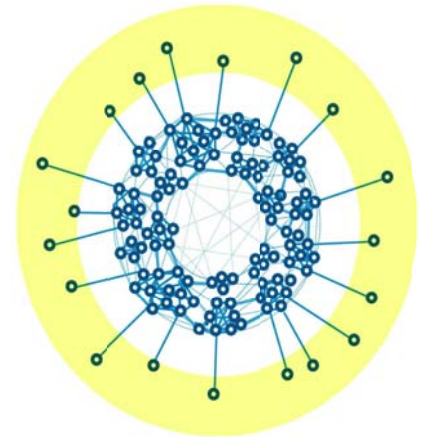


# RURAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

## Network Strategy and Structure

Building networks is a powerful way to mobilize more people to come up with effective solutions that increase access to health care in rural counties. The most successful networks are those that have:

1. A large number of people involved who are taking action.
2. Diversity of participants – especially people who have the problem – so that better solutions are generated.
3. Lots of connections among people so that ideas and actions spread throughout the county.
4. Many small experiments combined with learning to find out what works.
5. A substantial periphery of people, mostly outside of the county, who bring in new ideas and resources.
6. Leadership that is spread throughout the network, not centralized in one individual, organization or location.



The Rural Health Initiative (RHI) is a network of networks, with networks in Allen, Cass and Lafayette counties learning from each other and supported by a meta-network including the Technical Assistance Team, the REACH Foundation and national experts.

### Network Structures for Action

RHI encourages five main structures that networks can use to get work done.

These five structures are important because they help develop an effective network by expanding and diversifying network participation, as well as engaging the network and building new leadership, thus expanding the capacity of the counties to make significant change in access to health care. The five network structures for getting work done are:

#### 1. Core group

Each RHI County Network has a core group of well-connected strategic thinkers whose purpose is to help build a large, diverse network in the county that understands the importance of increasing access to health care, and helps a range of projects get off the ground to address different aspects of access to health care and builds network infrastructure to support those projects and working groups.

Network infrastructure includes:

- a communications system that keeps all elements of the network in touch
- a system for training and supporting network leadership
- a tracking, learning and evaluation system
- financial resources that support the network

## 2. Working groups and collaborative projects

Working groups are a way of focusing energy and action in a particular area that is likely to produce significant change. They may start as a broad action area or from a single project that broadens. Sometimes working groups are ad hoc and only require 1-2 meetings to fix a specific problem. More often they last several years.

Working groups are ideally initiated and led by people on the core team or in the stakeholder network. This way leadership capacity is built within the community.

The Connectors Working Group in Lafayette County started with a pilot group of intake staff from six organizations that met monthly to learn about each other's services to more effectively refer people with needs their agency couldn't address. The group then added speakers from different agencies such as Social Security so they could learn about requirements for those programs. Finally, the group expanded to 70 individuals and 17 agencies. The result is that many more individuals, regardless the agency they visit, are able to get the help they need to finding services appropriate to their problem.

Allen County has adopted a different approach to working groups. The Allen County RHI Network has convened several ad hoc working groups. For example, a working group was organized to help with recruitment

of new medical staff for the county. This group was able to find the type of home needed to attract an applicant.

The optimal working group will generate a number of experimental collaborative projects. These often arise from working group members' particular interests and skills. Having a number of projects in a working group often helps the group learn more about the problem. This is why reflection and learning are important in working groups. Many projects emerge out of an opportunity that arises that increases the chance of success in this area. Eventually, working groups can emerge from stakeholder gatherings where residents have an opportunity to identify unmet needs to increase access to health care and meet with others interested in working on those needs.

For example, the Farm to Plate Network in Vermont has a working group called Farm to Institutions, which is increasing the amount of locally grown foods in institutions such as schools and hospitals. During 2014, the working group had two major projects: 1) Four organizations worked together to produce the Champions of Change Healthcare Forum, which focused on ways to increase local food sourcing in Vermont's 16 hospitals; 2) Another project produced a report to help farmers scale operations to be able to serve institutions.

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## 3. Stakeholder network

The stakeholder network consists of all the organizations and individuals interested in increasing access to health care. The role of the core team is to expand this network by strategically building relationships with many people in each county and

engage the network through convenings where people have an opportunity to identify barriers to access to health care and join with others to begin to work on those barriers through the creation of new working groups.

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## 4. Backbone organization

A backbone organization catalyzes the network often by raising startup funds, providing an initial coordinator for the network and being part of the core team. However, as the core team and working groups progress, more of

the composition of groups and leadership is passed on to others in the community so that community capacity is greatly expanded.

## 5. Network of Networks Community of Practice

The key structure for learning is the Tri-County Community of Practice (CoP). Through the CoP, network leaders from each of the counties are introduced to new concepts and practices, share learnings from their

local experiments, and help each other solve challenges they encounter. For example, Allen County is now exploring whether it might start a Connectors Working Group modeled on Lafayette County's example.

## Support Structures

There are 6 key support structures that need to be developed for self-organizing networks to be effective.

In highly effective networks, new support structures make it easier for anyone in the network to start a new collaborative project:

1. Development of a communications ecosystem to move from a broadcasting of information to support for discussion, engagement and collaboration.
2. Training, coaching and communities of practice to support network leadership.
3. Restructuring of funding to provide incentives for self-organizing and development of new network leadership.
4. Expanding evaluation to include systems that help people in networks track their shift from traditional to network behaviors and structures.
5. Network mapping that enables participants to gain a better understanding of their network and how to improve it.
6. Understanding the system the network is working to change and identifying leverage points so that work is focused on areas where change is most likely to make a substantial difference.

## Additional Resources

### **Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact**

Plastrik, Peter, and Taylor, Madeleine (2014). Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

### **Network Weaver Handbook (A Guide to Transformational Networks)**

Holley, June (2012). Athens, OH: Network Weaver Publishing.

### **Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity**

Wenger, Etienne (1998). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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