

# Vermont Housing Fellow Program

## **Vermont Housing Finance Agency**

Management Innovation: Human Resources

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2020 NCSHA Awards - Category: Management Innovation | Subcategory: Human Resources

### Vermont Housing Fellow Program

The Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA) recognizes the value of having a diverse staff, both in demographics and life experience. A diverse workforce has been demonstrated to increase employee satisfaction, decrease turnover, drive innovation and improve customer service.

According to Census Bureau estimates, just 6% of Vermonters are non-white and the median age is 43, making our state one of the oldest and least racially diverse states in the country. A high cost of living and limited professional networks in Vermont can make it challenging to attract new workers to our area, often resulting in a small pool of non-diverse candidates for open Agency staff positions. With these realities in mind, VHFA sought to implement creative and innovative methods to attract new talent. In 2019, VHFA launched the Vermont Housing Fellow Program in an effort to bring underrepresented groups into the affordable housing industry.

#### Program development

For many years, VHFA has provided students at nearby colleges the opportunity to experience a professional work environment while completing tasks needed by the agency through temporary, part-time “intern” positions. With each student either paid by VHFA or provided credit by their college or university, these internships occurred largely on an as-needed, occasional basis.

The success of these prior internships led VHFA to realize that they pointed to a simple, relatively low-cost way to accomplish additional goals: (1) increasing staff diversity and (2) introducing a new generation of professionals to Vermont’s affordable housing community.

Internships have been increasingly touted by many employers as a low-cost, low-risk way to identify and evaluate new talent, develop the job skills of potential new employees, enrich management skills of current employees, increase productivity and bring a fresh new perspective to organizations, particularly in areas like technology and social media.

VHFA reached out to partners at the University of Vermont’s Public Administration program to design a program that would offer graduate students from any accredited institution paid, semester-long internship opportunities, at 10 to 25 hours per week, for which students could receive course credits through their university.

VHFA recruits candidates from accredited Public Administration and Public Policy graduate programs who have an interest in learning more about careers in affordable housing. Although its geographic proximity and existing relationship with VHFA makes the University of Vermont a natural source of candidates, VHFA is also intentionally contacting other graduate programs outside the state, with the goal of maximizing the diversity of the candidate pool.

#### Intern activities

Each Vermont Housing Fellow becomes a member of VHFA’s Community Development department, working under the Agency’s Research and Communications Team. The projects that Fellows have or will work on include:

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- Assisting with the 2020-2025 Vermont Statewide Housing Needs Assessment, which VHFA had been contracted to complete on behalf of the State of Vermont
- Updating a Housing Needs Assessment Guide, which VHFA provides to local municipalities to help understand their housing challenges and potential solutions
- Assisting with various research projects
- Communications tasks, including researching and writing VHFA blog and social media posts and assisting with legislative outreach projects
- Updating VHFA's Directory of Affordable Rental Housing with additional information to help aid internal research and assist prospective tenants
- Assist with VHFA's biannual statewide housing conference, including event planning and marketing

These tasks helped the Agency complete key projects that might not otherwise be completed without the assistance of an intern, while at the same time providing the interns with key skills that will aid them when they enter the workforce, including research, communications and social media, an understanding of public policy development and a basic grounding in affordable housing issues.

VHFA also recognizes that much of a young employee's development occurs informally. Consequently, the Agency consciously includes interns in meetings with the full Agency staff, teams, and external partners, as well as organizing one-on-one mentoring opportunities, including with VHFA's Executive Director.

### First housing fellows

To date, VHFA has welcomed two housing fellows to the Agency, beginning in January 2020. The interns are students in Public Administration programs at the University of Vermont and Suffolk University in Boston. Both interns are women, and one is a person of color born in Ghana.

### Challenges

Onboarding the Housing Fellows was more time-intensive in some ways than the Agency had initially expected. VHFA was aware that housing policy and programs are complicated and intentionally chose projects that did not require housing experience. However, the graduate students employed as fellows thus far have not had some of the practical research skills that would enable them to seamlessly transition into the projects that VHFA's Research and Communications Team typically works on, including advanced Excel skills and experience navigating database such as the Census Bureau's website. In response, the Agency had to elaborate on some of its procedures and training approaches.

In addition, the initial on-boarding process for the interns had not been fully thought out at first. Although the interns did not need as much support as a full employee, they still needed a full IT set-up and IT systems training, which took more time than originally expected.

Overall, VHFA feels that the Housing Fellow Program is an excellent and cost-efficient initiative that could easily be replicated by other HFAs; however, other agencies should not discount the investment in staff time that the program will require, particularly for the first several semesters as the details are worked out.

The greatest challenge faced through the program was the COVID-19 outbreak, which began just before VHFA was preparing to welcome its second Housing Fellow. As a result, the intern began her work

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remotely from her home in Boston, rather than traveling to Vermont to work for the summer. VHFA also made the difficult decision to cancel its biannual housing conference in November. Planning and marketing for the conference had been intended as a major component to of the planned work for that semester's intern. However, VHFA was able to pivot to other projects that could be completed by the intern remotely and included her in online team meetings as much as possible.

The pandemic has also created new opportunities. The Fall 2020 Fellow will have the option of working entirely remotely, which may expand the pool to candidates who would otherwise be unable to travel to Vermont in the fall due to work at their home universities. This approach may be extended to the Spring 2021 semester, depending on conditions. However, VHFA recognizes that this approach cannot substitute for the intangible experience of working in person and looks forward to being able to welcome interns back to the office once it is safe to do so.

### Results

Overall, the Vermont Housing Fellow Program has been a success in terms of VHFA's ability to successfully attract qualified, diverse applicants and train them to complete assigned tasks that are helpful to achieving Agency goals. The program has been sustainable financially and in staff time commitment.

The true assessment of the program's potential to increase diversity in Vermont's affordable housing community will only come after Housing Fellows have graduated and begin to pursue careers. In the long term, VHFA hopes that this program can successfully attract diverse new talent to the Agency and our partner affordable housing agencies in Vermont.