

New Jersey Affiliates Come together for Statewide Advocacy and Funding

Background: A virtual Habitat on the Hill (HOTH) in 2022 brought record participation by New Jersey affiliates. Several board members were on the NJ delegation and subsequently inspired by the depth and breadth of Habitat's advocacy efforts. They also saw the power of New Jersey affiliates coming together to advocate and wanted to keep that collaboration going after HOTH was over. One board member from Raritan Valley HFH stepped up to facilitate monthly calls for New Jersey CEOs and Executive Directors – and called this group the “NJ Leadership Team.” Another board member from Morris HFH arranged for her affiliate to schedule the monthly Teams calls and maintain a directory of the 17 affiliate leader's names and contact information. Meeting recordings and notes were shared with all affiliates after each monthly call.

Within a few months, the Leadership Team decided a sub-committee which focused primarily on state advocacy was needed. A charter (or collaboration agreement) was approved which contained simple goals and binding together all 17 affiliates in one advocacy voice on selected and approved proposed policy and legislation that would improve and increase home ownership for families of low to moderate income in New Jersey. The subcommittee functions exclusively to support the advocacy decisions and activities of the Leadership Team.

Dedicated volunteer facilitators are key to the monthly call activity: There have been three changes in the Leadership Teams' facilitator since monthly calls began in 2022. The original Facilitator from Raritan Valley had to step back due to a work obligation, so a Morris board member stepped up and ran the meetings for the past year. Now, this second facilitator is becoming President of Morris board and another board member from Gloucester HFH became the Monthly Call Facilitator starting in 2024. Having board members be key to this collaboration was important as CEOs/ Executive Directors needed to keep their attention on running their affiliates and engaging volunteer board members were essential to the group's existence.

Advocacy Sub-Committee: This group meets monthly, approximately a week before the Leadership Team call. Members of the Sub-Committee were recruited to represent geographical and affiliate size diversity. Currently there are 7 members. Recognizing capacity limitations, the Sub-Committee developed a “Decision Matrix” (2) to help the group decide what legislation should be followed and advocated for – and basically only focus on one or two bills at any one time to keep things manageable.

There has been one Advocacy Liaison to the LT monthly calls throughout the duration of this committee. This board member from Passaic HFH gives a short Advocacy report to the LT each month and ensures the LT is in agreement on legislative priorities and advocacy actions.

The CEOs/EDs have actively participated in advocacy activities including delivering testimony and reaching out to lawmakers. One (the South Central Habitat CEO) has been responsible for encouraging the group to support high level legislative pursuits including the successful attainment of a \$25 Million state housing trust fund carve-out for NJ Habitats (2023).

In the past months, the Advocacy SubCommittee has utilized a spreadsheet to track bills and other advocacy activities. (3) In addition to mobilizing calls to legislators, arranging for testimonies at hearings (4) and writing letters of support to legislative sponsors (5), the group prepared a Holiday Greeting template (6) for each affiliate to use in sending year-end messages to their specific representative.

Conclusion: In reflecting on the advocacy work that is evolving in New Jersey, the main message is the power of the collective compared to an affiliate working alone to bring about change. Each affiliate needs to develop and cultivate relationships with its own representative. But it is the group of all New Jersey affiliates that must work together to use those various relationships with legislators to advocate for public policy and funding that is essential to improving affordable housing opportunities in our state.

Attachments:

- (1) Advocacy SubCommittee proposal
- (2) Decision matrix
- (3) Advocacy Spreadsheet and Log
- (4) Sample testimony at state committee hearings
- (5) Sample letter of support
- (6) Sample Op Ed submissions
- (7) Holiday greeting template