

Focus Areas

- Workforce Housing
- Employer Engagement
- Rural Housing Strategy

TA CONSULTANTS:

Michael Norton, *Reinvestment Fund*

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**Southwest Minnesota
Housing Partnership**

SLAYTON, MN / SWMHP.ORG



Empowering Rural Communities Through: Employer-Driven Workforce Housing Solutions

Background

Southwest Minnesota Housing Partnership (SWMHP) works to build strong, resilient communities across south central and southwest Minnesota. In recent years, housing shortages have increasingly affected workforce recruitment and retention, especially in the region's manufacturing and agricultural sectors. In response, SWMHP recognized the need to engage local employers as active participants in addressing housing access.

Through the Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI), SWMHP launched a workforce housing effort to help employers understand how affordable housing contributes to a stable and productive workforce. The organization partnered with the Reinvestment Fund to co-create tools, messaging and a long-term strategy to strengthen employer engagement in community-based housing solutions.

The Challenge

Across southwest Minnesota, limited access to affordable workforce housing has emerged as a growing hurdle to local economic vitality. Employers often struggle to hire or retain staff when housing is out of reach for workers. At the same time, many employers are unsure how to engage on housing

"The Reinvestment Fund, and the connections they made with statewide organizations like Greater Minnesota Housing Fund and Minnesota Housing Partnership, brought us important new employer contacts."

— CHAD ADAMS – CEO, SWMHPC

issues or unaware of the long-term business value that housing investments can generate.

SWMHP set out to address this disconnect by equipping employers with relevant data, clear messaging and a roadmap for action. The challenge was to build a strategy that aligned with business priorities while being adaptable across diverse rural communities. This required tailored technical assistance, strong local partnerships and a deep understanding of both the housing and economic landscapes.

To begin, SWMHP piloted the model in Worthington and Luverne, two communities within its 30-county service area. These pilots provided an opportunity to refine the approach before broader implementation.

RCDI Support & Technical Assistance

With guidance from consultant Michael Norton of the Reinvestment Fund, SWMHP developed a comprehensive strategy to engage employers around workforce housing. The consultant supported the creation of tailored employer profiles featuring local wage data, housing availability and affordability insights specific to each community.

A case-making framework was also developed to demonstrate how stable housing supports reduced turnover, improved employee retention and long-term economic resilience. Messaging strategies and talking points were co-created to ensure alignment with employer interests and regional needs.

To put this strategy into action, SWMHP designed an eight-session, two-year employer engagement plan that builds understanding over time. Topics include financing models, tax credit tools, capital stacking, partnerships and policy connections. Sessions will be delivered in a hybrid format, with statewide partners such as Minnesota Housing Finance Agency and Lloyd Management supporting program content.

Key Achievements

- Created employer profiles using local wage and housing data to inform engagement.
- Developed messaging that connects workforce housing to economic and workforce stability.
- Designed an eight-session employer engagement curriculum tailored to rural markets.
- Secured partnerships with statewide housing and policy organizations to strengthen alignment.



LESSONS LEARNED & BEST PRACTICES

1

Using localized wage and housing data helps employers clearly see the connection between housing access and workforce challenges.

2

Centering the conversation on business value builds buy-in and reduces resistance to participation.

3

Early engagement of partners, such as housing agencies and private developers, strengthens implementation readiness.

4

Piloting the strategy in two communities allows for refinement before broader rollout.

5

Hybrid learning models (in-person and virtual) increase access and participation for busy employers.

WHAT'S NEXT?



This year, SWMHP will launch its first employer cohort to test and refine the full engagement model. Lessons learned from the pilot communities of Worthington and Luverne will be used to enhance program delivery and refine templates and materials for broader use across the region. The organization also plans to explore AmeriCorps support to enhance internal capacity and will continue collaborating with statewide partners to align employer engagement with ongoing housing finance and policy efforts. By aligning housing solutions with workforce needs, SWMHP is pioneering a replicable model for other rural regions seeking to engage employers in housing solutions.