



SMITH MARION & CO EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP FALL CONNECTION MEETING OCTOBER 2025

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CONNECTION

DRIVING PROGRESS THROUGH SHARED LEADERSHIP



In October 2025, Housing Authority professionals from across the country convened in Santa Rosa, California for a transformative two-day Connection meeting. Through open dialogue, real-world problem-solving, and peer-driven learning, participants dug into the practical challenges and opportunities shaping the future of affordable housing.

This fall's Connection focused on bridging strategic vision with operational demands—tackling topics like AI adoption, leadership transitions, internal process improvement, and navigating generational shifts in staffing and management. The collaborative energy sparked new insights and reinforced the power of Connection as a space for building stronger, smarter housing organizations.

HIGHLIGHTS

THE ROLE OF DEPUTY AND ASSISTANT DIRECTORS

Executive Directors shared their expectations of Deputy or Assistant Directors, with a common theme: these roles should create operational lift so EDs can focus on broader strategy. Some delegate disciplinary processes, HR issues, or board meeting prep. Others lean on deputies to step into leadership during the ED's absence—particularly during complex projects like LIHTC development.

Values alignment was critical. Many noted that the person in this role must think like an ED and share the organization's core mission and mindset. Others emphasized training, manager-level capacity, and the ability to take on full responsibility before earning the title.

THE NAHRO LAWSUIT: RISK OR RESPONSIBILITY?

The group debated the risk of joining the NAHRO lawsuit challenging HUD's cash management changes. Some were hesitant due to fear of retaliation, while others felt compelled to participate based on principle. Concerns around HUD overreach, conflicting federal regulations, and unclear interpretations were raised. The intersection with immigration issues added complexity. Several leaders emphasized the need for legal clarity and a united front.



OPEN MEETINGS, COMMUNITY COMMENTS & BOARD DYNAMICS

State rules vary regarding board member participation and community comments. Some agencies limit virtual attendance due to Open Meeting Acts, while others allow for accommodations. Community comment protocols range from in-person 3-minute limits to pre-submitted remarks.

When dealing with dominant or disruptive board chairs, EDs suggested leaning on policies, legal support, and transparency. Gaining alignment from other board members and redirecting conversations to formal meetings help ensure professionalism.

DEVELOPMENT LESSONS LEARNED

Veteran leaders shared hard-earned insights from RAD and LIHTC projects:

- Always hire a qualified consultant.
- Choose developers carefully—don't surrender control.
- Understand operating agreements thoroughly.
- Expect hurdles: delays from HUD, environmental issues, and legal bottlenecks are common.
- Use weekly check-ins to manage timelines and communication.

Participants emphasized the importance of integrating lessons learned, documenting processes, and knowing when to exit public housing.



TAX CREDIT STRATEGY & STRUCTURAL IMPACT

Participants acknowledged that a Housing Authority can do so many LIHTC deals it alters its identity—sometimes to the point of jeopardizing its own future role. HA leadership must remain vigilant about management contracts, compliance, and retaining oversight.

To stay compliant and viable, some agencies lease staff to property companies to maintain benefits and internal control. Others create new internal divisions to manage tax credit properties while keeping a firewall between auditing and operations. Some agencies discussed challenges with voucher program hand-backs due to cost concerns.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs) IN PRACTICE

Several HAs reported implementing KPIs tied to unit turns, occupancy, HCV timeliness, accounting benchmarks, contractor costs, and employee retention. Tips included:

- Keep KPIs simple and measurable.
- Implement 5–6 at a time.
- Evaluate quarterly and revise as needed.

Departments using KPIs reported greater clarity, accountability, and focus. Fraud prevention efforts and internal control processes were highlighted as important measures.

COST CONTROLS, DEBT COVERAGE & CAPITAL STRATEGY

Financial discipline is essential. Highlights included:

- Use strong construction managers to avoid change order surprises.
- Conduct detailed cost reviews.
- Track Debt Coverage Ratios (DCR) regularly and use bridge loans strategically.
- Create waterfall structures and resyndicate deals for long-term reinvestment.

TECH & SOFTWARE UPGRADES

Software systems like Emphasys and Yardi received mixed reviews. Leaders stressed the importance of cross-platform compatibility, consultant support, and integrating cost certification into financial reporting. Some are exploring RFPs for software upgrades tied to broader digital transformations.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: RISKS, POLICIES & POTENTIAL

AI applications are expanding—from call systems and CoPilot in Microsoft 365 to Adobe and Yardi's RentCafe. Teams are using AI to streamline communication, analyze trends, and enhance service. Policies are needed to govern use, prevent misinformation, and protect data. Leaders urged:

- Creating formal AI policies.
- Limiting sensitive data exposure.
- Training teams on responsible usage.

Concerns about privacy, accuracy, and public exposure were top of mind.

WORKFORCE HOUSING & SAFE HARBOR PRACTICES

Participants discussed structuring workforce housing for households at 65–100% AMI. Creative funding options include leveraging reserves, reducing developer incentives, or collaborating with nearby PHAs.

Safe Harbor practices help justify nonprofit use of HA employees. Most use fair formulas (e.g., salary + benefits + 5%) and maintain documentation to satisfy grant audits and state requirements.

STRATEGIC GROWTH & ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

As organizations grow from 10 to 20 employees, challenges in structure, clarity, and sustainability arise. Recommendations included:

- Scaling with purpose, not pressure.
- Aligning hires with a strategic plan.
- Delegating and redefining roles as functions expand.

Avoiding overreliance on grants and clarifying role duplication (especially in finance or maintenance) were key takeaways.



MAINTENANCE SYSTEMS, TRAINING & PREVENTIVE PLANS

Preventive maintenance plans varied across agencies. Key practices included:

- Biannual reviews and monthly check-ins.
- Dedicated HVAC specialists.
- Team training tied to BSC.

Outside assessments (e.g., from John Emery) were recommended for pre-NSPIRE inspections. Leaders discussed documenting staff performance and addressing issues quickly through proper discipline protocols.

INVENTORY, KEYS & CONTROLS

Inventory systems ranged from Excel spreadsheets with bin locations to barcode-enabled tools. Dedicated staff and regular updates are essential. Key tracking was also emphasized, with some agencies centralizing master keys and requiring check-ins.



Learn from those who are walking the same path as you.

**NEXT MEETING:
MAY 6-7TH, 2026
SPRING CONNECTION
FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE**



As we set our sights on what's next for Connection, we're inviting you to be part of shaping the journey. From cutting-edge technology in affordable housing to empowering multigenerational teams and elevating maintenance leadership—your insights and experiences are the fuel behind every session.

Make your voice count: vote on upcoming topics, share your challenges and wins, and start planning to join us in Franklin, Tennessee just outside of Nashville.

More than just a gathering, Connection is a catalyst—a space to reflect, reimagine, and lead alongside peers who understand the path you're on. Let's build what's next, together.

2025 FALL CONNECTION TESTIMONIALS

“Love the fact you get your money's worth. No down time, packed scheduled, very informative, love the Q&A part.”

“I like the open communication and suggestions and knowledge from other housing authorities on subjects I didn't know or needed more ideas on”

“Everything! Topics, small group sessions, Smith Marion Team being up to speed and in housing industry current trends/events etc.”

INTERESTED IN JOINING CONNECTION?

Scan the QR code below to set up a 30-minute discovery call

