



BUILDING RURAL COMMUNITIES

HAC 2016 RURAL HOUSING CONFERENCE

DISCUSSION PAPERS





NURTURING RURAL LEADERS

By Gisela Salgado, California Coalition for Rural Housing and Janet Topolsky, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

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?



THE EMERGING RELEVANCE OF CREATIVE PLACEMAKING WITHIN RURAL HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

By Bob Reeder, Rural LISC, and Thor Erickson, Omar Hakeem, and Lizzie MacWillie, bcWORKSHOP

Background

In recent years, diverse communities have embraced a growing movement to foster and implement *creative placemaking*, a process involving public, private, and community partners working together to strategically improve the social and physical character of a community through arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking, particularly when incorporated into a broader community development approach, has been shown to be a powerful vehicle for fostering community connections and pride of place. The strength of creative placemaking is its ability to gather a community around a common experience and to provide a process by which the history and future of a place can be expressed and discovered collectively. Reorienting community investment toward an asset driven model, particularly in low-income and/or under-resourced communities supports stabilization, historic patterns, and equitable revitalization.

Traditional notions of housing development are commonly focused on housing delivery or land development. However, the shift to incorporate cross-disciplinary activities – including the infusion of arts and culture – has shown to be a tremendous “value add” for a project’s community development goals. The conceptual framing of creative placemaking does not solely reference any one element of art, culture, or physical housing development (to include architectural, interior, and landscape design), but collectively creating, making, or sharing.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

Creative placemaking relies on inclusive resident engagement to be successful. Gaining and maintaining equitable representation of the community can prove to be time consuming and an ongoing challenge, yet is also an excellent opportunity to build trust within communities.

Adding engagement and creative activities into already tight project budgets can be seen as adding undue costs. However, when understood as part of a holistic approach to community development, the long-term economic benefits outweigh the additional upfront costs.

The words “art” and “culture” can be intimidating and/or alienating to audiences who perceive these endeavors as “not for them.”

Discussion Questions

- What does “resident engagement” really mean? How does the process of securing inclusive resident engagement work?
- What are the financial factors that create both opportunities and barriers to incorporating creative placemaking into development projects?
- How are concepts like “art” and “culture” defined operationally? How can they be discussed and presented in a non-alienating way for audiences who do not usually gravitate toward them?
- How do you view community vitality, and what role does both the construction of housing and the process of developing housing play in contributing or detracting from community vitality?



PERSISTENT POVERTY AND RURAL INEQUALITY: WHERE DOES RURAL HOUSING FIT IN?

By R. Scott McReynolds, Kentucky Housing Development Alliance and Ann Williams Cass, Proyecto Azteca

Background

In Hidalgo County, Texas, almost one out of every two children (46.4 percent) lives in poverty. In Breathitt County, Kentucky, the median household income is less than half the national average (\$26,094 compared to \$53,482). In fact, over a quarter of the households in Breathitt County live on less than \$15,000 per year. But these statistics tell only half the problem. It's not just that these areas have extremely low incomes and high poverty rates, but that they have had these problems for a very long time.

USDA's Economic Research Service considers a county to be a persistent poverty county if its poverty rate has exceeded 20 percent for 30 years or longer. Today there are 353 persistent poverty counties and the overwhelming majority of them are outside metropolitan areas. While only 63 percent of all counties are nonmetro, 85 percent of persistent poverty counties are found outside metropolitan areas. Persistent poverty counties are concentrated in specific geographic regions. These regions include central Appalachia, the Rio Grande Valley, the Mississippi Delta, the Black Belt, and Native American lands.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

While the official measure for persistent poverty is 30 years, many of today's persistent poverty counties have had high poverty rates since at least 1960 (when the current poverty measure was first introduced). Poverty has remained entrenched in these regions despite the War on Poverty and many other relief and development efforts.

The reality of high poverty rates over long periods of time creates layers of challenges and obstacles that must be overcome for these communities to prosper. These challenges include:

- lack of good jobs and limited economic opportunities;
- lack of infrastructure (e.g. water, sewer, and roads) and basic services (building code enforcement, fire protection, law enforcement, and garbage collection);

- poor educational outcomes;
- poor health outcomes;
- high levels of drug abuse and lack of treatment programs;
- transportation and isolation;
- broken housing markets;
- lack of available land that is suitable for develop and/or land use issues;
- limited governmental and nonprofit capacity needed to access federal and state resources;
- lack of sources of matching funds;
- limited access to credit and capital for individuals and businesses;
- diversion of resources away from the greatest needs; and
- lack of hope for a better future.

Faced with these layers of challenges and obstacles, providing a single service - such as affordable housing, pre-school education, or healthy meals – in these communities can be a monumental task. Actually trying to “move the needle” on poverty rates and income inequality can seem impossible.

Overcoming persistent poverty will require a significant investment of outside resources. We know from the War on Poverty, however, that simply dumping lots of money and/or programs designed outside the community into these hard-to-serve areas is not enough. The efforts must start with local communities and be built upon local assets and a local vision for the future. Purdue University, <https://www.pcrd.purdue.edu/signature-programs/strategic-doing.php>, offers a process called *Strategic Doing*. It is designed for situations in which nobody can tell anybody else what to do. Collaboration is the only way to move forward. It is focused on doing, not just talking, with shareholders, not stakeholders, as everyone will share in the outcomes. It puts a focus on local assets that already exist.

When significant outside resources support and leverage locally driven efforts, real change happens. Overcoming persistent poverty and closing the rising income gap will take a multi-faceted, long-term effort. There are no quick fixes. Justin Maxson of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation describes the sort of work that needs to be done as being “hard, slow and expensive.”

While affordable housing alone cannot solve persistent poverty and close the rising income gap, housing must be part of the solution. We know housing is an economic driver and these communities desperately need the jobs and economic development that housing provides. We also know that people living in safe, decent, and affordable housing have better health outcomes, are more successful in employment, and perform better in school. Affordable

homeownership and home repair programs also add to the local tax base and thus provide more funding for schools and other services. These programs also provide the best opportunity for low- and moderate-income families to build wealth.

Perhaps the most important benefit from affordable housing programs is they offer a tangible bit of hope. A safe, decent home provides a base upon which a brighter future can be built.

Discussion Questions

- Given the multitude of obstacles and the inherent complexity of serving persistent poverty communities, nonprofit and local government capacity is critical. How can we build and maintain capacity in these areas?
- We know that ending persistent poverty will require work across broad spectrums (e.g. housing, education, health care, job training, economic development, drug treatment prevention/programs, etc.). Who should we partner with? How do we pay for the hard work of building these partnerships?
- How we do what we do can be almost as important as what we do. How can we operate affordable housing program to maximize the economic and social benefits of affordable housing on persistent poverty communities?
- Ending persistent poverty will require a sustained effort and will be “hard, slow and expensive.” How can we attract meaningful philanthropic investment to support this work for the long haul?
- Are there people and entities that benefit from the status quo and may resist efforts to end persistent poverty?



PROPOSALS FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION: PROVIDING INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT RURAL DEVELOPMENT

By Hope F. Cupit, Southeast RCAP, Inc., and Julie Bornstein, Coachella Valley Housing Coalition

Background

When a new Administration takes power, the rural housing community is eager to engage and educate, giving voice to our work across the country. With rural voters' economic anxiety well-documented through this year's election cycle, the current transition is particularly important. Rural concerns may be elevated in the national dialogue, bringing resources to our community. Yet there are also threats to domestic discretionary spending, which could turn back years of progress and thwart efforts to bring opportunity and self-sufficiency to rural America.

Rural communities face declines in population, high poverty rates, a sluggish recovery from the recent recession, and increased drug addiction and abuse. In rural America, there remains a fundamental need for access to capital as well as for strong federal, state, local, and private-sector partnerships. Along with other needs, rural America has serious infrastructure problems that hinder rural development. President-elect Trump has expressed a strong interest in improving the nation's infrastructure, and a variety of elected officials have indicated a willingness to work with him on this issue. In rural areas, investing in housing represents infrastructure investment that addresses human needs, creates jobs, and stabilizes rural communities.

The physical challenges in rural areas have significant impacts on the options for developing infrastructure. Water, sewer, and electrical power delivery may have to span long distances between developed areas but each foot must be paid for regardless of the number of actual users. New technology may not be available for internet and Wi-Fi, limiting opportunities for information, education, and commerce and making the finished development less desirable to the ultimate users. Supportive retail and community services do not have sufficient customers or users to risk rural location investments.

Having a focus on strong infrastructure is not only critical to the survival of rural America but also speaks to economic opportunity, standards of living, and social cohesion for rural residents. But, because there are fewer people across whom to spread the costs, large

infrastructure projects in rural areas tend to have much higher costs per household than comparable projects in urban areas. Housing stability is necessary for individuals and families to thrive and prosper, yet millions of households in both rural and urban communities across the country live in homes that cost more than they can afford, have physical or health hazards, or may be lost due to foreclosure or eviction. In addition, the demand for rural infrastructure development often goes unheard because rural populations are smaller and less dense than those in urban and suburban areas, which generate louder political voices.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges associated with educating federal policymakers are numerous, and can be illustrated by the issues connected to creating adequate infrastructure for rural development. Rural areas have fewer banks and fewer specialized lenders in those banks. Rural communities may struggle to draw upon private capital for affordable housing development and ample evidence shows that national philanthropic investment largely bypasses rural America, especially isolated areas with persistent poverty; therefore, rural places may rely heavily on federal support through various programs that promote rural development. Reduction in federal spending for affordable rural housing programs has made the situation worse.

Another issue to consider is that rural developers are less likely to operate in a specialized niche, concentrating solely on financial transactions. They must often address a wide range of community needs, unlike their (often) more specialized urban counterparts. It can be extremely stressful for those rural development practitioners who often must play multiple roles to make up for the lack of support often found in rural areas.

Infrastructure issues in rural development relate to communities that are isolated and lack the population density that can support economic infrastructure development. Strengthening support for rural infrastructure development can be linked to increasing the availability of credit sources. Rural communities are sometimes at a disadvantage when federal and state governments allocate infrastructure spending dollars.

That does not mean that opportunities do not exist. In many cases, satisfying rural infrastructure needs demands new investment – not rehabilitation of old, outdated systems. Land rights can be purchased far less expensively than in urban areas. New technology may become available to change the nature of providing necessary services to support development.

Discussion Questions

- What steps can be taken to draw political attention to the need for improved access to reliable and affordable energy services, including renewable and alternative sources of energy that will lead to infrastructure support in rural development?

- What are the pros and cons of focusing on supporting the rural housing and infrastructure programs that already exist, or developing ideas for new initiatives the Trump Administration could claim as its own?
- How can (or should) the rural housing community link investment in traditional infrastructure (e.g. roads, bridges, broadband) to investment in the production and preservation of housing?
- What strategies exist to develop and improve access of rural populations to information and communications technologies that support Internet access and build capacities for an effective use of these technologies?



WORKING TOGETHER TO ADDRESS THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC IN RURAL AMERICA

By Secretary Tom Vilsack, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Chair, White House Rural Council

Background

More Americans now die every year from drug overdoses than in motor vehicle crashes. The majority of those overdoses involve prescription medications. Kaiser Family Foundation recently reported that 44 percent of Americans personally know someone who has been addicted to prescription painkillers. In 2014, opioids – a class of drugs that includes prescription pain medications and heroin – were involved in 28,648 deaths. This public health crisis is hitting rural America particularly hard. In January, President Obama asked me to lead a federal interagency effort to address the opioid epidemic in rural communities.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

Communities across the nation are struggling to deal with the opioid epidemic. Departments across the Administration are using all available tools to combat it. At USDA, for example, we are using the Rural Health and Safety Education grant program to increase substance use disorder awareness; the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program to increase access to treatment; and the Community Facilities Grants and Loans Program to build treatment and recovery facilities.

Despite these efforts, great challenges remain, including the extreme shortage of transitional housing for those in treatment and recovery that has been expressed to me by community leaders from around the country. Stable quality housing is essential for the recovery of those suffering from substance use disorder and for enabling them to become contributing members of our communities again. In August, USDA launched an initiative to use Rural Housing Service resources to help fill the need for transitional housing. Actions include encouraging the use of Community Facilities financing for transitional housing projects; making vacant USDA-owned properties in 22 states available for sale or lease to nonprofits to convert into transitional housing; and a pilot in four states (Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Vermont) to make vacant multifamily rental housing units available to tenants participating in drug court

programs. However, more must be done and we must continue to work creatively with housing and community development practitioners to provide homes and align other essential services for those in treatment and recovery.

This issue is a critical part of USDA's greater call for safe, affordable housing options. We must all come together to protect the stock of USDA-financed affordable rental housing properties across the United States, which is vital for the stability and well-being not just of people recovering from substance use disorder but of entire rural communities. Many of these properties are at risk of paying off their mortgages, exiting USDA's programs, and losing their affordable status in the coming years. USDA is working hard to preserve and revitalize them through our existing program tools and partnerships, but Congressional action is needed to provide additional funding for preservation and new construction.

Discussion Questions

- Who are the key partners and stakeholders who can play a role in addressing the transitional housing issue in rural communities related to the opioid epidemic?
- Beyond USDA Rural Housing Service programs, what other housing assets can be utilized to address this challenge?
- How can prevention and treatment programs and other essential services be integrated with housing?
- What additional data and analysis could be helpful in targeting limited resources to alleviate the issue?



THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC AND RURAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING

By Alan Morgan, National Rural Health Association

Background

The obstacles faced by health care providers and patients in rural areas are vastly different than those in urban areas. Barriers unique to rural health care delivery systems include long travel distances to obtain health care, low population densities, lack of economies of scale and high rates of fixed overhead per patient revenue. An enduring characteristic of the rural health landscape is the uneven distribution and relative shortage of health care professionals.

Rural people are less likely to have private health care coverage, and the rural poor are less likely to be covered by Medicaid benefits than their urban counterparts. Moreover, all these factors have helped to set the stage for an opioid abuse crisis in rural America.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that opioids killed over 28,000 people in 2014, an average of more than 76 people every day. Additionally, a February 2014 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* revealed rural areas have higher rates of drug poisoning deaths, including deaths from opioids; drug poisoning and deaths are increasing more than three times the rate in urban communities; rural adolescents are more likely to use prescription opioids nonmedically than are their urban counterparts; and drug abuse in rural communities creates an increased demand on health care, the social services, and criminal justice systems – thus making this the time to act immediately.

Nationally, roughly 35 percent of homeless individuals are substance abusers. Among homeless rural veterans nationally, substance abuse rates reach as high as 75 to 80 percent.

Providing an affordable, drug free rural housing option is a national challenge.

Discussion Questions

- What are the specific housing challenges and opportunities for consideration in this rural crisis?

- How can we as rural advocates best develop a national rural community opioid response?
- How can we better provide safe, affordable drug free housing in rural communities?
- How can we best engage rural health stakeholders to further enhance support to rural communities as they work to solve their rural opioid abuse challenges and raise awareness of solutions to these challenges?