

Rural Poverty Summit

Opportunities for Organizational and Partnership Action

October 20, 2009

Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota

Convened by

University of Minnesota Extension

Center for Community Vitality

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/Community/>

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

EXTENSION

Out of concern for the health and prosperity of rural Minnesota communities, 24 policy leaders from all sectors in Minnesota gathered together on October 20, 2009, to ask these four questions:

1. What do we currently know about rural conditions?
2. How can small rural communities use help now?
3. What can/should organizations do?
4. What are [our] takeaway ideas, insights, worries, or strategies?

Over the course of three hours, participants engaged in a deliberative dialogue process facilitated by Donna Rae Scheffert¹. Participants were assigned and reassigned into groups of four to six people for each of the first three questions above. After small group discussion, the plenary group reassembled for summary discussion. Question four was discussed only in the plenary group. Graduate student notetakers were assigned to each small group to record the conversation.

SUMMARY: Page three is a single-page summary of the most often-cited issues and solutions from the small and large group discussion.

MORE DETAIL: Beginning on page four, the compiled conversation notes more richly describe the discussion² among summit attendees.

¹ Scheffert is a widely recognized expert in leadership studies. She is an independent management training and leadership development consultant with Action Wheel Leadership, Inc. She was formerly engaged as a Leadership Development Specialist and Extension Professor at the University of Minnesota.

² The ideas and opinions expressed herein are those of Summit participants and do not necessarily represent the viewpoint of the University of Minnesota or the Center for Community Vitality.

ISSUE	→ ORGANIZATIONS CAN...	→ IN PARTNERSHIP WE CAN...
<p>Rural communities lack the resources necessary to develop and maintain physical and organizational infrastructure. Without this infrastructure in place, it is difficult or impossible for communities to pursue other resources and opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Commit specific resources for physical infrastructure assessment, development, <i>and</i> maintenance. → Choose more flexible processes or relax funding guidelines in order to deliver resources where they will be most effective. For example, many informal community groups are poised for action, yet are cut off from external philanthropic or governmental funding. → Help community groups develop local fiscal agent relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Repurpose or reuse existing infrastructure for planning and resource allocation. For example, partners may share facilities, distribution networks, communication networks, and other physical or organizational assets.
<p>Rural communities lack the population density necessary to sustain basic services—particularly health care services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Consider alternative modes of service delivery—e.g. mobile health clinics, libraries, and service centers, or remote virtual kiosks. → Provide incentives for service providers to offer their services in rural areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Reuse one another’s delivery and support modes and piggyback services. Partners must share information freely so that effective processes can be replicated.
<p>The geographic and social isolation inherent in rural areas can both mask individual/family poverty and cut off whole communities from outside opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Foster personal connections with individuals and families—particularly newcomers, immigrants, and native populations—and support forums in which poverty can be discussed openly. → Provide incentives—e.g. underwriting transportation, etc.—for geographically clustered communities to work together or collaborate on a regional project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Inform one another of particular community wants, needs, and assets so that complementary services and supports can be offered regionally. → Jointly offer regional networking events to increase the connectedness of rural communities.
<p>The cost of living in rural areas is structurally different from urban areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Allocate resources to match local services or products to reduce the cost of rural living. Further, organizations can strive to make their <i>own</i> products and services more affordable for those in rural areas. → Encourage community projects that address urgent needs—for example, community gardens, clothing exchanges, and food shares. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Pool resources to underwrite the costs of both urgent needs and sustainability investments—e.g. food, heating assistance, weatherizing, alternative energy.
<p>Individuals and families in poverty need better, more accessible information about the basket of services available.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Simplify processes for distributing program information so people in crisis can quickly and easily find and access help. → Identify, invest in, and leverage local formal and informal communication channels—local media, weekly community fliers, email networks, “office hours” at the café, etc. → Remove barriers to asking for help: reduce the negative stigma, increase community awareness of rural poverty, and adapt messages and strategies as culturally appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Refer individuals and families to one another’s services and work to unify program eligibility and/or application processes. → Jointly develop a comprehensive, virtual “one stop shop” that links people in need to a wide range of information by location, type, etc.

DETAILED RESPONSES

Question one: What do we currently know about rural conditions?

“Rural” is too expansive a category to use in generalizing conditions. Some rural regions of the state are faring much better than others. Further, asset levels among rural regions vary substantially.

Infrastructure and Housing

Investments in rural infrastructure are sorely needed—especially wastewater, rural roads, and broadband. USDA Rural Development has funds specifically for broadband projects.

However, some communities may lack the public and nonprofit institutional presence necessary to access ARRA and other government and philanthropic dollars. Further, the smallest cities may be too cash-limited to even qualify for ecological assessments for infrastructure projects.

Rural communities may be able to capitalize on shifts in energy policy as a means to invest in rural infrastructure.

Housing stock erosion plagues many rural communities. Rural housing markets are typically “thin”—that is, there are a relatively small number of buyers and sellers at any given time. In these situations, families end up “stuck” in place, unable to quickly move for better work or educational opportunities.

Institutions and Community

The sense of “community” is often strong in rural areas, though divisions may exist along tenure, race, immigrant, and church status. As many rural communities lack local nonprofit organizations, churches function as an important social hub. Depending on their orientation toward newcomers and/or outsiders, churches can either help or hurt broader community efforts.

Though some rural communities have a strong segment of longtime residents and leaders, other segments of the community are much more transitional—ephemeral employment, residence, relationships, etc. This may be particularly true in reservation communities or other places with a high proportion of youth.

Many rural communities lack physical or social centers where new residents may connect with neighbors. The Horizons program has found that communities that quickly welcome newcomers tend to be the most successful.

Work and Family

Through the economic crisis, summit participants have seen more highly-educated rural workers out of jobs. Thin labor markets (i.e. few open positions) may lengthen unemployment spells for rural workers.

Small farms are often not profitable enough to sustain a family without outside income. Many rural workers hold down multiple jobs. The complexity of working patterns challenges conventional childcare arrangements.

Rural commuting costs (both time and money) are significant—especially for individuals piecing together multiple jobs. In this way, rural economies are vulnerable to energy price shocks.

Families are often simply unaware of services for which they may qualify.

Migration

Migration is both a short and long term concern. If baby boomers follow migration patterns similar to those of their predecessors, the Midwest rural population age 55-75 will increase by ~22 percent between 2010 and 2020.

Outmigration of younger workers leaves rural local governments with limited tax capacity. Surveys indicate that young people are willing to remain near home if good jobs are available. Though labor market datasets are increasingly robust, many rural areas are too sparsely populated to obtain accurate employment data and projections.

Immigrant families bring cultural diversity and richness to rural areas. They also place new demands on rural school systems—larger class sizes, language barriers, etc.

Medical Care

Many rural areas face shortages of skilled health care workers. Lack of local medical expertise makes “aging in place” difficult if not impossible. Elderly in need of professional care often must move to a regional center.

Industry

Rural industries can contribute to cyclical poverty. Specific technical training (mining, agriculture, etc.) limits workers to jobs within certain industries. Weak rural job training programs limit occupational mobility.

The agricultural sector is struggling through the economic crisis. No stimulus money is available for agriculture. The sector is seeing very high levels of lender mediation—many farms in trouble.

Government

All levels of government in Minnesota are facing tough decisions and trying to balance both short- and long-term concerns. Intergovernmental funds are not always reaching small cities, though the smallest MN cities were spared IGA cuts in most recent state budget.

Poverty

Rural and reservation poor often challenge the conventional definition of poverty, describing themselves as rich in family, land, community, etc. Coming to terms with poverty as an identity issue is challenging.

People lack a mental image of what poverty means in rural areas—more so than in urban areas. ‘Who is poor’ looks very different depending on the context. Defining poverty and self-acknowledgement in rural areas is much more difficult than in urban areas. It’s difficult to address poverty when you can’t identify it.

Though rural poor sometimes end up in metro-area programs, greater physical isolation makes rural poverty unique from urban poverty. Many find that geography confounds efforts to understand and address rural poverty.

“Poverty” is typically a taboo subject in many communities. It is a difficult word to utter aloud and even more difficult to discuss openly. Horizons communities have had some success in facilitating open community dialogues.

One statewide foundation reported it being difficult to convince local elites that “poverty” does not equate with “laziness.” Often poverty is framed as welfare—an individual issue.

Question two: How can small rural communities use help now?

Infrastructure

Communities need assistance to meet infrastructure mandates—wastewater projects, for example. Given tight local government budgets, where will the funding come from? How long can small cities defer maintenance?

Broadband and cell phone coverage are important tools for rural commerce and microenterprise. Affordable, reliable access to both will provide economic opportunities for rural entrepreneurs.

Energy conservation investment reduces operating expenses (both at the family and community level) and frees up current dollars for other priorities. Families and communities need access to low-interest loans to pursue these conservation investments.

Institutions and Community

Short-term solutions (less than five years) must also be smart in long-term (or at least complementary to long-term solutions). Within the next five years, we can strengthen the networks that are already in place and find ways to enroll eligible families in programs (e.g. EITC, workforce training, etc.).

Communities are not accustomed to utilizing poverty resources. Linking people with resources is an achievable short-term project. Some communities have developed resource directories.

People in positional leadership positions should have easy access to information (e.g. USDA Rural Development programs). Currently, these connections are rooted in haphazard networking. How can these connections be strengthened?

Creating a common vision in rural communities is key. Communities can leverage their own resources and talents. Each community needs an organization or fiscal agent through which to receive grant funding—a long term commitment.

Work and Family

We need to cut the cost of living for rural families. Access to affordable transportation and food are the biggest issues.

Many rural rideshare programs are reliant upon an aging volunteer base—are these programs sustainable or scalable?

Medical Care

Broadband may also help ease health care access issues. Health care professionals with access to online resources or records may be more effective in rural areas.

Governments and/or communities must provide incentives for high-skilled medical workers to settle within reach of rural communities. Quality of life, amenities, low cost of living, etc.

Industry

Microenterprise and entrepreneurship hold some promise for rural communities—if telecommunication infrastructure is there. Efforts must be community-focused: local residents inventing their own future.

In the short term, we can cultivate established businesses in communities.

Rural areas are an underutilized human resource base. While much attention is given to natural resource endowments in rural areas, new and emerging sectors may find also talented people at a lower cost in rural communities.

Government

Local governments need money—either through trimming expenses or raising revenue. Own-source revenue streams are running dry in many rural communities.

Though the smallest local governments have few expenditures available to trim, some efficiency may be found in consolidation and/or coordination between local governments or the nonprofit sector. Pressure from funders may drive some organizations to consolidation.

Pushing needs assessment up to a broader regional base may lessen the turf wars between county-based agencies that are often a barrier to collaboration and/or consolidation.

Some government funding is being directed to individual families when the problem actually lies at the community/institutional level—child care assistance, for example. These funds could be pooled together to offer a more cost-effective service.

Poverty

Families in trouble are sometimes unaware of services in the community. Agencies must be equipped and trained to connect people to other resources—either online or in person. Every agency must be prepared to be a single point of entry (hub) for multiple social services.

If we *name* poverty and personally know someone in poverty, similarities between us become more salient than differences.

If we are to spend limited dollars effectively, we must offer differentiated services to those in short-term vs. long-term need. We have a responsibility to balance our efforts between addressing the long term (economic health) and the short term (survival)—for both families and organizations.

Question three: What can/should organizations do?

Infrastructure

Some counties have had success with transportation networks for seniors. Is it feasible to scale this up to serve a broader population?

Physical distance as a service-level barrier may be overcome through smarter use of centralized information sources and databases. Though, this strategy requires reliable connectivity.

In the federal stimulus package, there is money available for broadband expansion³. For example, regional libraries could apply to expand their technological capacity.

Organizations can help secure low/no interest loans for the rehabilitation of rural housing or public facilities.

Institutions and Community

Rural communities want to thrive and people want to stay there. Operating under these assumptions, sustainability of work is not a one year or two year issue; it is “a forever question.”

Organizations can't afford to duplicate funding or services. A group called “Friends in the Field⁴” catalogs and maps organizations in rural communities—mission, location, and contact info. This catalog has proven to be a valuable resource both internally and externally.

Organizations will have to give up activities that they don't do well. Refocus on most effective programs. However, organizations should expand their organizational relationships—“kiss a lot of frogs” to find partners in service-delivery. Recombine differently to add value to common work. When one person's needs are beyond one organization's capacities, find partners to fill the gap.

Organizations must focus on evidence of program effectiveness. We have a responsibility to demonstrate the impact of programs to a persuadable, but not engaged, policymaker. These impacts must be sustainable beyond the stimulus funding horizon.

In addition to program funding, organizations need general operating support.

Organizations have an obligation to share data and other informational resources freely. It's “unsexy,” but critical to our work together.

Communities and organizations can engage in trust-building activities—often these processes take many years to unfold. Activities such as these encourage community readiness. In addition to developing these human resources, communities should make certain that capacity is in place to receiving funds. Is a fiscal agent available?

Organizations can facilitate community engagement, reaching beyond the “usual suspects.” We have to engage more broadly in the community. Ask people what they need. Together, we can build, organize and mobilize the public will to end poverty.

In rural areas, faith communities are a powerful force. What more can they offer to a community-wide vision? Membership associations and organizations may offer keys to discovering and addressing

³ <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/broadbandgrants/>

⁴ <http://www.wiserearth.org/group/mnfriends>

systemic issues. Foundations are uniquely positioned to convene organizational dialogues. They often know quite a lot about the internal workings of other organizations.

Work and Family

Organizations and communities should find ways to use the skills of highly-educated, idle workers.

Retain and retrain—sustain existing businesses and quickly retrain unemployed workers for viable jobs. Non-employer businesses (in which sole owner is the company) may be opportunities for placement out of adult basic education programs.

Industry

A new partnership is being developed by the Center for Rural Policy and Development on regional competitiveness focused on jobs and businesses.

Some are exploring a wage subsidy program implemented in the mid 1980s. Government paid 80% of the wage—most impactful for small employers. This tool could be used to help create jobs in communities that lack private wealth.

Online learning resources—e.g. from colleges and universities—are used by residents and nonresidents alike. If marketed internationally, these programs could bring significant revenue to regional areas.

Government

In rural communities, families may be resistant to take advantage of government programs. Many of these programs result in money funneled into the local economy. De-stigmatizing the receipt of assistance will bring needed dollars into struggling communities.

Leaders from all sectors can broker relationships between organizations or units of government. This effort requires significant internal trust-building and grass roots efforts and is often driven by external funding and/or programming pressures.

Local governments need to reengage citizens to build awareness of problems and solutions. Citizens need to seek out new resources to help small governments with their work—a grassroots public-private partnership.

Poverty

We need to address immediate needs, but we can't do so exclusively. Resource development is key. For example, nutrition education can be a great opportunity for local production that doesn't threaten neighboring communities/states but that utilizes the experience of the local community.

The fundamental lack of assets is the problem. It's great to communicate the presence of programs, but programs run out of money eventually.

In order to successfully address poverty, communities must get local elites on board.

Redouble efforts to frame poverty as a *community* issue. Nonprofits have a responsibility to “manage the message.” Telling a human, individual story may earn media attention, but risks framing the solution as an individual one. Tread carefully.

Be inclusive at the decision-making table. Eliminate barriers to participation among all constituencies—transportation subsidies, paid childcare, wage replacement, if applicable.

Question four: What are your takeaway ideas, insights, worries, or strategies?

What is poverty? Lack of money, relationships, and/or meaning.

However difficult this period may be, there is a phenomenal genius in our system that enables and assists us in addressing our problems.

In small, rural communities we can clearly see direct lines between investment and outcomes. We can return to proven strategies.

We can connect cities with professional grantwriting resources—there is federal money available for communities that can make a compelling case.

We must continually assess programs in the context of a dynamic external environment.

What is the next step for this group? “Communication is great. Collaboration is better.”

We assume that community-based efforts are driven by a comprehensive vision and are inclusive of actions of governments, agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions, associations, and individuals. We hope that this Rural Poverty Summit exposed new opportunities for collaboration in pursuit of a common goal.

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