

GRAND FORKS HOUSING AUTHORITY

BUSH PRIZE FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION



GRAND FORKS, NORTH DAKOTA

LEADER

Terry Hanson

BUDGET

\$10,000,000+

GEOGRAPHY

North Dakota,
Native Nations

YEARS ACTIVE

Founded in 1967

INNOVATION STORY NO. 7

LESS IS MORE

Grand Forks Housing Authority (GFHA) is a leading provider and proponent of affordable housing in the Grand Forks area. Founded in 1967, GFHA currently provides housing assistance to over 2,000 low-income families and disabled and elderly residents. GFHA serves as the property management firm for nearly 700 affordable housing units.

STORY BY **KARIS THOMPSON AND
MORGAN MERCER**

“ **OUR PRIMARY GOAL IS TO ENSURE THAT EVERY HOUSEHOLD IN GRAND FORKS HAS ACCESS TO SAFE, DECENT, AFFORDABLE HOUSING.**

— EMILY CONTRERAS, Grand Forks Housing Authority

INNOVATION

GRAND FORKS HOUSING AUTHORITY

In an era of ever-present budget cuts, GFHA fosters new opportunities to expand availability and improve the quality of the area's affordable housing stock.

BREAKTHROUGH



When families struggle to pay rent, they often turn to emergency services. These funds can run out quickly and only provide temporary relief. GFHA saw an opportunity to pair its housing assistance with a short-term aid program to centralize services, and eliminate unneeded overlap. The revamped program reduced costs, increased the number of families assisted and increased long-term stability.



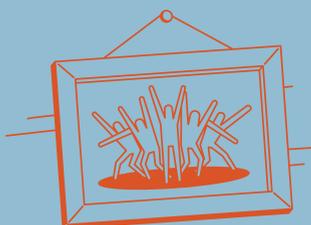
INQUISITIVE STAFF LEAD CREATIVELY

GFHA gives staff the autonomy to rely on their personal experiences or housing expertise to question and redefine the organization's programs and policies. This trust breeds bold employees willing to act rather than sit by and wait for change.

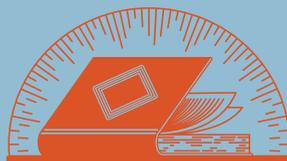


DOING MORE WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

GFHA breaks the cycle of homelessness by focusing on local partnerships that expand its work beyond affordable housing. Through these collaborations, GFHA combines pre-existing resources from each organization in a way that advances the partners' collective mission without adding to either group's bottom line.



REPRESENTS COMMUNITY



EMPHASIZES LEARNING



EXHIBITS RESOURCEFULNESS

THERE IS A PROBLEM quietly sweeping through Grand Forks, North Dakota. You can find it taking cover in a temporary shelter, or huddled up in the heated stairwell of a parking ramp on a cold night. Every month, hundreds of families in Grand Forks fall behind on rent, face eviction and find themselves homeless. In 2016, North Dakota's chronic homelessness rate climbed by 27 percent, even while national rates among veterans, families and children dropped. Yet the reality of the problem isn't easy to see when cold weather forces those without a home to get off the snowy streets and take cover out of sight. Nevertheless, in a state known for fierce winters, homelessness is a dangerous reality to face.

While emergency shelters fill up each night and elected officials wrestle with long-term plans to combat the growing issue, Grand Forks Housing Authority helps families answer one question: How am I going to pay for a place to live? Each month, the organization turns federal funds into resources that help more than 2,000 families—or around 4,000 individuals—keep or find an affordable home.

With GFHA's help, Crystal Bailey-Dale got to tell her kids something they never heard before: "Here's your home. We can do whatever we want to. We can paint your room. We can have a dog. We can make it our own."

In a time threatened by budget cuts and dwindling federal funds, GFHA has learned to do more with less. Its programming reduces residents' reliance on emergency assistance from local agencies and provides a consistent alternative that helps individuals become more self-sufficient.

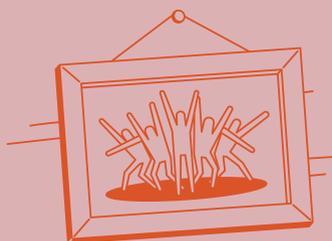
Along with housing vouchers that make rent affordable for low-income individuals, GFHA continually pursues services that

support North Dakota residents on the path to financial independence. The organization provides credit and homeownership counseling, after-school programs for young children, access to six media learning centers, free summer lunches for neighborhood kids and English language courses for new immigrants.

For Les Hilliard, housing subsidies from GFHA are a lifeline. Each month, he receives \$730 from Social Security disability payments. GFHA guarantees his monthly rent payments don't exceed 30 percent of his income, ensuring Les can afford his one-bedroom apartment at Oak Manor. "I know I'd be on the street if I didn't have this."

“ WE TAKE THE COMPLEXITY OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMING AND BRING IT DOWN TO BASIC LEVELS. ”

— EMILY CONTRERAS, Grand Forks Housing Authority



REPRESENTS COMMUNITY: Nearly 25 percent of staff at GFHA took advantage of at least one of the agency's programs before being hired. This commonality helps employees develop deep relationships with residents that lead to frank discussions about what is or isn't working on GFHA's properties. The organization frequently surveys residents on the effectiveness of its programs, and always makes sure to include two resident representatives on its governing boards.

Inquisitive Staff Lead Creatively



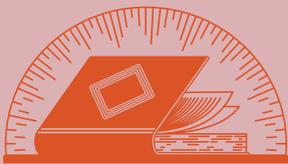
Looking out her office window, Courtney Cerroll couldn't stand what she saw—empty space. What was once a playground for kids who lived in GFHA-sponsored homes was now a patch of dirt. The resident services coordinator knew she had to do something to change the view, so she grabbed an application for a Community Development Block grant and started filling in the blanks. A few days later, when Terry Hanson, GFHA's executive director, asked Courtney if she thought they should apply for a grant to replace the former playground, Courtney said: "I'm way ahead of you."

GFHA gives staff members like Courtney an unprecedented amount of latitude to redefine how the agency operates and revise agency policies, because they're experts in housing assistance. Often, employees also have firsthand experience battling poverty and homelessness themselves, making them better equipped to serve their clients. GFHA leaders continually challenge staff to reassess the quality of the organization's programs and policies by asking them to answer one question: "How would you do it differently?" These kinds of questions institutionalize a culture of engagement and empowerment among staff at GFHA.

When families can't afford rent, they often find short-term relief through emergency assistance programs. However due to high costs, funds like these can run out quickly and only guarantee a month of support, leaving families scrambling again when the help is gone. During a meeting with the United Way of Grand Forks, Emily Contreras, GFHA's executive administrator, saw an opportunity to pair United Way's emergency relief resources with GFHA's ongoing housing assistance. The resulting program decreased costs, streamlined assistance, eliminated duplicate services and increased long-term housing stability for families.

Before GFHA stepped in, United Way's Starting Out Right (SOR) program gave families a one-time credit of \$1,500 to cover

a security deposit on a home and the referring agency a \$500 administration fee for the program. With GFHA's contributions to the revamped SOR program, households receive money for a security deposit and one month of rent, and are also enrolled to receive a monthly rent subsidy through GFHA for as long as they remain eligible. This two-step process not only eliminates initial barriers to housing, but also ensures families pay no more than 30 percent of their gross monthly income toward rent, providing them with long-term housing security. Not to mention the reduced cost of the program averaging under \$400 per household. With the money it saved by cutting overlapping services, such as the \$500 administrative fee, GFHA began offering financial incentives to families who stay in compliance with their lease housing assistance program.

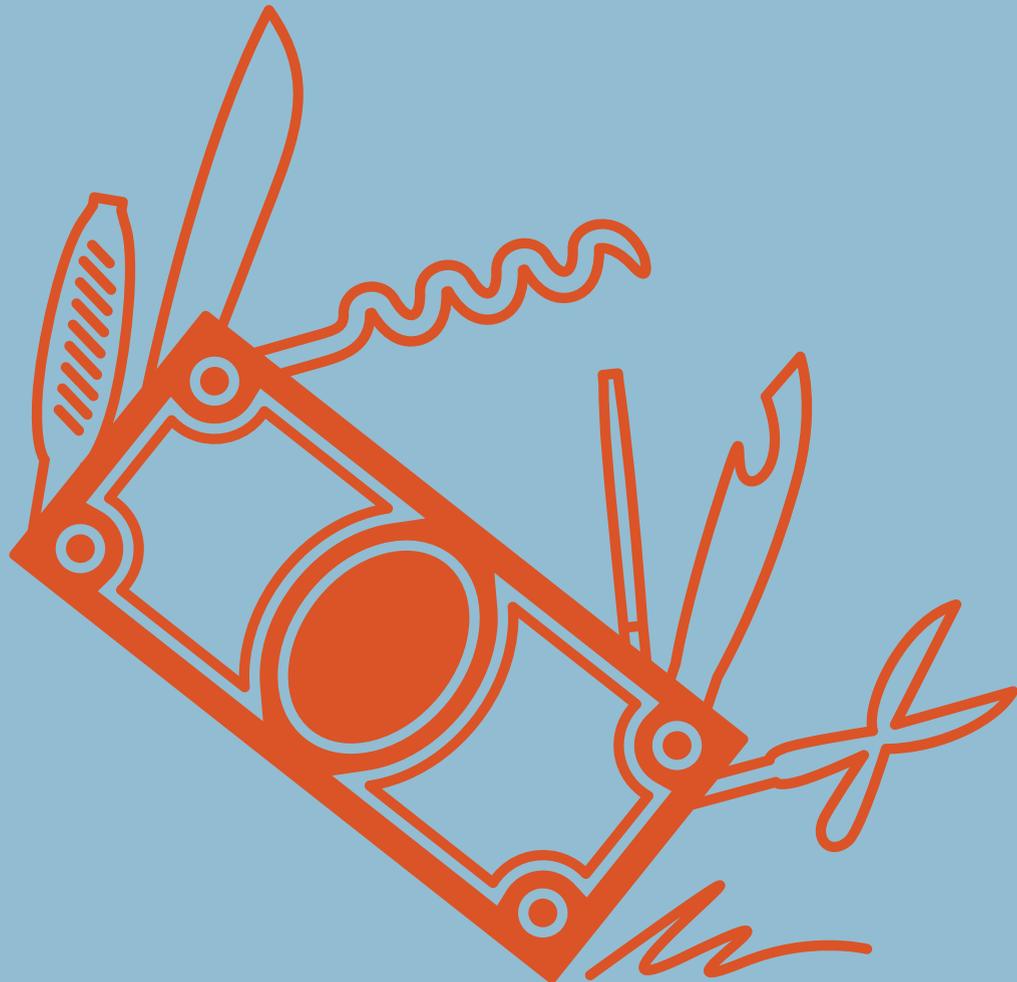


EMPHASIZES LEARNING: GFHA staff felt frustrated by how long it took to get Housing Choice Vouchers into the hands of eligible clients. At the time, the agency required voucher participants to watch a video at a monthly group meeting at GFHA's office before receiving housing assistance. But staff saw that wasn't working and came up with a new solution to put the video on YouTube. By letting clients watch the video on their own time, GFHA made the eligibility process more efficient and began reaching more people who needed vouchers.

“ HERE'S YOUR HOME. HERE'S SOMETHING WE CAN DO WHATEVER WE WANT TO... WE CAN MAKE IT OUR OWN.

— CRYSTAL BAILLEY-DALE, GFHA stakeholder

Doing More With Limited Resources —



As a federally funded agency, GFHA could operate independently of local organizations. Instead, GFHA chooses to surround itself with a roster of partners that contribute to a brighter future for North Dakota residents and prevent tenants from falling into homelessness.

GFHA asks prospective partners what it can do to help them accomplish their goals. By aligning its assets with the resources of other partners, GFHA advances the collective visions of both collaborators in a way that opens up new opportunities for its clients beyond affordable housing. For some GFHA

residents, relying on public transportation to get to and from the doctor prevents them from regularly accessing health care. Nancy Brandner, a resident services coordinator at GFHA, spent more than a year talking with staff at Valley Community Health Center to fix that. They came up with a swap. If GFHA provided a free space, the center would provide free, ongoing medical and behavioral services to GFHA's residents. Soon, in lieu of taking a bus, tenants will be able to take an elevator down to the first floor of GFHA's new \$9.5 million housing complex to see a medical professional.

Instead of limiting its role to administering federal housing funds to local residents, GFHA constantly seeks creative collaborations that let the agency do more for its clients without tacking on extra money to

its budget. In the early 90s, GFHA started operating an after-school program in conjunction with various partners such as Microsoft, the Otto Bremer Foundation, AmeriCorps and the Grand Forks School District's EN-CORE program. The program provided homework help, a snack, somewhere to play and a safe space for up to 20 residents of GFHA-managed properties. Many of the staff were University of North Dakota students participating in AmeriCorps or a federal work study program.

Stopping the cycle of homelessness doesn't end with rent vouchers or temporary housing assistance. For GFHA, finding an affordable place for its clients to live is often just the start. What comes next is a series of partnerships GFHA hopes will allow residents to build a life in their new home that they're proud of, too.



EXHIBITS RESOURCEFULNESS: In two years, GFHA spent \$60,000 fighting bed bugs when a substantial number of units in one of its buildings faced major infestations. The bed bug problem had to stop, but GFHA knew its residents couldn't afford to do it alone. At the time, the closest company offering heat treatment services to eliminate bed bugs was over 300 miles away and cost an average of \$1,000 per unit. In 2012, GFHA purchased its own equipment for \$80,000 and formed the GFHA Pest Elimination Division. This one-time investment helped the agency lower its overall pest elimination costs and create a social enterprise business. Today, the division checks nearly 700 GFHA units quarterly for any signs of pests. The preventative move keeps major infestations at bay, protects tenants' possessions from damage and ensures costlier services aren't needed down the line.



EXTERIOR, Grand Forks Housing Authority

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**THERE IS HOPE. YOU
ARE WORKING HARD.
YOU ARE GOING TO
BE ABLE TO SAVE
MONEY. IT IS ALMOST
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WITHOUT THESE KINDS
OF PROGRAMS.**

— EMILY JOHNSON, Grand Forks Housing Authority



STAFF, Grand Forks Housing Authority

TERRY HANSON & KURT KREUN
Grand Forks Housing Authority



INTERIOR
Grand Forks Housing Authority





EMILY CONTRERAS
Grand Forks Housing Authority



GROUNDS
Grand Forks Housing Authority