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FINALIST

Community Housing Network staffs up rental assistance in Oakland County

BY SHERRI WELCH

When COVID hit Southeast Michigan, Community Housing Network was faced with a huge increase in the demand for emergency rental assistance and other supports.

Its budget rose from \$15 million to \$34.2 million as it became the lead agency in Oakland County providing federally funded Covid Emergency Rental Assistance, funding for households facing eviction and other housing crises due to COVID-19-related hardships and for landlords to help ensure they can maintain local rental housing stock.

CHN builds affordable, accessible housing and provides housing assistance through its call center, which fields over 15,000 calls each year. It connects thousands of people each year to affordable housing, short-term and long-term rentals, homeownership options and supportive and accessible homes for people with disabilities. It then works with people to help them access health care and mental health treatment as well as education, job and money management services to help improve their quality of life.

To help launch the largest program in its 20-year history and expand other supportive services, the Troy-based agency hired 50 new employees within three months, adding to nearly 100 existing staff.

Hitting hiring hard

To attract employees, it expanded its reach for job candidates, looking beyond the typical social worker requirement and other credentials normally required. Instead, it focused on needed skill sets. It also expanded its advertising and offered 100-percent remote and flexible work options, extensive training and competitive benefits, enabling it to attract a diverse group of candidates.



Shelley Brinkmann (from left), vice president of Real Estate; Kirsten Elliott, vice president, COO; Carrie Mendoza, vice president, CFO; and Marc Craig, president, at Community Housing Network in Troy. | NIC ANTAYA/CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS | CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Over the last year, CHN has been working with a consultant to review its recruiting and hiring practices through a diversity, equity and inclusion lens and to improve those processes to ensure it is recruiting, hiring and supporting a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace.

To quickly deploy CERA assistance, CHN streamlined its hiring process by reducing the time between recruitment and placement from two to three weeks to one to two days.

At the same time, it stepped up its engagement and connection with its 100 existing employees, making the executive team accessible through virtual hours and providing "self-care retreat days." It also sent employees CHN "swag" including comfy socks and sweatshirts to keep them comfortable while working from home, hosted drive-thru DoorDash gift card giveaways, an online holiday party and virtual mix-and-mingle events.

CHN has also worked to diversify its board.

CHN BUILDS AFFORDABLE, ACCESSIBLE HOUSING AND PROVIDES HOUSING ASSISTANCE THROUGH ITS CALL CENTER, WHICH FIELDS OVER 15,000 CALLS EACH YEAR.

Members who have run organizations with \$100 million budgets sit alongside individuals who are current program participants in CHN programs, something that creates a useful exchange and balances the conversation, CHN said.

Since 2020, the agency has assisted 5,990 households with eviction prevention and other housing crises and provided COVID-19 response aid for emergency housing and other basic needs to 2,100 individuals, more than double the number it served previously.

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