

NeighborWorks® America
Request for Proposals

**Third-party Evaluation of Staff Certification Programs in the
Homeownership Education and Counseling Industry**

NeighborWorks America seeks Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for a consultant or group to conduct research, design an evaluation protocol and conduct comprehensive evaluations of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry for the Advisory Council for the National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling.

I. Background

NeighborWorks America is a congressionally chartered public nonprofit corporation involved in building healthy communities through a network of local neighborhood-based partnership organizations. NeighborWorks America along with these local partnership organizations form the NeighborWorks network, which currently consists of more than 230 local organizations creating healthy communities in 50 states across the country.

The NeighborWorks Center for Homeownership Education and Counseling (NCHEC) promotes long-term homeownership for low-income families and strong communities by promoting training standards and quality service delivery. Its efforts center on providing continuing education and certification for homeownership practitioners, along with delivering professional tools and resources.

NCHEC convenes and staffs an Advisory Council that created the National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling, a set of guidelines for quality homeownership education and counseling services.

The National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling were drawn upon a variety of sources, including existing standards used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and local, regional, and national housing counseling organizations. Input on the standards was gathered by the Advisory Council for the National Industry Standards from many industry partners, including national lenders, GSEs, HUD, mortgage insurers, executive directors and counselors of local, regional, and national organizations.

The National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling provide a baseline for what constitutes quality homeownership education and counseling. Organizations and homeownership professionals can use the National Industry Standards to ensure that quality homeownership education and housing counseling services are delivered to clients. These standards create a level of consistency in the industry and add to the continued professional delivery of specialized services by counselors and educators nationwide. The National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling focus on a set of six core areas.

1. Competency, including strong knowledge of the homebuying process, money management, etc.
2. Training, with recommendations for a minimum number of hours of training.
3. Code of Ethics and Conduct, which practitioners should sign and abide by.
4. Skills, including communication and listening skills, adult education and facilitation skills.
5. Operational Knowledge, regarding programs, marketing, etc.
6. Performance Standards for practitioners, which include standards curriculum, recordkeeping, and reporting.

Organizations supporting and providing homeownership education and counseling can endorse and/or adopt the National Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling.

Endorsement demonstrates an organization's support for National Industry Standards and dedication to professionalism for practitioners on behalf of their clients. Adoption demonstrates an organization's commitment to implement the standards for homeownership education and counseling in everyday business operations.

Organizations providing homeownership education and counseling are encouraged to adopt the National Standards on an organization level and direct their educators and/or counselors to sign and adhere to the Code of Ethics and Conduct outlined in the standards. A representative from an organization who has authority to adopt standards of practices (e.g., the executive director, board chair, homeownership center director) can adopt the National Industry Standards for the organization by visiting the National Industry Standards website. Documents can be obtained and reviewed at www.homeownershipstandards.com. After entering information about the organization and each counselor and/or educator on staff, staff will review and confirm the information. Organizations are notified of any further information needed, and when adoption is confirmed. Full National Industry Standards adoption occurs when the recommended benchmarks for homeownership education and counseling are implemented into the organization's business operations.

One of the recommended core operating benchmarks of the National Industry Standards is certification of homeownership education and counseling professionals of organizations providing homeownership education and counseling, as described in the guidelines: "After completing minimum training (30 hours of facilitated instruction), certification will require (professionals) to take and pass a comprehensive exam demonstrating at least 80% proficiency... of skills, core competency areas... and related content and activities..." Currently, a number of national and state entities cite (or have been cited by others) that they provide staff certification in the homeownership education and counseling industry.

The application for adopting the National Industry Standards requests information on training (coursework taken on topics related to homeownership education and counseling, affordable lending, adult education techniques, and other related topics) and certification (receipt of professional certificates/designations separate from training that may be awarded after multiple courses, generally requires passing an exam and may expire on a specified date) for each homeownership education and counseling professional at the adopting organization.

National Industry Standards staff review and verify all information provided by organizations applying for adoption of the National Industry Standards, including staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry. To date, staff only have verified that homeownership education and counseling professionals at adopting organizations hold stated certifications. It has been beyond the scope of work to evaluate whether or not the certification programs cited meet the National Industry Standards.

In an effort to elevate the level of professionalism and consistency in the industry by strengthening the adoption process for the National Industry Standards, the Advisory Council for the National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling is interested in administering a third-party evaluation of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry to determine which ones meet the National Industry Standards. This project will be overseen by the Advisory Council's Working Committee - Certification Evaluation and National Exam.

II. Purpose

The purpose of the RFP is to solicit proposals and bids from a consultant or group to:

1. Research the principle providers of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry.
2. Design a plan (including criteria and approach) for undertaking the evaluation of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry.
3. Conduct evaluations of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry to determine which programs meet the National Industry Standards.
4. Prepare report of findings (including best practices) and assist with communication strategies for entities based on whether or not they meet the National Industry Standards.

III. Requirements

The selected contractor would provide the following services:

- Meet with Working Committee to develop a thorough understanding of the breadth and implications of the evaluation being undertaken, of the National Industry Standards, and of the homeownership education and counseling industry in general.
- Research background on the current state staff certification programs available in the homeownership education and counseling industry. There are estimated to be nearly two-dozen national and state staff certification program providers. This research should be a scan of the nature of these organizations and their staff certification programs. This research would build from the initial information provided by the Working Committee to get a better sense of the variations across programs. And it would help to finalize a database of state and national organizations providing staff certification programs.
- Design a detailed evaluation plan of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry that will be approved by the Working Committee. This plan would include the assessment criteria and approach for determining whether programs meet the National Industry Standards. Using the National Industry Standards as the baseline,

the evaluation criteria may consider the content, skills, program operations, timing and duration and delivery of each staff certification program. The approach may include onsite visits, telephone interviews, research/review of materials and other evaluation strategies. It is important to the Working Committee that the process be transparent; thus the assessment approach should include measures that promote and support transparency, such as public information about the project's intentions and scope of work; a self-assessment tool for entities to review prior to committing to a third-party evaluation; voluntary release forms for participating entities; etc.

- Conduct evaluations of staff certification programs in the homeownership education and counseling industry to determine which programs meet the National Industry Standards based on the approved evaluation plan.
- Prepare report of findings, noting whether providers meet, exceed or fall below the National Industry Standards. For providers that fall below the National Industry Standards, provide detailed information on deficiencies and how they could meet the National Industry Standards. For providers that exceed the standards, provide detailed information and document best practices for the industry. Also, after reviewing all programs available, develop a list of recommendations for a model certification program, including all components.
- Working closely with the Working Committee, develop a communication strategy for providers that do not meet the National Industry Standards.

IV. Proposal Contents

Please provide a **4-5 page proposal** including the following:

- Your capacity to satisfy the requirements in this RFP. Provide information about your experience and knowledge of the homeownership education and counseling industry; certification program evaluation; and project design and management.
- 2-3 references from organization to which you have provided similar services.
- Outline of your plan to carry out the project described in this RFP.
- Budget, including daily rates and anticipated expenses.
- Proposed timeline for activities included in your plan to carry out the project described in this RFP.

V. Proposal Evaluation Criteria

NeighborWorks America reserves the right to determine which bidders have met the base requirements of this RFP. In addition, NeighborWorks America may reject, in whole or in part, any and all proposals, waive minor irregularities in proposals, allow an offeror to correct minor irregularities and negotiate with all responsible efforts in any matter deemed necessary to serve the best interest of NeighborWorks America.

NeighborWorks America reserves the right to reject any and all proposals when such rejection is in the interest of NeighborWorks America, to reject the proposal of a bidder who has not met the prerequisites of the bid proposal or who has previously failed to perform properly or complete on time contracts of a similar nature, and to reject the proposal of a bidder who is not in the sole opinion of NeighborWorks America, able to perform the contract to the sole satisfaction of NeighborWorks America.

NeighborWorks America also reserves the right to waive any informalities and technicalities in the bidding. NeighborWorks America reserves the right, however, to award the contract in accordance with its best interest and will not be required to accept the lowest bid. Responses will be evaluated using the following criteria:

- A. Capacity and the qualifications of the vendor; ability to provide all the services requested.
- B. Evidence of successfully conducting similar services for other agencies, companies or organizations.
- C. The soundness of the plan proposed for carrying out the assignment.
- D. Cost/fees.

VI. Proposal Submission

A copy of the proposal to this RFP must be received by **November 6, 2009**, in any **one** of the following forms:

a) E-mailed as a MS Word or PDF attachment to tdurotoye@nw.org

b) Faxed to: (202)-376-7276
Attn: Tosin Durotoye
NCHEC Project Manager
NeighborWorks America

c) Mailed to:
Tosin Durotoye
NCHEC Homeownership Programs Manager
NeighborWorks America
1325 G Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005

Any questions about the proposal can be addressed to Jayna Bower, Director of NCHEC by email at jbower@nw.org.

VII. Award Date

Proposal shall be evaluated - including interviews of the most responsive individuals or groups - by NCHEC staff and members of the Advisory Council for the National Industry Standards for Homeownership Education and Counseling's Working Committee - Certification Evaluation and

National Exam. The contract will be awarded on or before **December 4, 2009**. The selected contractor will then enter into a contract through a letter of agreement and Task Order.