HOUSING ASSISTANCE COUNCIL

RURAL HOUSING CONFERENCE 2014

RETOOL, REBUILD, RENEW

Renaissance Hotel Washington D.C.

December 3 – 5, 2014
CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) convened the 2014 HAC Rural Housing Conference: *Retool, Rebuild and Renew* in Washington, D.C. on December 3 – 5, 2014, with pre-conference activities on December 2nd. Since its inception, the Rural Housing Conference has aimed to offer rural housing practitioners learning and networking opportunities to advance efforts to provide decent and affordable housing for our nation’s rural poor.

Attendees were able to participate in numerous pre-conference meetings, 35 workshops, seven plenary sessions, and a variety of networking opportunities. Workshops were offered through five learning tracks that were designed to enhance participant knowledge of housing development, affordable housing finance, organizational development, innovation and current policy issues, and Native American housing matters. Attendees also recognized their peers’ accomplishments through the Rural Housing Awards.

Over six hundred rural housing practitioners registered to participate in the 2014 HAC Rural Housing Conference. Attendees were asked to provide feedback on the various workshops, plenaries, networking opportunities and conference logistics. A summary of the conference evaluations is provided in this report.
QUICK FACTS

99% reported overall conference to be “Very Good” or “Excellent”.

“The desire to share knowledge so openly is exceptional.”

100% reported the networking opportunities to be “Good” to “Excellent”.

What I liked best about the Rural Housing Conference was “the opportunity to meet others from around the country” and “the opportunity for direct conversation with USDA and HUD.”
Conference Events Well Received as Revealed by Evaluations

- Kick-Off Reception
- America’s Emerging Leaders
- Rural Housing
- Sec. Castro (HUD)
- National Housing Coalition
- Rep. Cleaver and Sec. Vilsack (USDA)
- Renewing the Discussion
- Awards Banquet
- Closing Plenary
- HUD and USDA Nuts

Evaluations:
- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
Representative Bennie Thompson, a long-time member of HAC’s board of directors, welcomed conference attendees. He emphasized the importance of their local rural housing work and the importance of HAC’s assistance. Rep. Thompson addressed the challenges expected in the upcoming Congress. He advised to “make do until we can do better” and to remember that rural housing groups have a lot of experience “making do.”

Emerging Housing Leaders Plenary

Setting an inspiring tone for the conference’s first day, the opening plenary featured three emerging leaders, Denyse Carr, Julio Lamas and Shekinah Washington, who have chosen to make their careers in rural housing. The young panelists described how they have learned by doing, demonstrated their abilities to skeptical clients or partners, and in two cases brought their organizations up to date in the world of social media. They suggested rural housing organizations recruit young staff through high school career days, volunteer opportunities, AmeriCorps, and college programs.

They recommended that mentors challenge young staffers with new responsibilities, take them to meetings and network-building opportunities, and keep lines of communication open. They pointed out that one can come to rural housing from many different fields of study, and that rural housing can make use of many different skills. Moderator Eileen Fitzgerald concluded that if these three are any indication of the emerging leaders available, it is safe for elders to retire.
Plenary with Secretary Julián Castro (HUD)

In the conversation between HUD Secretary Julián Castro – in his job for less than six months at the time – and HAC Executive Director Moises Loza, Castro demonstrated a good grasp of the housing issues facing rural Americans including veterans, Native Americans, and residents of the colonias. He stated firmly that despite the “urban” in his department’s name, HUD’s mission includes improving rural communities.

Acknowledging that funding available for HUD programs “pales in comparison to the need,” Castro spoke of the importance of HUD partnerships with other federal agencies, as well as with the private sector. He noted that veteran homelessness has dropped because of the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. He anticipated a need to make the case for housing program funding in the new Congress and expressed optimism that the Community Development Block Grant program would, as in the past, benefit from bipartisan support. Secretary Castro also addressed the conference’s emphasis on young leaders, saying that employers must enable young workers to see the impact of their work, such as interacting with the people they serve and following projects through to their conclusions.

National Rural Housing Coalition Plenary with Senator Heidi Heitkamp

The afternoon’s plenary session was sponsored by the National Rural Housing Coalition. Officers and staff of the Coalition described the newly elected Congress scheduled to convene in January 2015 and prospects for rural housing program funding. Then Senator Heidi Heitkamp spoke about the need for affordable housing for working families. There are acute housing problems in Indian Country, she said, but because of the booming energy economy in North Dakota developers are planning expensive housing in the state, both for sale and for rent. She encouraged attendees to communicate with their Senators and Representatives about housing needs because without their stories “we will get what we always got.”
Plenary with Representative Emanuel Cleaver

Representative Emanuel Cleaver spoke about the importance of homeownership, illustrated by his own story. Until he was seven years old his family lived in Waxahachie, TX in a shack without running water. They moved to better conditions in public housing and saved money to purchase a house, where his 92-year-old father still lives. Affordable housing is essential to help the U.S. recover from the recession, Rep. Cleaver said. He criticized Congress for doing too little to address important issues such as housing, and reminded participants that “we rise or fall as a nation based on what you do and what you say to the people who represent you.”

Plenary with Secretary Tom Vilsack (USDA)

During the morning plenary, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack spoke about the great need for housing in rural America and how well USDA’s programs can work to meet the need. Expressing frustration about the difficulties in funding and carrying out the programs, he asked conference participants for assistance in two areas. He said it is important not only to support the rural housing programs, but also to educate people throughout the country about the good things that government does. Americans criticize government and want to cut its funding, he pointed out, while USDA has made it possible for 905,000 families to become homeowners.

Secretary Vilsack also explained that while Congress has continued to support the rural housing programs it has reduced funding for salaries and expenses. Insufficient staffing levels have made it difficult for the department to deliver the programs and use all the funds available. He asked rural housing supporters to express the same level of concern for salaries and expenses as for programs.
Renewing the Discussion Plenary: Discussion Papers, Breakout Sessions & Reporting

Participants divided themselves into six groups to renew strategic discussions begun at past conferences. The discussions were based on issue papers written by expert rural housing practitioners. Later, each breakout group reported comments and recommendations to the conference as a whole.

1. **Rural Housing and Public Policy**

   The policy group emphasized communication and education, from the local level to legislators and from housing program supporters to those who tend to oppose government programs. They suggested that messages could include measurable links between housing, jobs, and the economy, along with reminders of rural places’ importance to the rest of the country for “food, fuel, and fun.” Social media are important, as are working with partners and registering voters.

2. **Partnerships and Collaboration for Rural Housing**

   Participants in this group noted that reductions in resources require collaboration among a variety of community development interests including housing, education, health care, jobs, youth, and more. Housers can take a leadership role in convening these parties, and should identify in advance what positive outcomes are expected. HAC could assist by collecting information about best practices for such efforts as well as data to measure the outcomes.
3. Reduced USDA Presence and Resources – How Can Rural Housing Organizations Adapt?

Attendees included users of USDA’s single-family and multifamily programs, who agreed that all the programs deserve continued support. In response to fears about Rental Assistance costs crowding out other programs, they recommended all rural housers should support all the programs. The group also offered suggestions for local nonprofits to supplement USDA staff, for the department to improve its processes, for reducing Rental Assistance costs, and for use of other resources such as HOME, CDBG, and the National Housing Trust Fund.

4. Outreach and Technical Assistance Delivery to Rural and Tribal Communities

Those who attended this session noted that it could have been two separate discussions, because rural and tribal issues are similar but different. They agreed that for both communities, effective technical assistance (TA) needs to meet people where they are; that is, individual coaching for each organization is best because situations and factors like state regulations vary from place to place. Further discussions were needed, the group concluded, to identify ways to market available TA and to make sure that rural community organizations and tribes can access it.

5. Change or Die? Adaptation for Survival

Most participants in this group were from organizations that have existed for more than 25 years and have made changes in order to survive that long. They noted that mission and money are key factors, and that the goal is to find a “sweet spot” where the organization’s activities have high mission content and are bringing in funding. Recommendations included conducting annual evaluations of the organization and its staff’s skills, planning three to five years into the future, and being willing to take risks. Staff should be held accountable and should be willing to adapt.

6. Recruiting and Retaining the Next Generation of Rural Housers

This discussion group identified obstacles to recruiting and retaining young staff such as lower salaries than in the private sector, a lack of knowledge among urban students about rural opportunities, and a tendency to use less technology than young people are used to. There were many outreach suggestions: offer internships, work-study programs, and AmeriCorps positions; work with local chambers of commerce and churches; recruit local youth, including those who have benefitted from housing aid. The group also identified important intangible benefits such as the quality of rural life, the psychological rewards of social justice work, and opportunities for professional responsibility at a younger age than in large urban organizations.

An ongoing conversation. Download the discussion papers and continue to share your thoughts: http://ruralhome.org/calendar/nrhconf/1036-discussion-topics
Introducing the “Nuts & Bolts” plenary, USDA’s Doug O’Brien and HUD’s Cliff Taffet described the challenges and aspirations for their housing programs. The plenary was then separated into breakout sessions, with attendees choosing whether to learn more about USDA or about HUD.

Tony Hernandez ran the USDA breakout session. He began by describing improvements that are underway in processes and automation. The deputy administrators for the Rural Housing Service’s three divisions summarized current events in their areas. In a question and answer period, participants’ concerns ranged from data access to preservation of farm labor housing to suggestions for saving Rental Assistance funds.

In the HUD session, led by Cliff Taffet, participants were given the opportunity to ask specific questions about their work with HUD programs. General topics included funding, services, and access to programs. Many questions were related to the HOME program and changes to the SHOP program.

**HUD and USDA Nuts & Bolts Plenary**

Doug O’Brien (USDA Deputy Under Secretary of Rural Development) and Cliff Taffet (HUD General Deputy Assistant Secretary of Community Planning and Development).

USDA Nuts & Bolts Panel: Tony Hernandez (RHS Administrator) and Deputy Administrators Joyce Allen (Single-Family Housing), Bryan Hooper (Multifamily Housing) and Rich Davis (Community Facilities).

HUD Nuts & Bolts Panel: Marion McFadden (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Grant Programs), Henrietta Owusu (Deputy Director of Policy), Martha Murray (SHOP Program Manager), Valerie Piper (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Development), Jackie Williams (Director of Rural Housing and Economic Development), Julie Hopkins (Director of Technical Assistance, CPD).
RURAL HOUSING AWARDS BANQUET

- Cochran/Collings Award for Distinguished Service in Housing for the Rural Poor: Retired Senator Kit Bond

- Henry B. Gonzalez Award for Contributions to the Improvement of Rural Housing Through Elected Office: Senator Patrick Leahy & Representative Harold Rogers

- Skip Jason Community Service Award: Retha Patton (Executive Director, Eastern Eight Community Development Corporation, Tennessee), Martha Mendez (Single Family Director, Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, California), Brad Bishop (Executive Director, Self-Help Homes, Utah), Andres Saavedra (Senior Program Officer, Rural LISC, Arkansas)
REVIEW OF WORKSHOPS BY LEARNING TRACK
RETOOLING OUR COLLECTIVE TALENTS

95% “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed”
That the conference enhanced their overall knowledge of rural housing issues.

86% “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed”
That the conference enhanced their overall level of rural housing technical expertise.

Housing Development | 8 workshops | 222 total participants | 92% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the workshops enhanced their knowledge of the subject matter.

Ways participants plan to apply knowledge or skills gained through the workshops:

- “Do an energy audit, and review any potential air leak areas.” –Green Single-Family Rehabilitation participant
- “Talk with HAC about TA. Make a comprehensive plan for several properties in our area.” –Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resale: Creating a Program that Works participant
- “Check in with local community college regarding their Youth Build program. If they offer a contractor/construction course, check if funding/GED is available for at risk youth.” –Green Multifamily Rehabilitation participant
Affordable Housing Finance | 8 workshops | 235 total participants | 79% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the workshops enhanced their knowledge of the subject matter.

Ways participants plan to apply knowledge or skills gained through the workshops:

• “Explore SHOP opportunities.” –Using HUD Programs in Rural America participant

• “I plan to make a list of funders and add their funding cycles to my calendar.” –Funding Your Affordable Housing Projects participant

• “Look up QAP [Qualified Allocation Plan] for the state, and start to work on a market study.” –LIHTC 101: Basics for Affordable Housing Developers participant

Organizational Development | 7 workshops | 171 total participants | 79% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the workshops enhanced their knowledge of the subject matter.

Ways participants plan to apply knowledge or skills gained through the workshops:

• “Familiarize myself with the databases discussed (HUD/HMDA). Take extra time to use these databases to analyze all of my organizational service areas.” –Rural Data in a Data Driven World participant

• “About to address AFFH [affirmatively furthering fair housing] in several rural communities and this discussion was very helpful.” –Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing participant

• “Pass on strategic communication planning tool.” –Communication in Today’s World: Proven Methods and New Strategies participant

• “Try to find more training on accounting principles and talk to Board about these issues.” –Financial Management and Federal Compliance Issues for Nonprofit Organizations participant
Innovation and Current Policy Issues | 9 workshops | 222 total participants | 94% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the workshops enhanced their knowledge of the subject matter.

Ways participants plan to apply knowledge or skills gained through the workshops:

- "Make a targeted list of (newly elected) members to ensure they are educated about the economic impact of rural housing and increased need for rural affordable housing."
  – Working with Policymakers participant

- "Become a HUD certified counseling agency." – Challenges and Opportunities in Housing Counseling participant

- "Make plans to start face-to-face discussions with local banks [regarding CRA]."
  – Making the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) Work in Rural America participant

Native American Housing | 3 workshops | 42 total participants | 95% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the workshops enhanced their knowledge of the subject matter.

Ways participants plan to apply knowledge or skills gained through the workshops:

- "Get in touch with Veterans Affairs about homes for veterans." – Accessing and Using Federal Housing Programs on Native American Lands participant

- "Will continue with research/reporting so as to write a series of stories on the topic [of housing for veterans on Native American lands]." – Supportive Housing for Veterans participant

Did you know that you can still access handouts and presentations from the workshops you attended (as well as those you didn’t) via the HAC Trainings app: [https://event.crowdcompass.com/hacr3/custom-list/Workshops](https://event.crowdcompass.com/hacr3/custom-list/Workshops)
FILM SCREENING: TO BUILD A HOME

The Navajo Housing Authority screened the film “To Build a Home” (2014) on the evening of December 3rd. Aneva Yazzie (CEO of Navajo Housing Authority), Yvonne Latty (Film Director and Professor of Journalism at New York University), and Earl Tulley (COO of Navajo Housing Authority) conducted a Q&A session with a robust audience of late-night conference goers.

Synopsis: For the Navajo, home is a sacred place – but far too many have no running water, no electricity and no bathrooms. Thousands of Navajo people are living in substandard homes while their fate lies in the hands of the federal government, where Congress is currently pondering the NAHASDA Reauthorization bill which could result in the nation’s aid being dramatically cut.

See the documentary: http://www.navajodignity.com/

SECTION 502 PACKAGING TRAINING

3 days
3 trainers
23 participants
Trained to become Section 502 Loan Packagers

Congratulations participants!

QUILT RAFFLE

Hand-made quilts are readily identifiable symbols of ingenuity, pride, and enduring quality. These are also key elements of rural sustainability. This year’s beautiful quilt, made by Annalene Two Bulls who is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, was won by Russell Downing of the Community Action Network, Inc. (Springville, TN). Proceeds of the raffle will go to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, which is the charity chosen by the Oglala Sioux Tribe Partnership for Housing.
SOCIAL MEDIA

#R3Conf

Photographs and videos from the 2014 Conference are available online:

THANK YOU!

99% reported HAC staff to be “Very Good” or “Excellent”
The HAC Rural Housing Conference is a collaborative effort of national and local organizations committed to improving housing in rural communities. HAC would like to offer its sincere appreciation to the partner organizations that generously helped to produce this conference.

**MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS**

Bank of America Foundation
Council of Federal Home Loan Banks
JPMorgan Chase
Navajo Housing Authority
NeighborWorks® America
The Home Depot Foundation
U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

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