

Bright IDEA

Virginia Housing

Management Innovation: Internal Operations

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VIRGINIA HOUSING

2023 NCSHA Award Submission

ENTRY CATEGORY:

Management Innovation - Internal Operations

ENTRY NAME:

**Bright IDEA: Innovative Approach to
Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Access**



“Virginia Housing’s approach to inclusion, diversity, equity, and access is a cross-function, enterprise-wide methodological approach impacting our work internally and externally to support our mission.”

- Adrienne Whitaker, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Brief Description

Addressing equality disparities is an integral part of Virginia Housing’s history, culture and identity. As we move forward, we strive to be a leader in **inclusion, diversity, equity** and **access, or IDEA**, in the Commonwealth of Virginia and within our industry. To achieve this goal, we have taken an intentional innovative approach to our work in this area by ensuring that we are strategic in our efforts across our enterprise as well as our work with business partners and in communities. We refer to our DEI efforts as **IDEA**. This acronym more adequately reflects how we are leveraging our commitment to this work to advance our overall mission. Our **Bright IDEA** approach is outlined in our IDEA Strategic Plan, which focuses on *our organization, our people, our business partners and our communities*.

Our **Bright IDEA Strategic Plan** addresses five areas:

1. **Access and Success:** Recruit and retain a diverse workforce and build a diverse pipeline.
2. **Climate and Intergroup Relations:** Create and sustain an agency culture that affirms and respects diversity and employs inclusive practices throughout daily operations.
3. **Training and Education:** Engage in learning the concepts of DEI, and the importance of these concepts in completing the Virginia Housing mission.
4. **Infrastructure and Accountability:** Drive for Operational Excellence in Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access by creating and sustaining an agency infrastructure that effectively supports progress and accountability in achieving IDEA goals.
5. **Community Engagement:** Targeted Outreach and Lending Initiatives to Lessen Disparities in Access to Housing for Virginia’s diverse and marginalized communities.

We have devoted the past two years to building and executing a model that has a methodology that can be leveraged and replicated as a best practice for other HFAs interested in developing a DEI program within their organizations.

Why it was Undertaken – Management Challenge/Opportunity

In 2020, the Commonwealth of Virginia asked all agencies to develop a specific DEI approach. Although some guidance was provided, Virginia Housing took this opportunity to have a **Bright IDEA**: to develop a comprehensive plan that closely aligns with our mission as well as our overall strategic plan. One of our first actions was to incorporate IDEA questions into our 2021 Associates Survey. The results from the survey made the need for a more intentional approach and methodology to DEI apparent. According to the survey results:

- In terms of diversity, equity and inclusion, 52% of non-managers and 62% of managers agreed or strongly agreed that they feel comfortable talking about issues of racism on their teams.
- 75% of associates agreed or strongly agreed that they know where to find resources to learn more about these issues.
- In contrast, many of the other questions scored at 90% or higher.

These survey results supported our commitment to go beyond submitting a required document to be part of a statewide plan. Instead, it provided justification to develop a comprehensive plan that identified where we are starting on our DEI journey with clear goals, objectives and milestones.

How Did We Start: Leveraging Operational Resources

Virginia Housing dedicated internal operational resources to ensure we were well-positioned to undertake the task of developing our comprehensive **Bright IDEA Strategic Plan** with intended outcomes and accountability. In preparation, we leveraged the following resources.

- **Consulting Firm (TMI Consulting)** – We solicited the firm to assist us with having crucial conversations amongst staff, managers and the leadership of our organization in 2020.
- **Managing Director of Human Resources and Team** – Our HR team was critical in facilitating “book club” conversations in 2020 to create a safe space for associates to have these conversations. This also provided groundwork for our next steps.
- **Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** – We made the critical decision to hire a full-time, leadership level, professional to be 100% dedicated to developing and charting our course on our DEI journey.
- **Planning & Policy Department: Ongoing Employee DEI Surveys and Assessments** – As previously mentioned, we incorporated DEI survey questions into our 2021 Associates Survey to determine our baseline. The next survey will take place in 2023.
- **Cross-Pollinate Proven Best Practice: Assessment Tool** – We leveraged a proven best practice assessment tool to determine where our organization currently is on our DEI journey. The goals and objectives within our **Bright IDEA Strategic Plan** align with each stage of progression within the assessment tool. We also obtained best practice DEI survey questions and aligned them to both the assessment tool and to the goals/objectives of the strategic plan. Both resources provide a methodology to evaluate our progress ongoing.
- **Enterprise-wide Accountability** – All departments aligned their business plans to the goals/objectives of the **Bright IDEA Strategic Plan**.

What We Have Accomplished

By leveraging a proven best practice assessment tool and survey questions, we determined our organization was at **stage 3 - compliance** of the six stages of IDEA progression and we set an aggressive five-year goal to reach **stage 6 - inclusive** (see tool and stages in the appendix). Over the past two years, we have taken the necessary steps to achieve **stage 4 - affirming** as an organization; however, we also acknowledge that different departments are at different stages. Our actions to achieving progress needed to be customized for each department. One of our biggest accomplishments is obtaining buy-in from our entire leadership team on this approach and incorporating IDEA into the business plans of each department. This also ensures accountability at both the organization level and the department level.

We also established and leveraged two key councils: Our **IDEA Council** comprised of individuals identified by each department across the enterprise as well as members-at-large. The members of the council meet monthly to provide input and feedback as well as bring forward concerns of our associates. They also ensure we have ongoing activities and events to create a sense of belonging for all our associates. Over the past year, we have had eight activities/events and we also have weekly communications to increase awareness. Our **Minority Business Advisory Council** is comprised of community partners who are instrumental in providing input and feedback on our IDEA initiatives.

Why It Is Meritorious and Meets NCSHA Award Judging Criteria

Innovative: Our Bright IDEA Initiative Applies Innovation to the Execution of Our Commitment to DEI

Our **Bright IDEA** approach incorporates three critical areas: 1) We incorporated our IDEA commitment into the overall strategic plan of our organization. By doing so, our commitment is a public commitment that is displayed on our website. In addition, not only does this hold us accountable to ourselves; it also invites our business partners and Board of Commissioners to hold us accountable to our IDEA efforts.

2) Our **Bright IDEA Strategic Plan** serves as a road map for our journey not only over the next couple of years but addresses sustainability milestones that we must cross as we continue to move forward.

3) Our IDEA commitment is not owned by one person or one department. To ensure authority-wide shared responsibility and accountability, all departments have incorporated IDEA into their business plans. In addition, they were given the autonomy to create their own IDEA goals and objectives with the assistance and ongoing support of our DEI Director.

Replicable: Our Bright IDEA Initiative Can Be Replicated by Other HFAs

Our **Bright IDEA** approach had specific steps that can be replicated. We leveraged existing industry proven best practice DEI questions and incorporated them into our biennial associates survey to assess our IDEA current state. The DEI Director scheduled listening sessions with managers, leadership team members, associates, external stakeholders, HR director and our CEO to obtain feedback about existing commitment to IDEA and recommendations to incorporate into our IDEA strategic direction. Our DEI Director scheduled meetings with external organizations who are successfully executing diversity, equity and inclusion in our region to obtain their best practices and determine what could be incorporated into our plan. To execute the plan, we ensured all departments incorporate aspects into their business plans and an emphasis was placed on intended results from our efforts.

Provides Benefits That Outweigh Costs

As part of our **Bright IDEA** approach, we re-evaluated existing partnerships, memberships and sponsorships to ensure we are maximizing our return of investment. This allowed us to “break down silos” and ensure various departments benefit from the relationships instead of being housed in one area of the organization. In addition, we are receiving positive feedback from our associates regarding our IDEA efforts as well as members of our advisory councils who witness the impact of our commitment externally.

Demonstrates Effective Use of Resources

Since our **Bright IDEA** approach is across our organization, we ensure a portion of existing budgets are allocated to IDEA efforts, particularly in HR, marketing & communications, and community outreach. Additional expenses needed were minimum. We added two FTEs: The DEI Director and an Equitable Development Officer.

Achieves Strategic Objectives

Our **Bright IDEA** Strategic Plan compliments our organization’s overall strategic plan and specifically addresses the following goals/objectives within that plan.

- Strategy Goal #1: Develop Targeted Outreach and Lending Initiatives to Lessen Disparities in Access to Homeownership.
- Strategy Goal #2: Drive for Operational Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).

See appendix for specific **Bright IDEA Strategic Plan** goals/objectives vs. accomplishments.

Conclusion

As we have discussions with other organizations who have attempted to execute a DEI Strategy, we find many have been derailed because they did not have a road map. Our **Bright IDEA** approach yields benefits because of three key factors: 1) It has the **voice of our people** because we leverage surveys and our IDEA Council to ensure they are involved. 2) It has the **voice of our partners** because we leverage our Minority Business Advisory Council to assist us and provide feedback on our initiatives. 3) And, it has **accountability** by ensuring all departments include IDEA into their business plans with goals and objectives for the year.

Appendix

IDEA Strategic Objectives	2022-2023 Accomplishments
Access and Success: Recruit and retain a diverse workforce and build a diverse pipeline. Recruit and hire a more compositionally diverse workforce. Retain a more compositionally diverse workforce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human Resources Launched New Fellows Program. Developed relationships with Historically Black Colleagues and Universities (HBCUs) to recruit new associates and interns. Engaged an external consultant to conduct a focus group to obtain perspectives on work in general. There was an emphasis on obtaining feedback from Generation Z and millennial associates.
Climate and Intergroup Relations: Create and sustain an agency culture that affirms and respects diversity and employs inclusive practices throughout daily operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded our leadership team beyond Chiefs and Managing Directors, to include directors of key areas. This shift created an expanded leadership (LTX) with more representation and diversity of gender, race, orientation and thought. Formed an IDEA Council, which allows for diverse perspectives when discussing key aspects of our organization. Delivered an ongoing series to create a sense belonging for associates The following seven sessions/activities delivered: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Juneteenth Lunch & Learn session. Pride Month Light on building to bring awareness. Hispanic Heritage Month activities including food demo station and Spanish lessons. National Disability Employment Month Lunch & Learn session. Partnered with Virginia War Memorial for customized tour for employees, <i>War Heroes Through the Lens of Inclusivity</i>. Black History Month Celebration, <i>Celebrating Black History in Music, Art, & Prose</i>. Women's History Month Celebration: <i>Trailblazing Women Panel Discussion</i>.
Training and Education: Engage in learning the concepts of DEI, and the importance of these concepts in completing the Virginia Housing mission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly newsletter IDEA articles to increase awareness. DEI Mandatory Training on Civility in the Workplace achieved 100% participation. DEI Mandatory Training on Unconscious Bias achieved 100% participation. Facilitated IDEA team conversations on Unconscious Bias (by request – delivered to four departments thus far). Legal and Finance Departments incorporating IDEA Updates and Workshops into their “all associates” meetings (three sessions thus far).
Infrastructure and Accountability: Drive for Operational Excellence in Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access by creating and sustaining an agency infrastructure that effectively supports progress and accountability in achieving IDEA goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established Minority Business Advisory Council, which is assisting us with three key initiatives: 1) Fellows Program 2) Access for BIPOC Developers Initiative; and 3) Equitable Development Initiative. Incorporating IDEA into Business Plans across all departments. Exceeded goals for doing business with small, women and minority-owned (SWaM) businesses by 15%. This was a collaborative effort with all departments.
Community Engagement: Targeted Outreach and Lending Initiatives to Lessen Disparities in Access to Housing for Virginia's diverse and marginalized communities. Create IDEA-aligned programs and resources that facilitate new partnerships, resources and opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Outreach hired Equitable Development Officer. Rental Housing Incorporates IDEA into the Rental Symposium. Homeownership sponsoring and participating in a series of DEI Training hosted by the Charlottesville Area Association of Realtors from March through June. Federal Program incorporates IDEA Training into its Housing Voucher Summit. Program Areas Deliver IDEA Focused Learning Series for associates led by Community Outreach. Virginia Housing was awarded a Drum Major Award from Urban Financial Services Coalition at the annual Martin Luther King celebration. The award was presented by Sen. Tim Kaine and awarded based on our demonstrated commitment to breaking down barriers to homeownership to marginalized and under-represented populations.

Leveraged Proven Best Practice Assessment Tool and DEI Survey Questions

DEI Continuum Tool



GALLUP

Advancing DEI Initiatives: A Guide for Organizational Leaders



Associates Feedback About Our IDEA Strategic Direction



“The Legal Division’s outputs and services largely come down to providing advice and counsel on complex legal and business issues. We do our best work when a variety of viewpoints and options are considered and debated to get to a fully baked conclusion. IDEA leads to multiple points of view and experiences being expressed, all toward a common goal in a collaborative, mission-driven, team approach. IDEA is just plain good for our line of business.”

– **Fred Brennan**, Chief Legal Council

“The goal of the community development learning series is to expose Virginia Housing associates to larger trends in community development that impact our work as a housing finance agency. We also want associates to walk away understanding how persistent inequities in housing have most severely impacted communities of color throughout the Commonwealth so that they are equipped to work with Virginia’s diverse housing delivery network.”

– **Mariah Williams**, Equitable Development Officer, Community Outreach



“IDEA is critical to the work we do in Marketing and Communications. Our audiences want to see themselves represented in our content. If they can walk away feeling seen and heard, we are headed in the right direction.”

– **Kyla Goldsmith-Ray**, Communications Director



"Virginia Housing is fully integrating our IDEA initiatives across the enterprise beyond required training through our open enrollment training programs, team-building sessions, eLearning for our associates and stakeholders, and our leadership development programs. We are committed to weaving in an IDEA perspective throughout all our learning programs so we can work together with increased understanding, and better deliver on our mission to our stakeholders. I am excited to personally play a role in this work."

– **Michelle Prosser**, Training, Development & Learning Director

"I believe IDEA is important to Virginia Housing because it fosters an atmosphere of creativity from all associates, and talking about new fresh perspectives from others, and placing an understanding of all cultures. As a member of the IDEA council, I am proud that my employer values ALL cultures and we are promoting, introducing new things to everyone in our enterprise. Not only does this allow associates to know one another better, it's allowing our associates to understand our clients and business partners better."

– **Henry Jackson**, Post Closing Manager and IDEA Council Member



"I appreciate the opportunity to learn about different cultures, races and genders each week while reading The Press through the IDEA Council. Recognition of people from all walks of life is integral in understanding the communities we serve."

– **Adrian Robinett**, Public Relations Manager

"Virginia Housing is committed to supporting supplier diversity, and I'm proud to lead the Procurement Team that brings it to life. We exceeded our SWaM goal for doing business with small, women and minority owned businesses by an average of 15% for the last two fiscal years! That achievement was significant because it was a Virginia Housing team effort, including the business teams and the leadership team, versus rules forced by Procurement."

– **Nicole Thompson**, Senior Procurement Manager



Creating a Sense of Belonging

Samples of our weekly IDEA newsletter articles

IDEA COUNCIL UPDATE



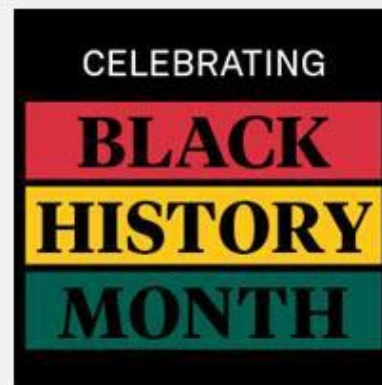
Ramadan

Ramadan is the Arabic name for the ninth month in the Islamic calendar. It is considered one of the holiest months for Muslims and is marked by a period of fasting. Learn how you can [support your fellow Virginia Housing co-workers](#) who are observing Ramadan.

IDEA COUNCIL UPDATE

The Origins of Black History Month

Harvard-trained historian Carter G. Woodson hoped to raise awareness of African Americans' contributions to civilization. He founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1925. The organization had its first Negro History Week celebration in February of 1926, and it encompassed the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. The week was expanded into a full month in 1976 and became Black History Month. Today it is also known as African American History Month. This year, the Commonwealth of Virginia is recognizing Black History Month by featuring the stories of Black men and women who have had a significant impact on Virginia's history. You can learn more by visiting [their website](#).



IDEA COUNCIL UPDATE

The Luck of the Irish

First celebrated by Presidential proclamation in 1991, Irish-American Heritage Month is a month-long recognition of the contributions that Irish immigrants and their descendants have made to U.S. society. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the anti-immigrant sentiment that the Irish faced when they first began to immigrate to America, including employment and housing discrimination. In March, we celebrate how people of Irish decent have overcome these barriers and thrived.

What Woman Inspires You?

In recognition of Women's History Month, Sue Armstrong showcased Mexican painter Frida Kahlo in her workspace as a personal inspiration.

What woman inspires you? Decorate your workspace showing us and send photos of your display to [Andrew Spencer](#) and we'll select someone new each week during this month to feature in The Press.



IDEA COUNCIL UPDATE

Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

March is recognized as Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, which is an opportunity to increase public awareness of the needs and the potential of Americans with developmental disabilities. According to the Centers for Disease Control, developmental disabilities are defined as impairments in physical, learning, language or behavior areas, and include:

- Autism spectrum disorders
- Cerebral palsy
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- Learning or intellectual disabilities
- Hearing loss
- Vision impairment
- Other developmental delays

The [Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services](#) is an excellent resource to assist individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, and can connect them to other resources.





"I'm so proud of the work our inaugural IDEA Council has been doing as the essential link between our DEI strategy and associate education and awareness. Virginia Housing continues to strive to create a workplace that works for everyone – possessing a sense of empathy, open-mindedness and respect that is critical to delivering on our mission."

– Susan Dewey, CEO, Virginia Housing



IDEA Activities & Events

Samples of our IDEA events



“Taste Tour of Latin America” with Chef Robert Rivera

Black History Month Art Exhibit with artist Dennis Winston





Black History Month actor, comedian and speaker Micah “Bam-Bamm” White

Black History Month violinist Lauren Watkins



Women’s History Month panelists: Jackie Stone, Senior Partner with McGuireWoods; Laura Lafayette, Chief Executive Officer of the Richmond Association of REALTORS®; Allison Bogdanović, Chief Executive Officer of Virginia Supportive Housing with Susan Dewey, CEO, Virginia Housing



Black History Month Attendees

National Disability Employment Month speaker, Matthew Shapiro, CEO of 6 Wheels Consulting LLC



Juneteenth speaker, Roscoe Burnems, Richmond's first poet laureate



Partnership with Virginia War Memorial



Virginia Housing lit up for Pride Month



Urban Financial Services Coalition's MLK Award



Charlottesville Area Association of REALTORS® DEI Training Series sponsorship

Marketing Materials

Samples of Social Media posts





Marketing in Spanish



Partnership with Radio One