

Investing in Rural Health: A Funder's Perspective on the Conditions and Capacities Needed to Stimulate Innovation in Rural Communities

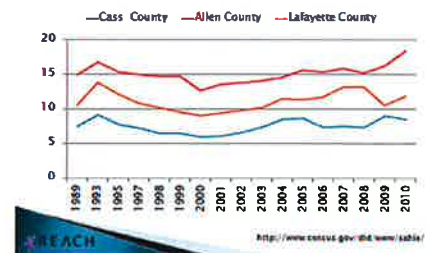
William Moore, PhD, Principal, The Strategy Group (www.thestrategygrp.org)

The Problem

Generally speaking, rural residents have more significant barriers and less access to high quality health care and coverage than their urban counterparts. In rural communities:

- There are significant workforce shortage issues in primary care, mental health and oral health care.
- Residents tend to be poorer and more likely to rely on SNAP benefits.
- Residents have greater transportation difficulties reaching health care providers.
- Residents are more likely to be uninsured and unemployed.

Poverty Levels: % of Residents in Poverty (all ages)



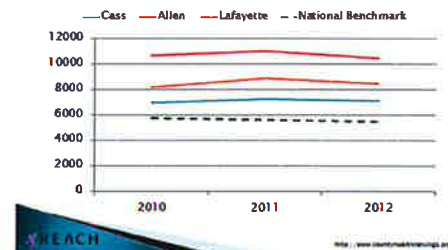
The Consequences

Significant health disparities and Inequities in rural areas of the country:

- More tobacco use
- Additional 22 percent risk of injury-related death
- More frequent occurrences of chronic diseases -- diabetes and coronary heart disease
- Rural youth twice as likely to commit suicide; 1 in 6 children in rural areas had a diagnosed mental, behavioral or developmental disorder (AEI, 2012).

Premature Death:

Years of Potential Life Lost before the age of 75 per 100,000 (age adjusted)



Our Assessment

After a decade of investment in the REACH Foundation's three rural counties the trajectories of most health outcomes were unchanged or worsening. We sought to answer the question: *What would it take to begin making positive, community-wide change in access to care and coverage, improving health outcomes for ALL residents, and increased capacity for these communities to implement their own solutions to pressing and persistent problems?*

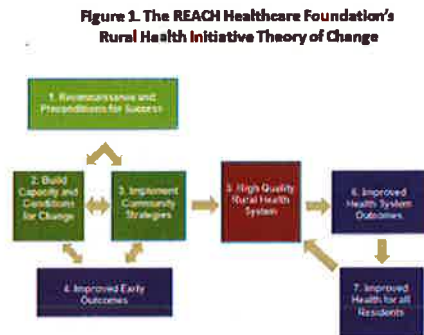
Our Approach

The REACH Rural Health Initiative (RHI) was born out of this recognition of ineffective investment in the rural counties of the Foundation's service area. The goal was to break through the persistent barriers to health care access and health equity for the medically underserved and most vulnerable

populations. The structures and processes used to form the RHI laid the foundation for a new rural community capacity building and engagement framework called the **Community Innovation Network Framework**.

The Conditions and Capacities for Community transformation

- **Supports for implementation:** A variety of resources – such as meeting facilitation early in the process, coaching, professional development, and money – are essential for sustained efforts to bring about community change.
- **Foundational structures:** These include community leadership teams, semi-autonomous but well-supported working groups, a growing network of individuals and organizations interested in finding new solutions to community problems, an influential champion and a backbone organization – one that is a trusted community resource.
- **New Processes and skills:** Communities struggling toward a new vision of the future often find themselves stuck in a cycle of talking without action and follow-up; lacking accountability for implementing actions; and closed-system thinking, where the same small group of individuals are leading and representing the views of the community on a variety of public issues. New processes and skills must be modeled, supported, and reinforced to ensure (1) a community-driven vision; (2) a network approach to supporting a culture of collaboration and innovation; (3) opportunities for the development and support of emergent leaders; (4) effective, action-oriented meetings with accountability and ownership; (5) a communication system and strategies to keep residents engaged; and (6) a shared system of reflective evaluation.
- **Community engagement:** Growing the diversity of the network within, across, and outside the community to increase participation and bring in new ideas and resources. A network approach that engages passionate community residents in ways that allow their interests to be reflected in change efforts attracts additional residents who share the work load and insert new thinking into the system.



Early Outcomes

As the conditions and capacities are fully implemented, the earliest signs of change emerge: trusting, mutually supportive relationships are formed; network expansion and adoption of network supportive roles begins to occur; increased collaboration, inclusivity, innovation orientation, and self-organizing are demonstrated through participants' values and behaviors; and new leadership emerges and is supported. Measurable progress toward new capacity and project goals is observed.