



Big Lessons from Small Rural Communities

Working to Reduce Poverty Long Term

By Karl Stauber, President and CEO, Northwest Area Foundation

Diesel truck mechanic Chris Wolfe had always wanted to start his own business. A failed repair shop located on a primary trucking route in Central Oregon seemed a perfect opportunity, but the risk was high and financing was scarce. Wolfe, however, was able to take advantage of a three-year pilot program between the Central Oregon Partnership—a 10-year community partner with the Northwest Area Foundation—and Seattle-based Cascadia Revolving Loan Fund¹, which provides financing and related assistance to underserved entrepreneurs.

In addition to offering financing, Cascadia helped Wolfe analyze the business opportunity, negotiate a non-compete clause with the previous owner, and set up a book-keeping system. The program also brought a loan officer to the Central Oregon area, thereby increasing the region's capacity to support entrepreneurship as a key approach to rural economic development.

Often considered a “fly-over” zone by conventional media and lending institutions, the rural Upper Midwest and Pacific Northwest are quietly, and sometimes not-so-quietly, demonstrating atypical attitudes and actions when it comes to addressing persistent poverty. Hundreds of rural communities, large and small, are aggressively regrinding the lens through which they view poverty and hope. They are using altered perspectives to identify and access local assets in new ways. They are also harnessing economic and community development resources differently to achieve long-term change: increased opportunities for prosperity for everyone, and particularly those in the lowest economic quintile.

These are some of the shifts noted by the Northwest Area Foundation (the Foundation), which has been working intensively with many partner communities within this region. After nearly half a century of conventional grant-making across a range of issues, in 1998, the Foundation decided to apply its assets to a single purpose - to help communities reduce poverty. The Foundation also determined that it would adopt an approach that engages entire communities.² It provides technical assistance and financial resources so that communities can build their capacity to design, lead and implement sustainable strategies.

To this end, the Foundation operates three programs and uses two investment strategies which are supported with a

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total of \$200 million over 10 years (1999-2009). Through its programs and community partners, the Foundation operates outside of the traditional philanthropic frame with the goal of achieving systemic and structural change within the Foundation's eight-state region. (See Box 6.1) This is a commitment to work that is neither fast nor easy, but one that will leverage positive and sustainable change.

Over the last several years, well over 200 rural communities have joined in this innovative approach. They have shown that they are not waiting to be saved; that they are willing to see and name the poverty in their towns; and, that they recognize that an infusion of money isn't a complete answer. They are investing their collective and personal time, ideas, reputations, and social and political capital to these efforts.

They are taking the lead: whether small communities of several hundred people, American Indian nations, or communities that may spread across one or more counties and are linked by history or common economic centers.

Seeing Leadership as Infrastructure

With a population hovering around 1,100, Eureka, South Dakota, faces challenges common throughout rural America: an aging population, a shortage of living-wage jobs, and higher than average poverty rates. Although the city had initiated a number of anti-poverty activities, none had created traction for long-term change. When community members learned about the Foundation's Horizons program—a community leadership program oriented toward reducing poverty—they saw it as an opportunity for their future.

But before stepping forward to become one of 44 small rural communities in the Horizons pilot initiative (2003-2005), Eureka decided to unload some “old baggage.” As reported in *USA Today*³, community members held a mock funeral and, with the help of the local fire department, incinerated a casket filled with lists of the negative feelings and attitudes that plagued them in the past.

The Horizons program, created for small rural communities of 5,000 and fewer, and with histories of economic decline and demographic change, provided Eureka and the other pilot communities with 18 months of leadership development training, coaching, and connections. Eight organizations—university extension services and tribal colleges—all of whom already work within these communities,

delivered this technical assistance. Horizons is based on the theory that a small community will be able to address poverty and build prosperity more successfully if it has a strong leadership system. The communities involved in the Horizons pilot ranged from 100 to 4,800 in population, and with poverty rates from 10 percent to 96 percent. One-third were within or near American Indian reservations.⁴

Armed with new perspectives and skills, Eureka’s growing circle of leaders created a common vision. They agreed upon the need for moderate-income housing. They also joined with nearby Ellendale and Ashley, North Dakota to secure a new cell-phone tower, a service that directly benefits local businesses. The Eureka Community Development Corporation raised over \$100,000 in grants to initiate a needed retail

NWAF’s Programs and Investment Strategies

Box 6.1

The Northwest Area Foundation’s mission is to help communities reduce poverty. It provides technical and financial assistance to entire communities so that they can build the skills, knowledge and connections needed to design, lead and implement systemic and structural change for long-term poverty reduction.

The Foundation’s three programs and two investment strategies operate in its eight-state region: Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. In the last eight years, the foundation invested about \$160 million in its initiatives and expects to invest another approximately \$40 million within the next three years.

- Ventures Program – 10-year partnerships with 10 communities, each anchored by a community-developed strategic plan to address the root causes of poverty in that community. Eight partnerships are with rural communities, including three American Indian Nations, and two are with urban centers. Grants range from approximately \$5 million to \$11 million per partnership over the 10-year relationship. One partnership, the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, was launched with a \$20 million grant.
- Horizons Program – an 18-month community leadership program whose purpose is poverty reduction. It focuses on small rural communities with populations of 5,000 and fewer and with histories of economic decline and demographic change. Forty-four communities participated in its pilot effort (2003-2005). The program began its second phase in late 2006 with the participation of 163 communities from across seven states. Eight local institutions – colleges and university extension services – are the grantees of this program and deliver Horizons training, coaching, and information in the communities. The program is delivered in four phases. Communities must meet threshold requirements to move from one phase to the next and those that complete all four phases will be eligible for grants up to \$10,000 to help implement their plans.
- Connections Program – Launched in 2004, Connections identifies and promotes practical approaches and tools any community could use in its own poverty reduction efforts. Information is disseminated through a range of products, including templates that provide guidance on how to write ordinances, DVDs that describe best practices, web-based calculators, curricula and reports, as well as through meetings sponsored for community leaders.
- Program-related investments – To date, the Foundation has made 17 PRI’s (valued at \$11.7 million) to Community Development Financial Institutions which, in turn, have made these funds available to start-up or early-stage businesses considered too high-risk by conventional lenders.
- Mission-related investments – In 2004, the Foundation allocated \$10 million (2 percent of assets) to Invest Northwest, a new private equity fund created to meet the capital needs of established private, middle-market, growth- and later-stage for-profit companies in the region. Investments in these businesses help support local economies by retaining or creating jobs and paying living wages and benefits. To date, \$3.9 million is actively invested.

For information about the Foundation, please visit www.nwaf.org.



Diesel truck mechanic Chris Wolfe in his repair shop financed through Central Oregon Partnership.

mall, anchored by a new hardware store, as well as plans for new housing.

“The pilot phase yielded several critical lessons,” said Jean Burkhardt, program lead. “We’ve learned that leadership development is critical infrastructure—and that with technical assistance and encouragement, these communities will confront poverty and take strategic action,” said Burkhardt.

In response to community demand, the Foundation enlisted the help of the Study Circles Resource Center⁵ to develop and field-test a guide to help communities talk about poverty and develop ways to address it. Called “Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all,”⁶ this guide is being used by the more than 160 small rural communities in seven states now participating in the second phase of the Horizons program (2006-2008).

All Horizons communities also participate in LeadershipPlenty®, which entails 30-40 hours of leadership training developed by The Pew Partnership for Civic Change.⁷

“We’ve found that communities need help to stay focused on poverty,” said Burkhardt. “Without specific goals, communities can drift back to conventional models of economic development, approaches that tend not to directly benefit those in persistent poverty,” she said.

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New relationships and leadership structures have emerged in three-quarters of Horizons’ pilot communities. In one American Indian nation, four out of six open seats on the tribal council were filled by Horizons participants. In another city, the mayoral race was fought between two program participants. When the race ended in a tie, the candidates settled the election with a coin toss on Main Street.

Local leadership can also help to ensure that policies are responsive to local needs. In Bridgeport, Washington, a town where 65 percent of the population is Hispanic, the city council took the simple – but significant – step to translate its minutes into Spanish, for the first time providing civic information to more than half of the town. The program also provides participants opportunities to share best



NWAF's Raices Initiative brings community members together to build leadership and capacity for change.

practices. Bridgeport's experiences are informing the 163 communities currently enrolled in the Horizons program, including three in Washington with Hispanic populations of at least 70 percent.

"Modest Foundation investment is yielding unexpected large returns," said Burkhardt. "Although these communities progressed unevenly, some in fits and starts, all made progress from where they began."

As significantly, all the program delivery organizations are adopting poverty reduction as a key work area. Because these organizations work across many communities, the skills they developed with Horizons are now being used broadly. They have collaborated across state boundaries, and in some cases helped change state policies.

Partnering for Change

In addition to providing leadership development support, the Foundation has established 10-year partnerships with 10 communities as part of its Ventures program. Each of these long-term commitments began after a roughly 2-year phase during which community members came together to develop a single strategic plan to address the root causes of poverty within their community.

Regardless of location or scale – whether composed of 13 neighborhoods in North Minneapolis, a county in South

Dakota⁹, or 16 counties and an American Indian tribe in Eastern Idaho – none of the Ventures partnerships operate as a conventional charity. Rather than funding existing programs and nonprofits, each partnership applies its grant dollars to help create systemic change. Grants go to developing a better understanding of the systems, policies and practices that create barriers to poverty reduction, promoting an ongoing stream of collaborations among public and private entities to develop, fund and implement integrated solutions, attracting outside resources, and gathering and sharing lessons.

Although in different phases of implementation, these partnerships have experienced a range of common challenges, and are contributing to emerging patterns of achievement. Each illustrates the impact of place in understanding and addressing poverty in its many dimensions.

One of these communities, BuRSST for Prosperity, has already demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. Distinguished by a growing immigrant population, BuRSST includes five communities south of Seattle: Burien, Renton, SeaTac, Skyway and Tukwila. Established in 2005, BuRSST⁸ invested \$182,000 in a workforce demonstration involving Port Jobs and South Seattle Community College. In its first year, the demonstration resulted in 699 employment placements, a 33 percent increase over the previous workforce model.

In Oregon, the Central Oregon Partnership (COP)⁹ is working to tackle issues related to remoteness and isolation, loss of conventional agricultural markets, and global competition that affect many rural areas. In response, COP is engaging leaders in the secondary timber industry to address their labor shortages and the community's under-employment. In 2002, COP began working with hospital administrators, elected officials, public health agencies and low-income residents to create federally qualified health care clinics in their region. An initial COP investment of \$60,000 leveraged \$600,000 in investments to open the first clinic. Today, Ochoco Health System services 18,000 visitors annually at clinics in Prineville, Bend and Madras. In January 2007, a new \$3.6 million clinic replaced the Prineville facility, sparking revitalization in the district. An additional clinic will open in LaPine soon. School-based clinic expansions are planned. Ochoco Health System has created 50 jobs, half of them filled by low-income wage earners who are now making living wages. An estimated additional 25 jobs have been created by other health-related businesses.

A separate Foundation effort, the Rural Latino Capacity-Building Initiative (RLCBI), works to increase the capacities of rural Latinos to organize and take on poverty-reduction work. It focuses on recognizing, reinforcing and renewing a community's economic, social, and cultural strengths and assets. RLCBI will identify, share and advocate for models, tools and processes that work. One of these is Raices (roots in Spanish), a four-year partnership among the Foundation and the University of Iowa Institute for the Support of Latino Families and Communities, and the Main Street Project (a Minnesota-based nonprofit associated with the League of Rural Voters). Anchored in principles of community leadership and accountability, broad participation by people most affected by poverty, cultural competency and language accessibility, respect of the rural context, and building capacities on assets, Raices is being piloted in clusters of communities in Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota and Oregon.

Investments

When Neil Sheldon of Stevensville, Montana, wanted to expand his polyethylene pipe manufacturing business, Poly Warehouse, venture capital wasn't readily available. Instead Sheldon got an equity investment of \$1.5 million through InvestAmerica, a private equity management group that includes the Foundation's Invest Northwest venture fund. InvestAmerica learned about Sheldon from contacts at the Montana Fund, a local funding source supported by a Foundation program-related investment. The company now has international markets, annual sales of \$7 million, 20 employees at its manufacturing site, and 10 more in sales


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locations in Wyoming, Utah, and Washington. Sheldon expects sales to triple in the next five years.¹⁰

Sheldon's story illustrates the impact that investment funds can have on small businesses in rural areas, a strategy that the Foundation has been pursuing for over 15 years. In the late 1990s, the Foundation decided it would apply a greater part of its portfolio to support its mission through program-related investments. In 2004, the Foundation established a second investments strategy, mission-related investments, and allocated \$10 million (2 percent of assets) to Invest Northwest, a new private equity fund. To date, the Foundation has made 17 program-related investments with a total principle value of \$11.7 million. Of the \$10 million authorized for mission-related investments, \$3.9 million has been actively invested. In addition, the Foundation is working to encourage linkages between the communities involved in its programs and community foundations within their states.

"We encourage foundations to consider this approach because we're finding it provides a framework that aligns asset-management and grant-making practices while delivering both social and financial returns," said Millie Acamovic, the Foundation's vice president of finance and administration and CFO.

There are currently hundreds of communities partnered with the Foundation in efforts to identify and attack poverty at its roots. The Foundation aims to gather the lessons learned – about strategies that work, practical tools, and stumbles to avoid – and share them with the many hundreds of rural communities hungry for solutions. The Foundation is investing in capturing and analyzing this knowledge, and is making many lessons available now through conferences, meetings and a variety of publications.

The Foundation is also committed to sharing strategies and tools tested and evaluated by other foundations, nonprofits, agencies and communities. If you have a proven approach or instrument to share, please contact the Foundation at nwaf-solutionsdepot@nwaf.org. 

Addressing Community and Economic Development in Rural America: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Big Lessons from Small Rural Communities: Working to Reduce Poverty Long Term

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