

Shaping the Landscape- Bond Protection & LIHTC Expansion

Tennessee Housing Development Agency
Legislative Advocacy: Federal Advocacy

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Background

In 2017, Tennessee Housing Development Agency (THDA) created a division of Industry & Governmental Affairs (IGA) to be responsible for maintaining a rapport with elected leaders and lawmakers at all levels of government. This division's focus is on engaging and educating partners, especially elected officials, on what the agency does do and can do in their communities to create affordable housing opportunities.

To bring its message home to elected officials, the IGA division employs three regional-based liaisons to interact with elected officials and boost the agency's visibility through regular and public interactions in those regions. These liaisons also serve as first-line contacts for non-profit and industry partners, and are the public face for the agency's management of nine federal program, including Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, Multifamily Tax Exempt Bonds, Housing Choice Vouchers, HOME grants, Foreclosure Prevention, Emergency Solutions Grants, Weatherization and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance.

Affairs of State

In 2018, Tennessee had an unprecedented turnover in elected officials at the local, state and federal levels. At the county level, more than half of the state's 95 counties had new chief elected officials, known as mayors. In the state legislature, there were 53 new elected representatives or senators out of a combined 132 seats. There was a newly elected governor, who had never held elected office before. At the federal level, three of the nine representatives were elected for the first time and one representative, Marsha Blackburn, transitioned to become the state's junior Senator.

This change in officials represented one of the most significant changes of elected leadership in the state's modern history. It also left a tremendous gap in the knowledge leaders had in the role that THDA plays in the state's economy, estimated at a total contribution of \$1.4 billion in 2018. The agency also directly helps more than four percent of the state's households with state and federal programs that it administers.

Accepting the Challenge

When federal lawmakers proposed a tax bill threatening to end the use of private activity bonds, THDA understood that a vital part of its business activity could be subjected to unintentional harm through the law-making process and quickly took steps to reach out to advise lawmakers of the issue and raise awareness through its various partners.

With this turn of events, the IGA division's ambitious goal was to meeting one-on-one with each elected official to ensure our representatives knew what THDA does and can do for the citizens of Tennessee.

For federal lawmakers, that included making a visit to Washington D.C. in November during their freshman orientation period, as well as returning during the NSCHA LegCon in March. With Executive Director Ralph Perrey and the IGA team, consisting of its director, three field liaisons, and a legislative

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liaison, met with Tennessee’s U.S. Representatives and Senators to encourage them to co-sponsor the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit expansion bill.

By bringing the regional staff into these office visits, THDA reinforced their value in the eyes of Congressional staff. In addition, liaisons are able to bring direct knowledge of activities on the ground to the representatives in Washington, D.C. by virtue of their interactions with legislator’s field staffers. Those field-created relationships enabled, and continue to enable THDA to get unprecedented time with legislators and their key staffers, especially on short notice.

Closer to home, IGA met with each new member of the general assembly, giving priority to key committees that oversee state government before the start of the legislation session. To follow-up, the division also met with those members before the agency’s budget hearings. This helped to reinforce the relationship and accessibility of the THDA staff to assist with affordable housing issues that may come up throughout the year.

The Results

This forward-leaning strategy has helped the agency to ever increasing levels of success.

The agency has successfully secured multiple co-sponsors for the Low Income Tax Credit expansion bill – 5 of 6 retiring members and 3 freshman – when it is re-introduced in this Congress.