Keene Housing Authority was established in 1965 with the mission of providing “safe, sanitary dwelling accommodations for the elderly and persons of low-income” in Keene, New Hampshire. In 2013 they officially changed their name to Keene Housing.

The name change was much more than a branding exercise; it reflected the organization’s evolution from a traditional housing authority to an agency with the latitude to create programs specifically for the community it serves.

The shift in approach and culture began in 1999 when Keene Housing (KH) joined the Moving To Work (MTW) demonstration program. They were one of the first 12 agencies to participate. Since then, MTW has transformed the way KH does business.

**FEDERAL FUNDING... AND FLEXIBILITY**

Moving To Work was developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to give high-performing housing authorities the regulatory and budgetary flexibility to design and test new initiatives.

According to Josh Meehan, KH’s Executive Director, MTW essentially replaces decades of onerous federal regulations with the directive to use federal funding in the way that best meets the needs of each specific community.

Meehan is quick to point out, however, that MTW doesn’t give agencies carte blanche.

“There are still some fundamental provisions we need to follow with respect to things like people’s housing rights and how we determine income eligibility,” he said. “But as long as we meet those requirements, we can combine our funding streams into one, then re-distribute it as our business demands it.”

When Congress created MTW in 1996, it designated three objectives for participating agencies: 1) Reduce cost and achieve greater cost effectiveness in Federal expenditures; 2) Increase housing choices for low-income households; and 3) Give incentives to households with children where the head of household is working, is seeking work, or is preparing for work by participating in job training, educational programs, or programs that assist people to obtain employment and become economically self-sufficient.

**LOCALLY DRIVEN SOLUTIONS**

April Buzby, Planning and Policy Analyst at KH, believes that MTW is, in effect, incentivizing efficiency. When an agency can find ways to reduce cost and achieve greater cost...
When Nathan Szanton started his career in development, he was studying to become a lawyer. But a summer spent interning with prominent Maine real estate developer Robert Monks was enough to change Szanton’s path…eventually.

Szanton graduated from the University of Southern Maine School of Law in 1990, and spent almost three years in private practice. When he realized that he lacked the passion for law, he decided to take the road less traveled by.

“That summer working in development was so stimulating and interesting that I knew I wanted to learn more,” remembered Szanton.

His first job in affordable housing was at the Maine State Housing Authority. They offered him a job as a lawyer, but instead he took a three-month consulting position giving technical assistance to nonprofits. The job grew into a full-time position as a loan officer. He describes his time at MaineHousing as “graduate school in the field of affordable housing.”

Szanton observed that there were a lot of social services for people with mental illness, youth with developmental disabilities, low-income families and other vulnerable populations. These service providers wanted to develop appropriate housing for their clients but didn’t know how.

He started The Szanton Company (TSC) in 1996 to help nonprofits navigate the development process, everything from finding a site and hiring an architect, to getting approval from planning boards and securing financing. Szanton was immediately busy.

In 2002, he partnered with mentor and friend Monks to develop properties as owners rather than consultants. Since then, the company has developed seven projects, creating housing for more than 400 families.

Based in Portland, Szanton now has 10 employees, most of whom work for Saco Falls Management, an in-house management company started in 2013 with the goal of improving the quality of their buildings and responsiveness to their tenants.

REHABILITATING HISTORY
One way that Szanton and his colleagues fulfill the company’s mission of creating “comfortable, attractive, and affordable rental housing” is to build apartments in or near downtown districts.

Several projects were rehabilitat- ing historic manufacturing mills that were once the economic engines of Maine cities like Lewiston, Biddeford and Saco.

“These mills really shaped the history of these towns, really gave the people in them a sense of pride,” Szanton explained. “When the mills shut down, it was a terrible blow to the identity—and income—of many communities, and these big, empty buildings became bitter reminders of a prosperous past.”

TSC has used Historic Tax Credits (in conjunction with low income housing tax credits) to transform a town’s liabilities into assets again. The Mill at Saco Falls, for instance, is an 1845 textile mill building right
Doing What Works (continued from the cover)

effectiveness (one of MTW’s objectives), then you can expand your mission.

One example of this is the streamlining of housing quality inspections. Essentially, a Public Housing Authority (PHA) must inspect its units biennially, but if the property has already been inspected and approved at a higher standard (a LIHTC inspection, for instance), then the PHA’s biennial inspection need not occur. This time- and cost-saving move is one that KH and other MTW agencies have been doing for awhile.

With the signing of the Housing Opportunities Through Modernization Act (HOTMA) in February 2016, inspection streamlining and other demonstrably cost-effective measures that were first implemented by MTW agencies have found their way into targeted reforms to federal housing programs.

“The whole point of MTW is for this cohort of organizations to try new things, study what they do, then share the outcomes so others can use the measures that make the most sense,” explained Buzby.

MTW also enables agencies to create new subsidy types to increase housing choice for low-income households. The Transitional Housing Assistance Subsidy Program (THASP) is a “sponsor-based” program that allows KH to work with community partners in a different way.

One partner, Southwestern Community Services (SCS), runs two homeless shelters. KH provides the shelter with a fixed subsidy for each occupied bed, and the shelter is then able to leverage that subsidy for additional private funding – and to expand their services for the community’s most vulnerable members.

Through this subsidy (which is inexpensive compared to traditional housing choice vouchers) KH can help chronically homeless people, a population that would be more difficult for them to assist without the leeway of MTW.

PREPARING FAMILIES

Another core objective of MTW is to promote self-sufficiency among families in affordable housing. One way KH does this is through their Stepped Subsidy program, which lets participants pay a portion of their monthly income for rent while KH pays the balance (up to an agreed payment standard). The amount is determined by an assessment conducted at the beginning of the voucher process, but as tenants work toward their goals and increase their income, the subsidy declines.

Everyone who enters the Stepped Subsidy program (between the ages of 18 and 62 and is not disabled) is automatically enrolled in the Resident Self-Reliance (RSR) program. Each participant is assigned a Resident Services Coordinator (RSC) and together they create a “3-Year Action

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The Northern New England Housing Investment Fund (NNEHIF) is a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation that promotes housing and community development by providing equity capital, technical assistance and consulting to affordable housing developers throughout Maine and New Hampshire.

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