In many rural communities, there’s a significant gap between the supply of affordable housing and the number of people who need it. The Housing Institute, created by the Minnesota Housing Partnership, closes that gap through customized curriculum, guided collaboration and capacity building for diverse community stakeholders.

Established in 2010, the Housing Institute brings together housing leaders and stakeholders to share their experiences, learn best practices, and develop creative solutions to bring quality affordable housing to their communities. In its first six years, MHP convened 18 teams throughout Minnesota, providing in-person trainings and ongoing technical assistance that have helped communities secure millions in funding, build or preserve dozens of housing units, and fundamentally shift how they approach community development.

The 18-month Institute has shown that engaging different stakeholders — from government agencies to private businesses to nonprofit stakeholders — in truly effective and meaningful partnerships is the key ingredient to completing short-term projects and sustaining long-term relationships that lead to vibrant rural communities and regions.

“MHP provided the groundwork and tools to understand what it takes to create a strong housing initiative. They provided excellent training on funding streams, potential project obstacles, environmental impact considerations, financing and loan options, and community engagement. But foremost was the training on how to build a strong working team to accomplish the task.”

Audrey Moen, Housing Manager, Northland Counseling Center, Itasca County, MN
#1 A TEAM-BASED APPROACH

Moving beyond individual leadership, the Institute relies on a team model that capitalizes on local expertise and resources. Participants form teams comprised of several entities in a region, often including city, county, HRA and EDA staff. As the convener, MHP doesn’t prescribe the make-up of the team. Each Institute supports three or four teams with five to seven individual members each.

“Never before has there been a collaborative effort by multiple agencies to address housing in Cloquet,” the Cloquet/Carlton team explained in 2014. “Potential or strengthened collaboration and partnerships [are necessary to] increase affordable housing options for Cloquet and Carlton County residents.”

“Because of the Housing Institute, we were able to connect with developers, one of which has since completed two large projects in our community.”

Mark Borseth, City of Thief River Falls.

#2 WORKING ON A SPECIFIC PROJECT

During the application process, we ask teams to consider possible projects or programs to pursue that would meet needs or address housing challenges in their communities. In the most recent Institutes, teams have worked together to pursue a variety of specific projects, including development of housing studies, websites, senior housing, workforce housing, supportive housing, single family rehab, and more.

“While applying for senior housing development funding has been an incredible amount of work, the resources and support network from the Institute have helped us to work through the process,” said Rose Dunn, the Executive Director of the Mora Housing and Redevelopment Authority.

Our Model:

At its foundation, the Housing Institute is about relationship building. It is rooted in the belief that, by creating partnerships and working in collaboration, rural areas are able to:

- Increase housing production
- Preserve existing units of affordable housing
- Achieve economies of scale while retaining local control
- Learn from others experience and knowledge
- Combine resources to take on a new project or program
#3 SHARING KNOWLEDGE

To meet the needs of the participants, MHP customizes the curriculum for each Institute. Overarching topics addressed in the majority of Institutes include: project financing, data acquisition, communications strategies, policy updates, community engagement and more. The Institute includes a number of in-person workshops that provide an opportunity for teams to learn from expert presenters on key topics, and meet with each other and other teams in the region.

“We see better, more competitive applications to Minnesota Housing for scarce funding resources from communities that participate in the Housing Institute,” said Mary Tingerthal, Commission of the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency.

#4 CREATING CONNECTIONS

The Institute doesn’t just share knowledge; it creates relationships. In addition to building a team of stakeholders committed to a project, the Institute connects those community leaders to funders and developers who can help make their project a reality. An MHP staff member also works directly with each team throughout the Institute, helping them maintain momentum and guiding them through the development process.

“As a housing developer, Sand Companies has been able to connect with communities and regions in need of housing,” said Jamie Thelen, President and CEO of Sand Companies. “It gives us an opportunity to learn about challenges in many areas of our state and, at the same time, share some of our successes in housing.”

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS:

How did the Housing Institute impact collaboration among members of your team?

We normally would have worked in our own silos. Instead, even today, after the project is open, we are all committed and ready for the next project to start.

The Institute provoked important, though often heated, dialogue around the challenges we face as a community and the impacted parties.

The Institute got people talking about the possibilities.

The Institute helped us to develop the trust to work together.

Bringing us together away from our home community brought more focus and strengthened our relationships.

We have a better understanding of what each organization does. It helped to pull in the right people to move things along.
Housing Institute Success: Beacon Hill

Over the past decade, Mark had lived many places he didn’t call home. A state prison cell. A cockroach-infested motel room. An apartment complex populated with alcoholics and drug addicts – two substances he had battled himself.

He had setbacks with his sobriety that led to arrest and suffered a stroke that left him partially disabled.

But, at the grand opening of the Beacon Hill housing development in August 2016, Mark kept repeating one phrase: “I feel so blessed.”

Mark was one of dozens of residents who moved into the new supportive housing development in Grand Rapids within days of its completion. A $9.4 million project, Beacon Hill helped to fulfill an urgent need for additional affordable and supportive housing in rural Itasca County, Minnesota. But, evidenced by the packed room of local residents and leaders from across the state, it was clear this housing project is special.

Certainly, it’s notable in its design, bringing together families and individuals, some with disabilities or troubled pasts, to create a diverse but connected community of more than 120 residents. Perhaps even more exceptional, though, these 48 units were the tangible result of a unique collaboration among local leaders representing a diversity of interests, from corrections to housing to mental health.

In 2013, the concept for this community was born when seven Itasca County leaders came together for the Housing Institute, an initiative of the Minnesota Housing Partnership with support from the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund. Over 13 months, they worked diligently toward their goal to create Beacon Hill; but they also built partnerships that will benefit their region for years to come.

For Audrey Moen, Housing Manager at Northland Counseling Center, the impact of the Housing Institute could be summed up in six words. “Many hands make for light work,” she said at the grand opening. “That’s exactly what happened here. We had people from many different levels and many different areas making this dream come true.”

Interested in participating in the Housing Institute?
Contact Kelly Zelenka, Community Development Director, at 651.925.5542 or kelly.zelenka@mhponline.org. Learn more at mhponline.org.

MHP is an equal opportunity provider.