

# Community Innovation Network Framework: Building on the Rural Health Initiative

Launched in 2012, the REACH Foundation's Rural Health Initiative (RHI) strengthened the conditions and capacity of three rural communities to significantly improving access to health care services and reduce health inequities through innovation.

## WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THE INITIATIVE?

The goal of the RHI is to increase access to healthcare services and aggressively target community efforts toward strategies found to reduce inequities in access, health coverage, and health outcomes in rural communities. At its core, RHI is a systematic and coordinated approach to community capacity building that involves technical assistance, facilitation, and other support to help rural leaders build local community networks, expand leadership, and use innovative workgroups to identify solutions and champion change.

The REACH Foundation has invested more than \$1 million since the initiative's start, with funding directed to program development, technical assistance, evaluation, convening, and local actions. In its fourth year of implementation, attention shifted to an intentional focus on sustaining the conditions and capacity grown as well as sharing lessons learned. To date, successes include the opening of a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in Lafayette County, MO; expansion of the FQHC in Allen County, Kansas; connection of community members in multiple counties to health insurance who were not previously covered; and successful recruitment of medical providers to rural settings, among others. REACH funding not only supports activities and programs but also leverages funding.

## WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE RHI?

Learnings from the four years of the Rural Health Initiative have allowed for the creation of the Community Innovation Network Framework that encompasses four necessary conditions and capacities for meaningful community change to occur: supports for implementation, foundational structures, processes and skills, and community engagement. This framework can help inform future capacity building in a variety of communities.

# THE WORK OF RHI: CREATING THE FAMEWORK

**Create conditions conducive for change.** Communities are rarely ready at the outset to engage in a significant change effort. History, tradition, culture, and norms for working are often entrenched and comfortable for stakeholders. Shifting the cultural and human conditions in ways that make change possible is a significant and necessary first phase of community change work. The extent to which the conditions can be made more amenable to change often determines how much change can be realized over time. The conditions include in no particular order: 1) garnering local committed leadership; 2) taking into account the local history of collaboration, shared problem-solving and decision-making; 3) the creation of a shared vision; 4) interested volunteers and other community members who are willing to work with leaders to bring about a shared vision; 5) resources – human and financial to support the change process; and 6) a well-defined process, set of structures and supporting infrastructure that can help the system move toward the vision.

## **Build capacity through network building.**

Network building is an approach to forming a network, or networks, of diverse individuals and organizations from across a county or community to identify needs and develop solutions for meeting those needs. Network building goes beyond enlarging a local core leadership team. It also includes a) establishing work groups that can focus on components of a larger project or effort so that leadership is distributed across a wider range of community members, and b) reaching out and making connections to a larger network of stakeholders, resources, projects and other communities working on rural health around the country.

## **Tailor the work to acknowledge local resources and realities.**

No single solution will work in every area so engaging a broad spectrum of people in the community as true partners is critical to effective and sustainable work. Utilizing local expertise and meeting them where they are allows for more accurate identification of community strengths and challenges. This process of engagement and the programs that emerge become vehicles for change within the greater system – in the case of RHI, within the communities' health care system.

## **Build capacity through leadership development.**

People are encouraged to be leaders in ways that align with their skills, to share ideas and innovations to address old problems, and to support emerging leaders to take on workgroups or engage in the overall initiative through the core leadership team. Existing and emergent leaders can build overall commitment and skills to reach out and connect people, encourage them to take action, and learn how to help the network see opportunities, reflect and learn.

## **Utilize a variety of supports.**

At the local level, RHI operates through a core leadership team and smaller work groups, with a backbone organization adding additional administrative support. A larger set of stakeholders in the community supports each county's RHI work and identifies new needs to address. A Technical Assistance Team comprised of REACH staff and consultants offer additional resources for evaluation, leadership, and sustainability development. Gatherings of core leadership teams, referred to as "Communities of Practice," enable learning across geographic sites and bring new ideas forward.

Learn more about us at [www.reachhealth.org](http://www.reachhealth.org) or contact:

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