

BUILDING A NEW GENERATION OF RURAL HOUSING PROFESSIONALS AND LEADERS

by Gisela Salgado and Rob Wiener, California Coalition for Rural Housing

Background

Many rural affordable housing and community development corporations (CDCs) came from a grass-roots movement that dates back to the 1960s. Many of today's CDC executive directors and leaders were the 'movers and shakers' of that movement. They are now reaching retirement age. As they do, the need for qualified, culturally sensitive leaders is becoming more pressing, especially as the nation's rural population becomes more diverse.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

This is an opportunity to grow and cultivate new leaders within the field, based in the organizations and the communities we serve. Engaging a new generation of leaders calls for a systematic approach beyond initial entrance to the field and mid-management-level experience. Organizations are called to prepare for these changes and plan for leadership succession, if they are not already doing so, in order to ensure survival and continued success in the future.

Rural CDCs face particular challenges attracting qualified and experienced new talent and professionals who want to pursue careers in the nonprofit housing and community development field, particularly from existing and emergent immigrant, minority, farmworker, and low-income communities. Rural CDCs compete directly with their counterparts in urban areas for the same pool of talent and, oftentimes, young people opt for life in the city. In other cases, professionals and young talent are not even aware of the varied career paths and opportunities in the field of affordable housing and community development and that rural America has a foundation of solid and ground-breaking CDCs.

Rural CDCs also experience challenges retaining and developing young professionals and leaders once they are in the industry. As an industry, we are currently experiencing uncertainty about diminishing resources and the future, which is affecting the morale of current professionals. It is challenging at times to offer a positive outlook to young people coming in.

Passionate, talented, and committed young people aspire to grow, develop their skills, and be considered for leadership positions, but within many organizations, especially smaller ones, the opportunities and pathways to reach these positions may not exist. Scarce financial resources may limit the ability of organizations to invest in the development of young talent by sending them to professional training workshops and conferences where they can be exposed to big-picture program and policy issues and connect with other practitioners in the field.

Succession planning is critically important to ensure there are systems in place for smooth transition of leadership when the time comes for executive directors and other executive-level staff to leave. It is also important for young people and new talent who aspire to these positions to know that there is a path and a plan for mentoring, leadership-shadowing, and increasing responsibility. Although organizations typically recognize the value of succession planning, it may seem very time-consuming. The time needed for succession planning competes with other priorities. It may even be uncomfortable to begin the conversation about envisioning the organization without the current executive leadership, but deferring such planning may cause dysfunction and chaos when that time comes. It is crucial to plan for the future.

Discussion Questions

- Are we prepared as an industry and within each of our respective organizations for leadership succession?
- Is leadership succession and planning a priority among our organizations, and if not why not? What steps do we need to take to achieve a smooth transition?
- Where do leaders come from? Are we cultivating them, mentoring from within the organization, hiring from the outside? What are we doing to attract, groom, and retain new talent in the field?
- What have we learned as an industry and what are the best models to implement leadership succession?