

## DELIVERING OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY: STREAMLINED ACCESS TO FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP WILLIAMSON, WEST VIRGINIA

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### COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

- Located in Mingo County, West Virginia
- 2010 Population: 3,191
- The local economy is largely fueled by coal mining, transportation, health care and retail.
- Mingo County Obesity Rate: 40+%
- Life Expectancy: 67.7 years

### THE CHALLENGE

Williamson, West Virginia has been called the “red hot center” of the decline in the coal economy. Facing an unemployment rate of more than 13 percent, a poverty rate of 30 percent, an adult obesity rate of 37 percent and a below-average life expectancy of 67.7 years, poverty and chronic disease threatened to overtake the community.

In 2009, four exemplary young citizens were each struggling to address the needs they saw in Williamson. Dr. Dino Beckett’s primary care practice was flooded with people who could not afford medical care and Vicki Hatfield was struggling to provide support to numerous sick patients through her Diabetes Education Center. With one grocery store in all of Mingo County and 12 percent of the population without access to a car, Bill Richardson of the Agriculture Extension at West Virginia University (WVU) was concerned about access to healthy food. In addition, the entire community was overwhelmed with unemployed coal miners looking for training for new jobs.

In 2012, these citizens and a coalition they brought together banded together with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the Livable Communities in Appalachia program. They formed a group called Sustainable Williamson to help turn around the future of their community, recognizing that health, quality of life and economic development issues are inseparable.<sup>1</sup>

Together they experienced early successes: Dr. Beckett’s clinic and Hatfield’s center moved to a shared space downtown where they could easily complement each other’s effort to assist patients. They used an \$80,000 planning grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to create a free community health clinic called the Williamson Health and Wellness Center (WHWC). This Federally Qualified Health Center later received an additional \$650,000 to support clinic operations.

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<sup>1</sup> The action plan that resulted from that technical assistance (workshop was held in Nov 2012) is available here: <http://www.arc.gov/noindex/newsroom/newsbriefs/LivableCommunities2013ActionPlans/WilliamsonLivableCommActionPlan2013.pdf>

These two organizations became an anchor for downtown Main Street. With a new, potentially powerful anchor institution in town, community leaders knew they would need additional resources to scale and diversify their efforts for a broader impact on health in the region. Despite their efforts to assist the community, no one in the health center had the time to learn the complexities of federal assistance in order to identify and apply for federal awards.

## PARTNERS

- Williamson Health and Wellness Center, Inc. (WHWC)
- Mingo County Diabetes Coalition
- West Virginia University (WVU) Extension Service
- Coalfield Development Corporation
- Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
- U.S. Health and Human Services Administration (HHS): Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

## EXERCISE

Federal program managers in rural areas often see struggling communities with one or two dynamic leaders who have the potential to turn things around, but these leaders are often overwhelmed by the complexity of navigating the federal government. In Williamson, there was potential for a sizable impact if federal partners could find a way to build relationships and connect with local leadership. In your assigned small groups, please discuss:

- What is the first thing you would do to understand the community's needs?
- What are the current challenges and anticipated barriers? What approach can you take to overcome them?
- What federal agencies and resources should come into play?
- What would be important to support long-term sustainability of the project outcomes? What could be recommended as broader policy or program changes across the government?

## ACTUAL STEPS TAKEN

1. USDA Secretary Vilsack and the White House Rural Council knew that rural communities frequently struggle to navigate the federal government. Building on the success of the HUD/DOT/EPA Partnership for Sustainable Communities, they launched the Local Foods, Local Places (LFLP) initiative in June 2014. This federal partnership of six agencies is aimed at helping rural America use local food to build local economies and improve health outcomes. The six partner agencies include: USDA, EPA, CDC, DOT, ARC, and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). LFLP communities with motivated and committed potential stakeholders about the resources the federal government might be able to provide. A key aspect of the

initiative is its extremely low barrier to entry; the only application requirement is submission of a two-page letter of interest.

2. In the months that followed, Dr. Beckett from the Williamson Health and Wellness Center completed a two-page letter of interest, and in December 2014, he received an LFLP technical assistance project. The goal of the project was to develop a plan for establishing a Health Innovation Hub, a holistic strategy to build a culture of health from the bottom up, with a focus on supporting entrepreneurs that are seeking to build access to healthy food and to create economic opportunity in the community.
3. As part of the award, Williamson received technical expertise from national experts in local food systems and economic development. A May 2015 community workshop brought together a diverse group of community stakeholders to flesh out their vision. The workshop was followed by a high-level roundtable in September, where representatives of each of the six partner agencies and community leaders discussed how to build their vision and what federal resources might be most appropriate and accessible to the community. Williamson's leaders emerged with a clear vision and a concrete action plan to efficiently pursue federal resources and implement their revitalization plan. The federal leaders committed to streamlining their available resources to complement each other's tools and requirements and minimize the bureaucracy for Williamson.

## UNIQUE OUTCOMES<sup>2</sup>

- Access to healthy food and growing the local food economy: The first outcome of the Livable Communities in Appalachia and LFLP work was the establishment of the Williamson Farmers Market and Ramella Park Community Garden. The project includes a downtown farmers market, a mobile market that brings produce to Mingo County residents with travel limitations that cannot visit the downtown market, and a community garden with three high tunnels (greenhouses) to grow produce year-round and 42 raised beds that residents in a nearby public housing facility can use to grow their own food. It also includes a growing beginning farmer training program with a focus on returning veterans, an orchard on reclaimed, strip-mined land, and a wellness coach who promotes good nutrition and exercise in schools. In addition to boosting the area's economy—the farmers market members shared a \$75,000 profit in 2014, up from \$20,000 in their first year—it is also providing fresh and nutritious local produce. The West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition, which receives support from USDA, recently launched a mobile market to bring healthy, local foods to communities around Williamson. Mingo County Diabetes Coalition/Williamson Health and Wellness Center initiated a lunchtime walking program and the local Road Runners' club holds monthly 5K runs. Twitter and Facebook are used to publicize fitness activities, and participants enjoy posting "healthy selfies" of their fitness journey.
- Economic development and job training: WHWC recognized the value of a multi-county partnership with Coalfield Development Corporation and joined together with common goals based on prior successes. At the beginning

<sup>2</sup> Description of outcomes taken in part from "Bringing Health, Wellness, and Opportunity to Coal Country, by C. Donovan Beckett, 10/31/2014, available at: <http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2014/10/31/bringing-health-wellness-and-opportunity-to-coal-country/>

stages of the partnership, the CDC work crew from Wayne County came to Williamson for workforce training on sustainable construction techniques including solar installations to downtown buildings. Later, as the partnership grew, CDC opened an office in Williamson at the Health Innovation Hub and launched a sustainable construction crew of Mingo County residents. In 2015, CDC and WHWC partnered together on a project called Refresh Appalachia, a POWER supported project to develop agriculture on post mine sites and to revitalize downtown spaces offering mentorship and entrepreneurial resources to local communities.

- Small businesses are also starting to flourish: a local caterer opened a new downtown restaurant specializing in healthy food and a local workforce was trained to install the solar electric for the WHWC health center and solar thermal heating for the fire department.
- Expanding collaborative regional networks: Economic and health concerns experienced by Williamson residents are not confined to the city limits. The region, including parts of Kentucky and Ohio, are experiencing similar issues. Recognizing an opportunity to expand their impact, the WHWC has a history of working with regional partners to replicate Williamson’s success. WHWC launched the Central Appalachian Sustainable Economies (CASE) network. CASE served as an informal peer-to-peer network of regional innovators cultivating new ideas and resources in central Appalachia for the growth of healthy communities from 2010-2015.
- Federal agencies applying lessons learned: USDA, ARC and other agencies are now applying this same format to a new “Access Broadband” initiative, and others under the banner of “Rural Impact”—looking for ways to bring rural communities to the table to address a more diverse array of policy challenges.

### UNIFYING THEMES

- Lower the barrier to entry: Communities that are struggling with diverse challenges need an access point to federal assistance that does not add to their obstacles. Provide a “front door” that is easy to navigate helps start the conversation.
- Partnerships among agencies smooth engagements with communities: Because six agencies had already organized themselves to come together in support of the community, it was easy for them to identify whose tools and authorities were most appropriate and how they could collectively complement the work of local leaders.
- Look out for young leaders: One of the best stories of Williamson is the cohort of young leaders with a different vision for the community. Because of their energy, they have been able to attract and retain other young vibrant leaders to Williamson.
- Boots on the ground: The Diabetes Coalition has shown the most dramatic, measurable change in the health status of residents due to its weekly health worker home visitation program. In one instance, a health worker discovered that a well-meaning patient was attempting to give herself insulin without removing the cap of her insulin pen, a problem resolved with training.
- Connection and collaboration: Every Williamson Health and Wellness Center activity is connected to the other. Projects are cross-promoted, cross-supported and linked. Once residents participate in one program, they learn about other available resources through printed materials, social media and word of mouth.

### FEATURED HIGH-VALUE RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITIES

- Local Foods, Local Places (<https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/local-foods-local-places>)
- Federally Qualified Health Centers  
(<http://www.hrsa.gov/healthit/toolbox/RuralHealthITtoolbox/Introduction/qualified.html>)

### BLOGS/PICS/LINKS TO NEWSCLIPS/WORKING PAPERS

- Streamlined announcement/ application requirements for LFLP:  
<http://1.usa.gov/1GKKSbR>
- Blog announcing selection of first 26 communities for LFLP: <http://1.usa.gov/1IANeaz>
- Healthy Affairs Blog by Dino Beckett: <http://bit.ly/1r27NPu>

“Maybe, when people read about what we’ve done as a small community over a short period of time, without, really, a whole lot of money,” Dr. Dino Beckett said to a WV paper last year, “it will encourage them to say, ‘If Williamson can get going, why can’t we?’ ”