

FACS *Magazine*

FALL 2015

FACS graduate
program: recruiting
some of the best and
brightest minds
to Athens



GICH helps communities thrive

By Cal Powell

Thirteen of them piled into a rental van for the hour or so ride down to Macon.

The passengers represented just about the entire spectrum of economic diversity in little Madison, Ga., population 3,979.

They were male and female, white and black, wealthy and not, all a part of the same team, all headed to the same destination, the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing bi-annual retreat, with the same purpose: to make Madison a better place to live.

"We talked about housing all the way down there and all the way back," said Monica Callahan, planning director for the city of Madison.

GICH, launched in 2004, helps Georgia communities like Madison – and those much larger – improve their quality of life and economic vitality through the development of locally-based housing and revitalization strategies.

Communities selected for the program commit to a three-year term that involves attending bi-annual retreats, where they identify needs, learn about best practices in housing and community development and then produce a community housing action plan.

At any given time, there are 15 communities in the program, known as freshmen, sophomores and juniors, appropriately enough.

The group from Madison, located about 30 minutes south of Athens, is in the freshman group along with Cedartown, Liberty County, Pine Mountain and Trion.

Madison is growing at a rate of 1 percent a year, Callahan said, and the city is in dire need of a comprehensive housing plan.

At the GICH retreat in Macon, the team heard from leaders of other GICH communities, attended workshops on a range of housing, legal and tax issues and met as a group with a facilitator to begin sketching out a comprehensive plan.

"I think it really invigorated the team," Callahan said of the retreat, the group's first as GICH members. "They talked about housing all the way home, and usually after a two and a half day retreat that's the last thing you want to talk about. But they immediately got back and started planning work sessions. It was a catalyst for them to really get busy."

The community teams are the centerpiece of the GICH program, said **Karen Tinsley**,

a faculty member within the FACS department of financial planning, housing and consumer economics who also serves as GICH coordinator.

The program was launched 10 years ago by Tinsley and retired FACS faculty member Tom Rodgers as an offshoot of the National League of Cities' Affordable Housing Program.

In addition to the UGA Public Service and Outreach office, the program's main partners include the Georgia Municipal Association and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.

To be chosen for GICH, communities must form a team representing a broad cross-section of citizens, including elected officials, builders, business owners and non-profit groups, among others, who are interested in addressing various housing needs.

After a selection committee makes site visits, finalists are chosen and five communities are selected to participate in the program. Since the program began, 55 communities or cities in Georgia have benefited from the program.

"I've seen a lot of success over the years with the communities participating in GICH," said Malisa

“They talked about housing all the way home, and usually after a two and a half day retreat that’s the last thing you want to talk about.”

– *Monica Callahan*

FHCE faculty member and Public Service Associate Karen Tinsley, who leads the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing program, stands on the porch of a home owned by Athens Land Trust.

By the numbers:

(all numbers from 2014)

**346 community members served on
15 community teams**

**GICH cities provided housing
counseling to 564 clients**

Amount of tax credits awarded to developers:

Warner Robins - \$692,668

Greensboro - \$923,148

Perry - \$974,775

Pembroke - \$785,867

Total - \$3,376,458

**Two GICH cities attracted funding
for housing activities from private
foundations:**

**Pembroke - \$5,000 from The Home
Depot Foundation for Veteran
Porch Repair and ADA Housing
Rehabilitation**

**Dalton - \$100,000 Lowe's
Foundation for Community
Building Renovation**

GICH Partners

Georgia Municipal Association

**Georgia Department of Community
Affairs**

UGA Public Service and Outreach

Georgia Power

The UGA Archway Partnership

**UGA Carl Vinson Institute of
Government**

UGA Extension

Georgia EMC

USDA Rural Development

Thompson, a 2002 FACS grad who now works as housing outreach coordinator for the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and as a GICH facilitator.

"The type of assistance GICH provides is very valuable, especially to smaller communities who may not know where to start. GICH has been that key."

One of the main benefits of a program like GICH, Tinsley said, is it allows communities that are "real go-getters" with abundant resources and experience in community development to share information with towns just beginning to formulate a revitalization plan.

Officials from tiny Greensboro, for example, learned about a program that provided additional points on a low-income housing tax credit development that proved valuable, said Rick Zeier, the town's city planner.

"Some of the (communities) have little local capacity," Tinsley said. "They don't have a community development director, they don't have any experience getting grant funds and have never applied for any state funding for housing."

For the team from Madison, the reputation of the GICH program for assisting with housing plans proved to be well earned. Partly as a result of participating in GICH, Madison now has a standing housing committee that meets weekly to discuss and address ongoing housing needs in the town, Callahan said.

"We were overwhelmed at the (February) retreat at the amazing opportunities to be able to engage with other communities and look at how they went about problem solving," Callahan said. "That in and of itself was inspiring."

Thompson, who worked with the group from Greensboro as a facilitator at February's retreat, has seen these sorts of benefits firsthand in her nine years as a GICH facilitator.

"They unify together on the housing issue and by doing so that makes the biggest impact," Thompson said. "By coming together and unifying, everyone has the same vision and is trying to reach the same goal. When they come to these retreats and discuss it, they set out to do it as a group versus as individuals and that's what makes it so powerful."