

CWD

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Making the Connection: Building Cross Agency Partnerships

The American Public Human Services Association Center for Workers with Disabilities (CWD) partnered with NCB Capital Impact to develop a series of technical assistance issue briefs targeted to the needs of Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) projects. These briefs will provide information and strategies on affordable housing financing and programs that could be accessed by workers with disabilities. Additionally, these briefs will provide MIG projects with guidance on how to gather information about their state housing and community development agencies and related programs. For more information on this and other resources, contact Nanette Relave at NRelave@aphsa.org.

Introduction

The introductory brief in this series provided an overview of various federal and state housing financing programs that can be used to support workers with disabilities at low income levels.¹ The brief also profiled state programs designed to increase access to affordable housing in the community. These programs would not have been successful were it not for cross agency collaboration and community-based partnerships.

This brief, *Making the Connection: Building Cross Agency Partnerships*, will discuss how to develop partnerships with state housing finance agencies and other housing stakeholders. Though the resources and allowable uses of MIG grants do not allow states to provide direct housing services to workers with disabilities with these grant funds, MIGs can support individuals with disabilities by creating linkages between programs offering affordable housing and those offering employment services. The overall objective of this issue brief series is to provide MIG projects with examples of successful housing strategies that have expanded integrated community living for workers with disabilities.

¹ See *Affordable Housing Financing and Subsidies: Resources for Programs Serving Workers with Disabilities* at <http://cwd.aphsa.org/home/docs/AffordableHousingBrief.pdf>.

Key learning objectives of this brief include:

- Understanding the value of cross agency collaboration;
- Identifying strategies to develop partnerships;
- Learning about a promising state agency partnership; and
- Identifying key tips for establishing partnerships.

Partnerships are essential to community integration as it takes a network of supports and services to facilitate community living and employment. And in this economy, partnerships are more important than ever as these challenging economic times put pressure on state agencies to reduce costs and increase savings. Partnerships can provide an avenue for cost sharing and increased efficiency in service delivery. In this context, it is valuable to identify strategies that can facilitate collaboration and coordination with state and local housing finance agencies.

This issue brief will highlight the value of cross agency collaboration and partnerships, profile a partnership in North Carolina between the Housing Finance Agency and the Department of Health and Human Services, and identify several key “how to’s” when building partnerships.

The Value of Cross Agency Collaborations

As noted earlier, in this economy state health and human service agencies are facing even greater challenges to creating and maintaining programming to support community integration. Additionally, the ability of state housing finance agencies to create and maintain affordable housing for low-income populations has been impacted by the credit crunch. By creating cross agency collaborations, there is an opportunity for pooling resources that can benefit all partners.

Partnerships between human service agencies and housing finance agencies can both leverage resources and play a critical role in helping to build a more coordinated system of community supports for working individuals with disabilities. At the same time, housing finance and human service agencies generally do not speak a common language. While the housing finance representatives talk about AMI (area median income) as the basis of program eligibility, the human service representatives measure financial and functional eligibility.

Developing collaboration with a housing finance agency should first begin with an information exchange to ensure everyone at the table understands each other’s language. It is also important to understand how housing finance agencies work and identify key junctures where innovative strategies can be used that will not hinder the housing finance approval process. For example, if state partners wanted to create a set aside pool of tax credits for the development of affordable, accessible units for workers with disabilities,

they would need to take into account the timeline for the annual review of the state's Low Income Housing Tax Credit Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP). For more information on housing finance agencies and their programs, see the first brief in this series available on the CWD website (at <http://cwd.aphsa.org/home/docs/AffordableHousingBrief.pdf>).

Partnership Strategies

There is no “cookie cutter” approach to building partnerships. Each state must develop strategies that work within the unique context of the state. Additionally, the systems change process that is integral to developing community supports and affordable, accessible and integrated housing for people with disabilities is a complex undertaking. Such changes may require overhauling years of established infrastructure in housing and community development agencies and, to a degree, human services agencies. Several key elements must be addressed to forge relationships or create entities that will maximize the availability of affordable supportive housing (see **Table 1**, below).

Table 1. Key Components of Systems and Indicators of a Changed System²

<i>Component</i>	<i>Operational Evidence</i>
Power	People have formal authority and responsibility for new activities
Money	Funding is available and reliable
Habits	People and organizations interact with each other to carry out new activities as part of their normal and ongoing routines
Technology and Skills	Skilled practitioners at all levels can effectively deliver results
Ideas and Values	A new understanding of the problem or policy objective(s) and new definitions of performance or success are widely shared

² Greiff, D., et. al. *Laying a New Foundation—Changing the Systems that Create and Sustain Supportive Housing*.

States that have been successful in re-engineering their housing and human services agencies have addressed these components at high administrative and policy levels, and worked to ensure effective and consistent implementation of changes.

Partnerships built with state housing finance agencies and other housing industry stakeholders can create innovative strategies for affordable housing development for individuals with disabilities. In many states, human service and other agencies have built upon working relationships with housing finance agencies developed as part of the state's Olmstead implementation. Strategies for partnerships can be as simple as opening lines of communication with housing finance agency representatives as part of a statewide task-force. Promoting information exchange by holding regularly scheduled meetings between key staff members across agencies has been an effective strategy in Iowa. Developing a guidebook on housing finance programs that can be shared across agencies and providing training workshops on supportive housing and services at statewide conferences have been approaches used by the state of Maryland to make cross agency connections.

Promising Practices—North Carolina

Many states have struggled with how to make affordable housing truly affordable to the very and extremely low income populations. Those with the most critical need often are people with disabilities who may also require community-based services to support employment and independent living. North Carolina has developed a model that highlights what partnerships between human services and housing finance agencies can accomplish.

Beginning in 2002, the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency (NCHFA) has partnered with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to facilitate the development of housing for people with disabilities in an effort to increase the supply of affordable, accessible and integrated housing. Through a policy change within the state's Low Income Housing Tax Credit Qualified Allocation Plan, the NCHFA now requires every tax credit housing project to set aside 10 percent of its units for people with disabilities. To support this commitment, the housing project is required to develop a plan for service coordination in partnership with local human service agencies. These partnership plans are intended to increase access to affordable housing units and to supportive services.

DHHS staff helps housing projects and local human services agencies make connections as well as provides general technical assistance with developing the partnership plan for service coordination. Both NCHFA and DHHS review low income housing tax credit applications to ensure all requirements are met. After the property is operating, NCHFA monitors for compliance.

In addition to modifying the Qualified Allocation Plan, NCHFA and DHHS partnered to develop a project-based rental subsidy for the targeted units. Known as the Key Program, the additional layering of the rental subsidy allows the rents to be “drilled down” farther to serve individuals with extremely low incomes. Both state agencies designate a portion of their annual budgets to the rental subsidy program, thereby sharing the cost.

Getting Started: How To's

There are a number of common “to-do’s” when building partnerships with housing agencies.

- **Identify housing agencies and organizations at the state and local levels that target low-income populations.** Pay close attention to affordable housing developers whose missions target very and extremely low income populations. These housing developers may have added incentive to partner with organizations serving those at low income levels including individuals with disabilities and others.
- **Seek out existing housing coalitions and networks.** Most states have a trade association or membership-based organization of the affordable housing developers in the state. By connecting with existing networks, it is easier to get your message out to a wider audience. Additionally, housing coalitions provide a “one-stop” place to go to meet with the housing industry.
- **Identify clear and measureable goals for the partnership.** A few questions must be asked at the beginning of the collaboration in order to establish common ground. What is the value of this partnership? What will each partner commit to the collaboration? How will success be measured?
- **Be willing to compromise.** Partners are more likely to buy into solutions when each side gives a little but no one partner has control over the outcome. By creating an open and accepting environment for negotiation, each partner will be able to identify their vested interest in the partnership.
- **Keep the process simple.** Creating additional layers of time consuming process within an already process laden environment can create friction among the partners.
- **Partner with legislative committees to foster cross system coordination.** Encouraging legislators to work across committee and departmental boundaries can help to minimize the pull against the collaboration.

Partnerships can be valuable when a common vision is identified from the beginning. Creating supports for workers with disabilities requires a multi-faceted community support system that brings together housing and service agencies in partnership.

COMING SOON!

Making Connections to Local Housing Resources

Now that we have discussed the tools and resources available to create cross agency collaborations at the state level, it is important to identify strategies that can be employed to create collaborations and coordinate programming with local housing resources. This brief will build upon the information provided on housing finance programs and provide additional detail on how to make connections with local housing providers both public and private. Information will include an overview of local housing agencies and providers, strategies for local coalition building and examples of successful cross sector collaborations targeting housing for individuals with disabilities.



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1133 Nineteenth St., NW, Suite 400 • Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202/682-0100 • Fax: 202/289-6555 • <http://cwd.aphsa.org>