

CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES IN CALIFORNIA



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## FRESNO HOUSING AUTHORITY

It's 2009: California is reeling from the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression; unemployment continues to rise; and the political environment is becoming ever more contentious. It's well understood by social service providers that while this extreme situation affects everyone, the most drastic effects of the national and state budget woes are being felt in low-income communities, where families are already stressed. And as needs increase, funding for programs is decreasing. Additionally, the traditional system of creating and supporting single-stream programs (education, health, child care, etc.) has created a zero-sum game where issues and services are pitted against one another – rather than encouraging programs to work together to understand the comprehensive and coordinated needs of fragile individuals and families.

Located in the center of the agriculture-rich San Joaquin Valley of Central California, Fresno is almost equidistant to both Los Angeles and San Francisco. Median household income in the county is under \$46,000, compared with more than \$61,000 statewide. Twenty-one percent of people in Fresno live below the poverty level — almost twice the statewide number — and the County ranks poorly on many health factors. Two-thirds of Fresno's population is comprised of people of color, and the youth population is growing rapidly.

**PROJECT DATE:**  
2010 - 2013

**SECTOR:** *Affordable housing*

**FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:**  
*Interviewing, analysis, and synthesis; strategic planning; focus group facilitation; communication strategies; branding; messaging; web design and development*



*FRESNO HOUSING AUTHORITY works to create vibrant communities, build quality affordable housing, and support the success of approximately 50,000 Fresno County residents who either reside in Housing Authority-owned complexes or receive Housing Choice Vouchers.*

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Like other communities across the nation with large low-income populations, Fresno faces high rates of unemployment and struggles to retain business and industry — as well as philanthropic dollars and federal funds. Within this context, the Fresno Housing Authority was getting comfortable with its new, visionary executive director and his energetic leadership team. The 70-year-old, HUD-funded agency was previously known as the Housing Authorities of the City and County of Fresno. Trying to provide quality, affordable housing for those suffering most in this economy is the main goal of the Housing Authority. However, this was not foremost on the minds of the general public. Further, the bold ideas of the new executive director were just beginning to percolate and needed to become invested in a bigger process to drive the agency's vision and programs. So the agency brought on Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) to lead an effort that would result in a very different kind of strategic plan that addressed hard questions while positioning the organization to not only continue but expand its programs. Through this process, the Housing Authority laid the path by which it could maintain exceptional programs and implement new models of service while conveying the vision, enthusiasm, and momentum of an organization dedicated to comprehensive community building.

*FTA's strategic planning process revealed many interesting findings. Among them: Affordable housing was not a top priority for the Fresno community. At the start of the process, even staff at the Housing Authority did not put the need for affordable housing in their list of top three issues facing Fresno.*



*Fresno County residents speak more than 100 languages; more than 40% of households in the County speak a language other than English at home.*

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The FTA-led process included an in-depth organizational assessment and a community analysis, as well as consideration of appropriate tools to alert the public of the services available through the Housing Authority. One-on-one, in-person interviews with a broad cross-section of more than 70 internal and external stakeholders informed the process, including meeting with and studying the best practices at housing authorities across the country. FTA conducted research and literature reviews, visited many of Fresno Housing Authority's developments, audited previous communications materials (including the website), developed and analyzed board and staff surveys, and ran focus groups with residents and youth. FTA also conducted a waiting room survey. Ultimately, this all led to the adoption of a 5-year strategic plan, Mapping the Way toward a Strategic Future for the New Fresno Housing Authority. The plan included inspirational and easy-to-remember program goals (related to People; Place; Public; and Partnership) and management goals (organized into three categories: Sustainability; Structure; and Strategic Outreach), as well as innovative strategies and actions to move the agency forward and to have lasting impact internally and externally.



*Fresno is the fifth largest city in California and is among the 50 largest cities in the nation. It accounts for about half of the population of Fresno County, but just two percent of the land area.*

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In addition, FTA facilitated numerous staff and board meetings and retreats — presenting and receiving feedback on how the findings could support broad communication goals, including proposals for a new name, vision, mission, and values. FTA then embarked on an extended partnership with the Housing Authority to launch and execute the new, robust communications strategy. This included the design of a complete rebrand and identity program: a new logo, color palette, suite of documentary photographs, document templates, and style book. FTA also developed messaging platforms to articulate Fresno Housing Authority’s new mission: *To create and sustain vibrant communities throughout Fresno County.* Beyond this, FTA designed and custom-coded a 400+ page interactive website built to emphasize the organization’s new guiding principles. This new totally-bilingual website launched in 2013.





