

There's No Place Like Home

Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency

Communications: Annual Report

HFA Staff Contact

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Introduction

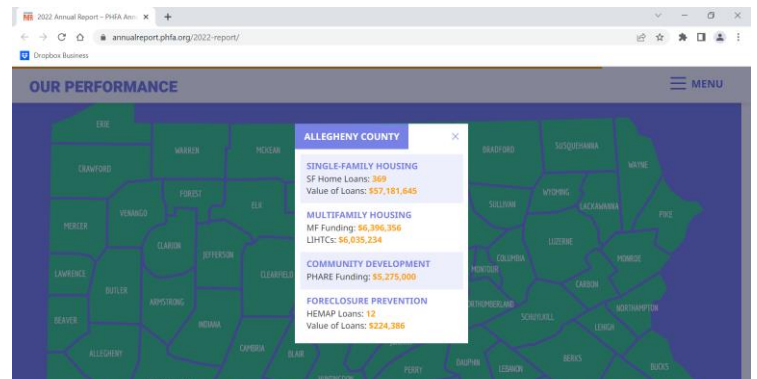
Two main features make our 2022 annual report stand out. First, the heart of our report is the interactive map that lets readers see the major housing investments by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency in their county. We are not aware of any state HFA that has such a map sharing statewide housing investments. The second impressive feature is the quantity and quality of customer video testimonials incorporated into our design. This is the first year we have added video selfies from renters that supplement the selfies provided by homeowners. We do a good job telling our housing story. But no one tells an organization’s story better than its customers. This year’s annual report includes 14 total customer testimonials, more than any other state HFA’s annual report.

Our 2022 report is available at: <https://annualreport.phfa.org/2022-report/>

Our Interactive Map

Feedback from our customers and website data show that the interactive map is the most heavily viewed section of our annual report (See the section titled “Our Performance”), and with good reason. The map provides county-by-county data about PHFA’s investments in homeownership, multifamily housing, PHARE (the state housing trust fund), and foreclosure prevention.

The main audiences for our annual report are our investors, business partners, and legislative staffers. These groups really appreciate being able to see the quantity and location of PHFA’s housing investments. Providing this level of detailed data demonstrates the agency’s commitment to public transparency. Legislators especially like seeing this confirmation of housing investments in their districts which they can then share with their constituents. This helps further strengthen our relationship with county, state and federal legislators. So, from a micro perspective, this lets our public see how our investments touch their lives. From a macro perspective, the map demonstrates our statewide commitment to affordable housing and community development, with all 67 Pennsylvania counties profiled.



The interactive state map lets readers pull up county-specific data about PHFA’s investments in four main categories.

Letting Our Customers Demonstrate Our Impact

During past NCSHA conferences, we have heard other states ask how it’s possible to get testimonials from customers. We have made this a priority for years, and we have had great success getting participation from the people we help with housing. These customer video selfies are the other part of our annual report that gets the most views. Nothing is more believable than hearing from customers about how an organization positively affected their lives. We have great success with these testimonials.

Every spring we run a customer contest during which the best customer video selfies can win a \$100 Visa gift card. We ask customers to provide a selfie of between 30 and 60 seconds. They are asked to share how homeownership has changed their lives. They also are asked to share 2-3 still photos of them in and around their home. The contest runs a month and we normally get about 20-30 entries, from which we choose our winners. While some videos may not have the best production values, we normally can fix them (by boosting low audio, for instance), and, honestly, we are most interested in the quality of their message. A heartfelt message will be effective even if the camera work is shaky.

This year we did something new, and it worked very well. We reached out to our developer partners and invited them to submit 60-second customer videos sharing why their renters appreciate their affordable apartments. The incentive for developers to participate is that they are acknowledged in the opening title slide to the video. Plus they get a copy of the finished video, with titles added, that they can use on their website. This effort was very worthwhile, as we got seven strong renters’ videos to run along with our seven homeowner videos. Since multifamily housing is one of our main housing initiatives, it’s terrific to be able to spotlight the impact of affordable rental housing through these videos. Developers are already asking if they can participate again in our 2023 annual report.

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, and collection and editing of customer 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.

We used a rotating montage of customer photos to start telling our story on page one. The diversity of our customers by age, gender and race is an important part of our housing message, and the cover page accomplishes that visually. As noted earlier, we conducted a fun contest with our home loan customers to collect short video testimonials. (The response was outstanding.) 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.

As noted in our introduction, the heart of our report is a statewide map of Pennsylvania that lets visitors see the extent of PHFA’s 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.

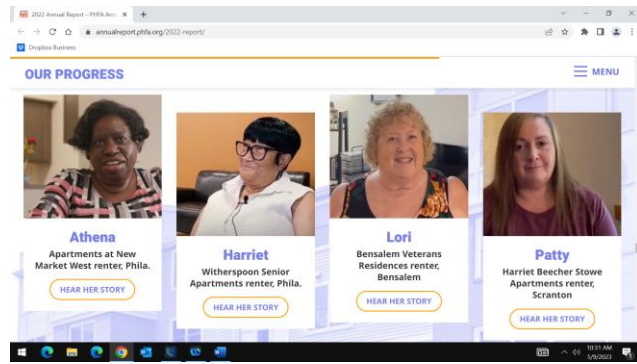
By early 2023, we were ready to publish the digital report. A huge advantage that quickly became apparent was the fact that we have totally eliminated the cost and effort of fulfillment and mailing needed in years past with paper-based reports. That saved us time. That saved us money. That saved the environment by eliminating the paper.

The Advantages

The benefits of a digitally based report are many. 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.

A digital report allows us to incorporate the animation of page elements 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, boost the readership of the report. Annual reports are not enticing for many readers who see them as ponderous and burdensome to read. 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 that lets us easily share our main housing investments in each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. Our Web statistics and anecdotal feedback tells us this data is of great interest to local housing authorities, municipalities and county governments. Not only is there a plethora of good data here, but the map allows us to present the data 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.



For the first time this year, our annual report includes video testimonials from seven renters (four shown here); these supplement the video selfies from seven homeowners helped by PHFA. Please note the diversity illustrated in these videos.

Conclusion

Let us end by noting how our report meets NCSHA's judging criteria. While all sections of our report work at telling our housing story, we feel that our interactive map and 14 video testimonials are the strongest part of our annual report and are innovative. Our reader feedback and statistics collected on our website confirm that those are the most heavily viewed sections of our annual report. We are not aware of any other state HFA that has such a detailed offering of statewide housing data presented via an easy-to-access, interactive map. Additionally, our annual report includes a total of 14 video testimonials from homeowner and renter customers. That is a large number of video testimonials and tells the PHFA story in a highly credible and even entertaining way.

While these two special features in our annual report take quite a bit of work to execute, they certainly could be replicated by any other state HFA. The measurable results of our website data about visits, and verbal and written feedback from readers, demonstrates these two features are the most popular aspects of our report. Most importantly, the statewide map clearly demonstrates how PHFA investments across the commonwealth are helping thousands of communities. Our move to a web-based annual report has reduced our report costs to only \$15,000 and has eliminated fulfillment and mailing costs. This is less than half of what we spent in years past on printed annual report. By reaching influential audiences with this detailed information demonstrating our progress on our housing mission, our annual report is a major, effective aspect of our agency's communications strategy.