

Little Free Library, Big Community Impact

Virginia Housing
Special Achievement

HFA Staff Contact

Maria Pruner

maria.pruner@virginiahousing.com

Virginia Housing

2024 NCSHA Award Submission

Entry Category:

Special Achievement

Entry Name:

Little Free Library, Big Community Impact



Overview

Virginia Housing is committed to embedding itself within our communities and working to achieve quality, affordable housing for all. When the idea of a department book swap came up, we immediately dreamed bigger and sought a way to include our community as well! Associates from two different departments in the Human Resources Division volunteered to lead the project. This was an innovative way to create collaboration and synergy within the division. Tying it to our mission through the incalculable value of literacy, the nascent Little Free Library project team decided to share the love of books and reading on a larger scale.

Why It was Undertaken

Virginia Housing headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, is positioned between three very different neighborhoods. The first is a bustling downtown center for businesses with heavy commuter and public transportation traffic. The second neighborhood has a large public university where students are almost always on foot. The third neighborhood is a small residential community with homes and a public high school. It's within this residential community, Oregon Hill, that we see our greatest opportunity to make an impact with this project.

Oregon Hill is a historically working-class neighborhood. According to the latest census data, the median household income in Oregon Hill is within the target income limits for Virginia Housing loan products and programs. Additionally, the neighborhood does not have walkable access to a local branch of the Richmond Public Library.

Twice a week, Virginia Housing welcomes students from a public high school, located in Oregon Hill, to share our cafe during lunch. While making the short walk, those students also pass our Little Free Library.

With research linking literacy levels to housing stability, we recognize the importance of and value of access to books for all ages. Positioning our Little Free Library at the crux of these three diverse neighborhoods allows books to flow from transient visitors to permanent residents and future homeowners.

Purpose of Our Little Free Library

Virginia Housing has taken a unique step to publicly support the importance of fostering a culture of literacy and community engagement. Our Little Free Library is a program that allows individuals in our local neighborhood to freely share and take books. This initiative is particularly significant as the local community, Oregon Hill, does not have a local library. The purpose of this initiative is multi-faceted and encompasses several areas Virginia Housing has actively encouraged:

1. Promoting Literacy: Our organization is committed to promoting literacy within the community, due to its link with housing stability. We believe that books and access to knowledge should be accessible to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status and/or geographic location. This initiative benefits people of all ages, whether they're seeking educational resources, leisure reading, or personal growth. By promoting literacy, we're empowering the community to access and obtain necessary resources.

2. Building a Strong Housing Community: The Little Free Library is a focal point for community interaction. It encourages neighbors to come together, share common interests in literature, and engage in meaningful conversations. It fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens social ties among residents.
3. Encouraging Reading and Learning: By providing access to books, especially in an area where there’s no traditional library branch, the Little Free Library encourages a love for reading and lifelong learning. This can positively impact individuals' development, education, and overall well-being.
4. Promoting Sustainability: Little Free Libraries often operate on the free principle of "take a book, leave a book". This promotes the reuse and recycling of reading materials within the community. This aligns with broader sustainability goals by reducing waste and promoting a culture of sharing, knowledge, and resourcefulness.

What We Accomplished

By installing and setting up the Little Free Library, we can engage the local community and our associates. Our Little Free Library was set up by associates who volunteered to be part of the project. The project team was passionate about reading, knew the importance of literacy, and were committed to sharing their love for reading with their co-workers and the local community. The project team met with the steward of an established Little Free Library in another part of Richmond (to gain insight and identify ways to be successful) and created a Policy & Procedure document (to govern the installation and ongoing maintenance of our Little Free Library). Additionally, the project team coordinated the installation effort with our in-house Facilities (to get their buy-in and assistance with identifying a location and completing the installation), Security (to identify a location), and Communication (to identify colors of the paint consistent with Virginia Housing branding) teams. This passion project has inspired all associates to share books and information through the Little Free Library with others in our community that we usually would not have been able to communicate or interact with otherwise.

Within the first four months, we had over 2,000 visitors come to our Little Free Library, which we captured using a door counter. We have given roughly 200 books to the local area and maintain the Little Free Library in a visible and accessible place for the community. We hope to continue inspiring a love of literacy in our local community.

Engaging Associates and Book Donations

The Little Free Library is a community resource, and that community includes Virginia Housing associates, as well as our customers, business partners, and external stakeholders. By locating the Little Free Library adjacent to a public sidewalk at the entrance to our headquarters parking lot, we have made it easily visible and accessible to anyone who comes to the headquarters building and/or passes by the building.

The Little Free Library team solicits donations from Virginia Housing associates to supplement the books that are left in the library by the community. The Little Free Library tagline is “take a book, leave a book” and the library is intended to be mostly self-supported by donations from library users. To ensure that the library is always well stocked for community use, our team asks for donations from Virginia Housing associates regularly by including requests for donations in our weekly associate newsletter, The Press. We also partner with the IGNITE Council, Virginia Housing’s associate engagement team, to promote the Little Free Library and solicit donations.

A stock of books provided by associates is kept on hand to help fill the library as stock gets low. Books are reviewed to ensure that they are in good condition and do not contain offensive material. Both associate donations and books left in the library are stamped to indicate that they are part of the Little Free Library program and are not intended for resale. Associate support helps ensure that this community resource is well-stocked to provide books for our local community.

Why it is Meritorious and Meets NCSHA Award Judging Criteria

1. Innovative: The Little Free Library provides a unique way for Virginia Housing to support the community. Oregon Hill is a traditionally disadvantaged neighborhood that has been undergoing a recent transformation and Virginia Housing has become a bigger part of that transformation with the installation of the Little Free Library. A public high school is located in the neighborhood and students from the high school come to the cafeteria at our headquarters twice a week for lunch. By providing books of all genres and for all ages, we can reach readers of all ages in the community.
2. Responds to an Important State Need: Literacy is empowering and there is a strong link between literacy and housing stability. By investing in community literacy, Virginia Housing is helping to provide current and future homeowners and renters with important tools for success.
3. Achieves Intended Results: Since the ribbon cutting in December 2023, the Little Free Library has been used more than 2,000 times. The Little Free Library team checks the library weekly, and we always find new books that have been donated, demonstrating that it has quickly become a community-sustained resource that follows the “take a book, leave a book” tagline of the Little Free Library organization.
4. Provides Benefits that Outweigh Costs: The initial setup cost for the Little Free Library was under \$800. Ongoing maintenance costs are minimal, both financially and in terms of effort. Most importantly, community members have 24/7 access to the library and the books are provided right in their neighborhood. This was not previously available, as there is not a public library branch in Oregon Hill.
5. Can be Easily Replicated: The Little Free Library project can be easily replicated by any housing agency or organization interested in creating a stronger community partnership. The Little Free Library organization provides tips, best practices, and resources for getting started. Additionally, it has a variety of pre-built library boxes and stands to order. Becoming part of the Little Free Library network requires little effort, but as Virginia Housing is seeing, can lead to big results.

Conclusion

Activist Margaret Fuller said, “Today a reader, tomorrow a leader.” The Little Free Library at Virginia Housing’s headquarters encourages our community to become readers and leaders. Taking a new approach to providing resources to our neighbors, customers, and business partners has been a rewarding and impactful way to give back to others. As a leader in addressing state housing needs, Virginia Housing takes pride in expanding our impact by providing free literacy resources to our community.

Appendix

Policy & Procedure Document- Excerpt



Virginia Housing

1. Document Overview

This document outlines the operations and maintenance of Virginia Housing's nascent community Little Free Library (LFL). The mission statement of the LFL is to share reading with the community and incorporate experiences from all identities for all readers.

2. Project Team

The following associates comprise the project team:

- Meredith Costa
- Brenna Perrey
- Brooke Rogers
- Amanda Sirianni
- Lisa Watson (Executive Sponsor)

3. Location and Hours of Operation

The community LFL is in the parking lot facing Belvidere Street at the HQ building. The LFL is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

4. Inspecting Books

Donated books will be inspected before being added to the reserve. New books in the community LFL will be inspected as part of weekly maintenance by the LFL team. Books that meet the following requirements will be kept in the reserve or in the LFL:

- In good condition (new or gently used)
- Does not contain outdated and/or offensive content

The project team will not be able to read every book that is donated, but commits to skimming all donated books to ensure they meet our requirements. Books that do not meet these requirements will be disposed of appropriately.

Initial Setup Budget

Description/Notes	Item	Cost
Little Free Library Brand Stand	Box	\$ 400.00
Charter Sign	Sign	\$ 40.00
Paint, Primer, Sandpaper	Paint	\$ 100.00
Library Post with Topper	Topper	\$ 79.00
Battery Operated Light	Light	\$ 50.00
Custom Stamps	Stamp	\$ 50.00
Library Visit Counter	Library Counter	\$ 40.00
		\$ 759.00
	Sales Tax 5.3%	\$ 40.23
		\$ 799.23

Setup and Installation Photos





The Press Announcement to Virginia Housing Associates



Little Free Library




The Little Free Library Grand Opening was held on Dec. 18 with a ribbon cutting ceremony at HQ. Stop by soon and leave a book, take a book. All are welcome! Read more below.

[Read More](#)

Social Media Post to Announce Little Free Library to the Public

Virginia Housing
9,758 followers
4mo • 🌐

Our downtown Richmond office is now home to a [#LittleFreeLibrary](#). We invite you to take a book or leave a book next time you're in the area!



👍❤️ Heather Weidner and 138 others 2 comments · 14 reposts

👍 Like 💬 Comment ↻️ Repost 📧 Send

The Press Announcement Seeking Book Donations

Little Free Library Donations

Back in December, four associates – Meredith Costa, Amanda Sirianni, Brenna Perrey and Brooke Rogers – volunteered to install a Little Free Library on Belvidere Street, just outside of HQ. Now they need your help to keep it full of books!

Please bring your book donations to Amanda or Meredith in the TD&L office, or to Brenna or Brooke in HR.

Books should be in good condition and should not contain hateful language.

Below are a few photos from the Little Free Library's dedication ceremony:

