us to share data that simply would have been too ponderous to include in the printed reports we produced in the past. But in a web-based report, these tables of data are simple to navigate and are engaging. Static PDFs offering a higher level of detailed data are also provided with the map. Using the web-based report this way allows PHFA to provide a degree of public transparency not possible in the past.

By early 2022, we were ready to publish the digital report. A huge advantage that quickly became apparent was the fact that we totally eliminated the cost and effort of fulfillment and mailing needed in years past with paper-based reports. That saved us time. That saved us money. That saved the environment by eliminating the paper.

### **The Advantages**

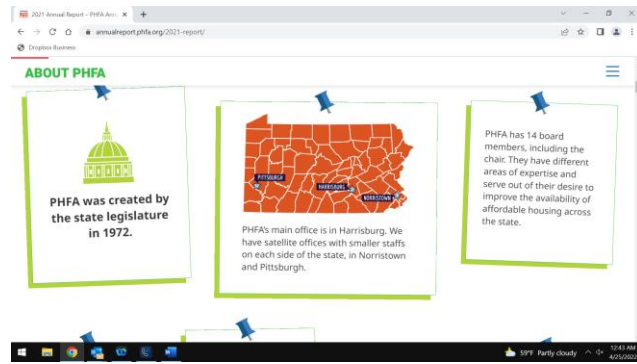
The benefits of a digitally-based report are many, which other HFAs should note. Cost savings are a major benefit that should catch the attention of any housing agency executive director. Our printed annual report (quantity of 3,600) was costing us about \$36,000 annually, including original photography, 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. If we reuse our web report template (making slight revisions to keep it fresh), that will save the agency money every year.



***Four customer video testimonials are provided.***

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.

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. Our feedback tells us this data is 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.



**As much as possible, text is provided in snippets with graphics, not lengthy paragraphs, to make reading more enjoyable. This also simplifies the writing of the report.**

## Conclusion

Let us end by noting how our report meets NCSHA's judging criteria, in case that isn't already clear. It took years for PHFA to break from tradition and move to digital publishing versus the print publishing of the past. But if our agency can do it, we can be a beacon to other HFAs to help them embrace the many advantages of moving to the web. We know from talks with our business partners that our annual report is well regarded by investors, developers, lenders and government officials tracking the agency's progress. They applaud our move to a digital format they find more engaging and more data-rich.

A key benefit of being web-based is the use of technologies like Crazy Egg, which not only let us track hits but also show what pages, and sections of pages, are attracting the most eyes. This feedback will help us continue to improve our report's design year-after-year. Plus, the cost saving of digital media over print are jaw-dropping. Not only is this year's annual report more engaging with readers because of its multimedia elements, but it's saving PHFA thousands of dollars. With resources always stretched thin, the cost savings alone of this year's report make it a champ.

Finally, we note that in the past if we got a request for our annual report, we had to physically mail it, which took days to arrive. Today, we can share the report with many more people than we did in the past – we can share it instantaneously when requested – and we can do it for much less expense. For PHFA, there's no going back to our old way of working. Our 2021 annual report is broadening our audience that learns about PHFA, and isn't that exactly what our marketing materials are supposed to accomplish? We think so.