

Housing Internships to Expand Agency Diversity

Vermont Housing Finance Agency

Management Innovation: Human Resources

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2023 NCSHA Awards
Category: Management Innovation
Sub-Category: Human Resources
Entry: Housing Internships to Expand Agency Diversity



Vermont Housing Fellow Program

Instituting the Vermont Housing Fellow Program has moved Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA) toward a long-sought goal of increasing staff diversity. At little cost, this innovative internship program has provided graduate students identifying with a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds the opportunity of working in Vermont's affordable housing industry. After completing their graduate programs, several prior housing fellows have assumed permanent, full-time positions in VHFA and Vermont partner housing agencies, attesting to the early impact of this program and to potential future benefits here and in other states that replicate it.

The [Vermont Housing Fellowship](#) is a semester-long part-time internship for graduate students studying Public Administration or related subjects. Students receive a stipend of \$17/hour and work 10-20 hours per week. One fellowship is generally offered at a time for a 12-week period aligning with the Fall, Spring, and Summer college semesters.

Innovating to address challenge of limited applicant pools

Having a diverse staff, both in demographics and life experience has been repeatedly demonstrated to increase employee satisfaction, decrease turnover, drive innovation, and improve customer service.

However, 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. The high cost of living and limited professional networks in Vermont has made it challenging to attract new workers to our area, often resulting in a small pool of non-diverse candidates for open Agency staff positions. According to its latest staff survey, VHFA's staff mirrors the state in terms of racial composition and age.

With these realities in mind, VHFA sought to implement creative 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.

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.

Working toward VHFA's strategic DEI goals

With a declared goal in the agency's 2020 strategic plan to become a more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization, VHFA adopted a commitment to work to increase the number of BIPOC members of VHFA's staff, in leadership positions and on the Board of Commissioners. [Of the ten students who have filled the Vermont Housing Fellow position](#), half are women of color with families from countries including Ghana, Haiti, and El Salvador.

The applicants for the Housing Fellowship have been diverse from its inception. This is due in part to the agency's close coordination with universities in the Northeast who have both a graduate Public Administration program and a racially diverse student body. In addition, the agency has emphasized in all job postings about the fellowship and in communications with nearby University of Vermont that candidates of color and historically underserved populations who are interested in affordable housing careers are encouraged to apply.

Program development

The program evolved easily from a long-standing history of inviting students at area colleges 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.

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 20 hours per week, for which students could receive course credits through their university.

VHFA recruits candidates from accredited Public Administration, Public Policy, and community-development focused 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.

Net benefits demonstrate resource effectiveness

With minimal costs, the Vermont Housing Fellow program spurs both staff diversity and productivity. The Fellow works on a finite project identified by the agency’s research and community relations department and is responsible for clear deliverables, as well as assisting with ad-hoc department workload. The costs to the agency (\$15,000 in a typical year for wages paid to the Fellow and about an hour per week of time from a supervisor) are substantially less than benefits the Fellows generate in terms of work products.

The program 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 when possible, as well as organizing one-on-one mentoring opportunities, including with VHFA’s Executive Director.

The Housing Fellow’s tasks helped the Agency complete key projects aligned with Agency goals that might go undone 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.

Low cost and track record in Vermont make program easily replicable

The Vermont Housing Fellow Program is an excellent and cost-efficient initiative that could easily be replicated by other HFAs by taking these steps:

Start-up steps

- Develop list of work projects and deliverables

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- Identify target graduate programs
- Develop public-facing overview of the program for HFA's web page and job posting ([sample here](#))

Ongoing steps prior to semester start

- Share job posting with graduate internship offices
- Review applications submitted and conduct phone interviews with top candidates
- Make selection and offer and confirm start date

During the semester

- Onboard fellow
- Describe work project(s) and deliverables expected
- Invite fellow to engage with a variety of staff as opportunities arise

After the semester

- Remain in contact with fellow, offering continued mentorship
- Keep them informed of relevant job openings and encourage them to apply

Past projects of Vermont Housing Fellows

Vermont town profile updates on housingdata.org



Magali Stowell Alemán, current Vermont Housing Fellow, recently worked with VHFA researchers to update dozens of visualizations about housing markets and residents in every Vermont community and county. The updated visualizations, accessible on housingdata.org, are widely used by planners, policy makers and practitioners to learn about housing needs in their location.

Housing needs in Williston, Vermont



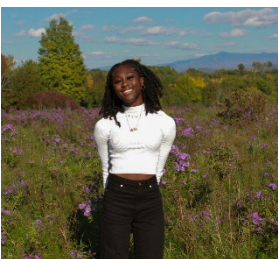
Olivia Lavecchia, the Vermont Housing Fellow during Fall 2022, completed a housing needs summary for Williston, Vermont, identifying issues related to housing affordability and availability for current residents and employees in the town.

Housing Needs Assessment Guide



Summer 2022 Vermont Housing Fellow Madelyn Stoen revised [VHFA's Housing Needs Assessment Guide for Vermont communities](#), assisted with outreach for the [Vermont Homeowner Assistance Program](#) and helped prepare for the biannual [Statewide Housing Conference](#).

Housing commission onboarding materials



In Summer 2022, Minelle Sarfo-Adu prepared materials to help local housing commissions educate new members, and assisted the Agency in archiving historical files.

Promoting homeownership for BIPOC Vermonters



Spring 2022 Vermont Housing Fellow Christina Cramer assisted with outreach for the [Vermont Homeowner Assistance Program](#) and conducted [research on current barriers to homeownership for BIPOC Vermonters](#) and potential strategies to expand homeownership opportunity.

Outreach strategies for underserved Vermonters



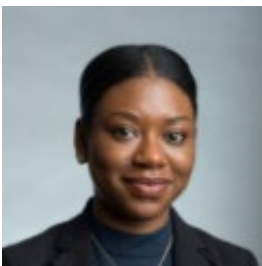
Fall 2021 Vermont Housing Fellow Barbara Asiimwe conducted research on outreach and marketing strategies for underserved groups as well as assisting VHFA with updating data and managing content on the [Vermont Housing Data website](#).

Survey on zoning barriers and incentives in Vermont towns



During the summer of 2021, Vermont Housing Fellow Ben Harrold authored a [report on the obstacles present to affordable home development in Vermont municipalities](#) and the regulatory policies in place to encourage affordability. The data were collected from a survey of town officials co-created by the VHFA and the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development.

Housing barriers for immigrants and refugees to Vermont



In December 2020, Housing Fellow Regine Albin completed research and a [report on housing barriers for immigrants and refugees to Vermont](#). After conducting interviews with area service providers and reviewing prior studies, Albin identified key areas for improving access to housing for immigrants to Vermont through improved language translation, outreach, affordable housing, workforce diversity, transportation and funding for culturally-specific organizations.

Vermont Directory of Affordable Rental Housing



Emerald Anderson, Vermont Housing Fellow during the summer of 2020, expanded the information available about the nearly 14,000 affordable apartments statewide with development costs subsidized through public programs, such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. Anderson gathered information on the Census Tracts for each apartment complex in the [Vermont Directory of Affordable Rental Housing](#) and updated each digital property profile.

Vermont Housing Needs



During her Vermont Housing Fellowship in the spring of 2020, Caroline Rubin joined VHFA researchers in finalizing the [2020 Vermont Housing Needs Assessment](#), a comprehensive report on housing needs statewide and in each Vermont county. In addition, Rubin prepared a summary of [housing needs in the town of Shelburne](#), Vermont and helped VHFA researchers add new indicators to the [Vermont Housing Data website](#) about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at state and local level.