



NURTURING RURAL LEADERS

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Background

Human capacity is critical to the ability of rural affordable housing and community development corporations (CDCs) to deliver their mission effectively. Rural organizations typically face great difficulty in first recruiting, and then training and retaining, qualified professionals. This is due partly to having a smaller population pool to draw from in the first place, but is largely because many capable rural professionals, early in their careers – especially those from the poorest and most distressed rural places – are drawn to urban and suburban areas that offer greater opportunities for advanced education, higher-paying jobs, and leisure activities. Attracting and retaining young leaders and people from diverse backgrounds for housing development, asset management, and community lending professional jobs – especially under-represented leaders from immigrant, minority, farmworker, and low-income communities – is even more challenging. Even when there is a capable pool of local workers who are qualified, they may not seek careers with nonprofit housing and community development organizations.

At the same time, there are leaders in the community outside our affordable housing organizations that we must rely on to make decisions and take action that affects our work. They may be the state representatives or mayors or county commissioners we need to leverage public funding and build resident support for our work, or bank officials we need as partners, or Chamber of Commerce or church leaders we need as champions – and more. Our organizations may have great and creative ideas, but without cultivating these leaders, our best laid plans and visions may go nowhere.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

Nurturing young leaders is imperative to increase CDCs' effectiveness and planning for sustainability in the face of enormous demographic change. The demographic composition of rural America is changing, and housing and community development organizations must be prepared to comprehend and address the needs of communities that have a range of cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds. Having professionals on staff who are representative of the

diversity of the area increases community acceptance as well as our competitiveness for scarce federal, state, and local resources.

At the same time, the established leaders in our communities whom we need to tap for leverage, partnership, and support often have only a rudimentary understanding of how we have to structure deals. Or they may shy away from developing additional affordable housing in the community because they want to avoid any controversy that might accompany it. Or they simply may not believe we need any more affordable housing because they are not up to speed on current data, or because they are out of touch with low-income and poor people in our community. Yet we need them to succeed. With all that our organizations must do to keep our work going, the task of keeping these critical “partner leaders” informed and helping build their capacity so that they can help us – or at least not get in the way – seems like a daunting additional task. But if we don’t do it, who will?

Discussion Questions

- Where do our *most capable* leaders currently come from? Are we cultivating them, mentoring from within the community and organization, or hiring from the outside?
- What are we doing to attract, groom – and especially *retain* – people currently living in our communities to be the new and diverse talent we need for our organizations?
- What practices do we (or can we) use to keep local leaders whose support we need up to speed on the affordable housing needs in our community?
- What practices do we (or can we) use to keep local leaders whose support we need up to speed on our work – and how they can help?
- Who is the one person living in our community who we most wish would work for our organization – and what would it take to land them?
- Who is the one leader we most need to understand our work or to partner with us – and what are the three most important things we can do consistently over the next year to build that understanding or partnership?