

Core Intermediaries and Collaborations: Increasing Scale, Adaptability and Access to Resources in Rural Communities

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The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation (Benedum) was founded in 1944 with a specific directive to serve the state of West Virginia and four counties in southwestern Pennsylvania. Benedum is a place-based funder with an overwhelmingly rural geography in central Appalachia. The ability to bring catalytic dollars into communities that are underserved in almost every regard is an exciting proposition that the Benedum Foundation has been committed to for more than 75 years.

Appalachia is a region that mystifies America, and West Virginia sits in the heart of it. Adored for its rugged beauty and unabashed sense of place, Appalachia is nevertheless stigmatized for its generational poverty and other vexing conditions. In states like West Virginia, creating a social and economic transition that advances opportunity for rural people takes many forms of capital. As one of the leading private family foundations granting dollars in West Virginia, Benedum has senior program staff embedded in the state working closely with grantees and institutional partners to catalyze change.

The Importance of Density and Scale

Building a brighter future in rural communities is partially about overcoming barriers. As a basic barrier, rural communities lack a density of resources. Philanthropic, institutional, governmental, private and non-profit resources tend to cluster in places with higher population density to offer the greatest economy of scale, but this density preference isolates rural communities from resources. As a result, rural communities are forced to be self-reliant and focused on efficiency above all else. This chronic scarcity of resources reinforces the view by those outside the community that rural organizations and communities are not competitive, lack capacity or are unable to serve enough people or leverage enough matching dollars to win large state and federal grants. This further deprives them of resources, perpetuating the negative cycle.

In addition to the negative effect that density has on resource availability, the remoteness and lack of density in rural communities also make it

challenging to scale successful programs across regions. Starting and maintaining programs in a state like West Virginia—which has only 77 people per square mile, compared to New York City, which has more than 27,000 people per square mile—create obvious challenges. Gaps inevitably exist in some of the most critical and necessary infrastructure, including rural education, health care and community support systems, thus perpetuating the challenges around capacity and scaling successful programs. As such, new organizations sometimes need to be formed to support community efforts or to act as the connective tissue to the many underfunded organizations working toward similar ends.

Enter philanthropy. Foundations are the unique players that bring investment dollars to rural communities to help enable innovation and support tailored approaches. The Benedum Foundation has evolved, along with its many grantees, to design strategies to offset the relative scarcity of resources in rural communities, and to support the critical gaps that undermine the issue of building scale. The primary approach at Benedum has been to convene thoughtful players on an issue, fund intermediaries that fill gaps and scale services, fund system-building collaboratives in the region, and attract other leveraged dollars (particularly federal) into rural communities.

Grantees of the Benedum Foundation can be classified into three types: (1) core intermediaries that offer system-building programs, (2) nascent initiatives that are growing and will likely scale up over time, and (3) catalytic new concepts that are compelling and innovative, and could either take off like a rocket or fail within a year or two. These three types of Benedum grantees—core, nascent and catalytic—create a framework for advancing systems-building work in rural communities. This chapter is dedicated to discussing the first type, core intermediaries, but it is important to note that sometimes new concepts succeed and grow into core intermediaries. Other times, core intermediaries spin off new ideas that get funded as nascent initiatives. Grantees come to Benedum with programs ranging in scope. Here are examples of how this approach can create sustainable outcomes and build a brighter future in rural communities.

The Role of Core Intermediaries in Rural Health, Education and Community Development

Rural communities need high-capacity, highly adaptive organizations to fill leadership gaps, collect data, serve as advocates and coordinate statewide efforts in dynamic, supportive ways. It is tempting for national leaders to simply classify the work of these core intermediaries as “capacity building”—a poorly defined term that rarely comes with ideas or reliable funding. At Benedum, core intermediaries are squarely about staying adaptable, creating opportunities to scale programs and attracting more resources. They are desirable and essential to the rural strategy.

For example, consider rural health care and the difficulties in delivering high-quality care to rural residents, many of whom live in poverty. The West Virginia Primary Care Association (WVPCA) is an important core intermediary in a state that needs scale and access. WVPCA is a nonprofit association that represents safety-net health care providers throughout the state of West Virginia. It is the largest organized primary care network in the state, and its mission is to ensure accessible, high-quality and cost-effective health services for all West Virginians, regardless of economic or social status. Rural residents are more likely to access care at a community health center (CHC), also commonly referred to as a federally qualified health center. One in four West Virginians gets health care services at a CHC in more than 360 locations across the state. Core intermediaries like the WVPCA develop working partnerships to better link services and build capacity among nonprofit organizations. WVPCA’s peer collaborations, for example, include organizations dedicated to oral health, elder living, child care and threat preparedness, which may appear unconnected but share affinities in working with populations that need cost-effective health care services. As a membership-based organization, WVPCA is sustainable and supported by organizations that gain value from its services. It gets a boost from philanthropy to help start and run new programs, react to opportunities or expand critical statewide work. Philanthropy can be a long-term partner to support and maximize the potential of organizations like the WVPCA, fill gaps and create scale. During the COVID-19 pandemic, because WVPCA is a stable intermediary, it has been resilient and responsive to supporting health centers across the state in testing, telehealth and vaccination.

Similarly, consider rural education systems. Rural educators are stretched for resources, schools are spread out in low-population counties, and families—who are just trying to meet basic needs like food and shelter—lack access to broadband and other tools of 21st-century learning. While philanthropy cannot fill all the resource gaps in rural education, it can leverage dollars around specific initiatives, and it can help fund innovation in schools faced with ever-tightening budgets. A core intermediary in education is the West Virginia Public Education Collaborative (WVPEC). WVPEC is a consortium of education partners across two states that includes private and public universities, rural nonprofit organizations and the Benedum Foundation. Public education is guided by state and federal requirements around teaching and testing, but there is still a healthy appetite for schools to incorporate other innovative and evidence-based programs that foundations can fund. The WVPEC fills some of the gaps left by bureaucracy by hosting legislative programs that inform elected officials on education-related topics and research, leading statewide initiatives and managing pilot projects in education. WVPEC is currently the lead grantee on a Benedum-funded project designed around early literacy in West Virginia. A collaborative and nimble partner, such as WVPEC, opens opportunities to work on difficult statewide issues, while engaging community projects and grass-roots efforts.

Scaling ideas and resources to improve education can also work across the urban-rural divide. Remake Learning offers grants to support learning projects and practices throughout southwestern Pennsylvania and northern West Virginia. The Benedum Foundation has been a continuous supporter of the Remake Learning network, which formed in Pittsburgh and spread outward into rural communities. A robust network of educators, institutions and individual members, Remake Learning has grown to more than 500 institutions and 5,000 individual subscribers, and has been recognized internationally for innovation in the classroom and partnerships across sectors. Its Moonshot Grants were created to support big, bold ideas and include a special emphasis on rural outreach so rural educators can connect with more resource-rich communities.

Lastly, consider community development that works across vast regions with small rural communities. The West Virginia Community Development

Hub (The Hub) was started in 2009 with funding from Benedum to fill a critical gap in assisting communities. The Hub evolved as a core intermediary with the skills and mission to serve as an essential partner for rural communities that wanted to solve their own problems. The Hub filled a natural gap and became a trusted partner in developing local food systems, enhancing community sustainability, securing funding for community facilities and restoring historic downtowns. Over time, The Hub has developed policy expertise and the skills to apply for and successfully receive more federal dollars for West Virginia communities. Flexible funding from foundations helps organizations like The Hub support tailored, resilient, inclusive and collaborative approaches.

Can Foundations Play a Catalyzing Role in a Multistate Region?

In addition to funding great work individually, foundations can work (and are working) together to form effective strategies across multistate regions. A successful example is taking place in central Appalachia. The Appalachia Funders Network (AFN) began in 2010 as a meeting of various foundations serving central Appalachia. Central Appalachia, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), includes West Virginia, along with portions of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio and Kentucky. Historically, this central region of Appalachia has experienced higher poverty rates than elsewhere in Appalachia. At the first convening of the AFN, local and regional funders met to accelerate an equitable Appalachian transition by connecting funders for learning, analysis and collaboration. A philanthropic collective was born. The shared goal: a positive economic transition, with social and economic justice at the forefront, for the rural communities left behind by decades of job loss, disinvestment and out-migration. The AFN started in Benedum's "catalytic new concept" grant category because there were no guarantees of what might come of it. In the early years, Benedum, Ford Foundation, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation and the ARC supported nearly all the startup costs, but once the idea took hold, the AFN developed into a sustainable membership organization, boosted each year by added investments from key funders.

The AFN evolved into a collective impact model for the region managed by a core intermediary, Rural Support Partners, that provided the backbone

organizing for various work groups, projects and convenings. Members of AFN participated in a continuously building, multistate strategy that understood that one of the biggest gaps that needed to be filled was attracting outside investment. The resource scarcity bias could be overcome by having a collective voice for central Appalachia. Over time, the case for more federal dollars dedicated to the region led to the 2015 birth of the Appalachian Regional Commission's Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) program. Congress appropriates \$50 million per year to coal-impacted communities through the POWER program. Between 2015 and 2020, ARC invested more than \$238 million in 293 projects through POWER. In addition, AFN work groups have spun off several new entrepreneurial concepts that are extraordinary in their own right, including the Just Transition Fund and Invest Appalachia. Lastly, the AFN, through outreach and customized visits to the region, is showing national foundations how to expand their grant-making into Appalachia and coinvest with local funders. Examples of foundations that have expanded into the region include the West Coast-based Marguerite Casey Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

What Are the Outcomes of Investing in Rural Intermediaries?

The organizations mentioned here have been decade-long grantees of the Benedum Foundation. They are not isolated examples. While core intermediaries receive millions of dollars in Benedum grants over time, they are most grateful for the close partnerships they develop with Benedum's senior program directors, who help advance larger policy and systems-building outcomes and share a network of contacts. Their partnership with Benedum is a future-focused endeavor. Investing in core intermediaries is one of the fundamental ways Benedum targets its grant-making to advance better outcomes for people and to ensure resiliency. It cannot be a flash-in-the-pan approach; it needs to be a long-term strategy to reach the desired community change.

What are the outcomes of this strategy? As core intermediaries in rural communities advance their missions, they naturally take on larger challenges. High-performing core intermediaries sprint into action when existing systems fail. One in particular, West Virginia Voluntary Organizations

Active in Disaster (WV VOAD), emerged as one of the most vital nonprofit intermediaries to mobilize in West Virginia during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. WV VOAD, normally dedicated to volunteer work recovering from natural disasters like floods, shifted its efforts to mobilize teams that distributed protective gear and cleaning supplies, distributed food to pantries, set up COVID-19 testing and eventually assisted with vaccinations. WV VOAD was critical to both the health care response and the human services response in West Virginia, working alongside the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the National Guard and state agencies that needed more manpower.

Summary

The Benedum Foundation refers to high-performing intermediaries as core intermediaries and funds them as one of three categories of grant-making, because they can fill gaps and advance access to better services in health, education and community development.

Core intermediaries help scale services, while also attracting more resources. In many ways, what brings about change in rural communities is overcoming the scarcity of resources. With core intermediaries, Benedum's grant dollars are highly leveraged, with grant dollars generally matched 10:1. When the Benedum Foundation grants \$10 million to worthy projects, \$100 million in overall project budgets is often present, catalyzing greater outcomes. This is not a requirement of Benedum's grant-making; it is a natural outcome. The core intermediaries in the Benedum Foundation's portfolio have accessed millions of additional grant dollars from federal agencies, including the U.S. departments of Agriculture, Labor and Energy; U.S. Economic Development Administration; U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration; and the Appalachian Regional Commission. Core intermediaries win awards for innovation. They spin off enterprises. They also attract philanthropic dollars from national foundations that are not normally active in West Virginia. Philanthropic dollars that attract other philanthropic or government dollars are most likely to lead to long-term sustainability for the grantees and their efforts.

Foundations can boost exciting work in some of America's most-difficult-to-serve communities by supporting efforts that lift systems and create scale.

Sometimes advancing difficult work means taking a risk on a new concept and identifying gaps. Philanthropic dollars can be delivered faster and with more flexibility than other sources, which allows nonprofit intermediaries to drive tailored, resilient, inclusive and collaborative approaches. This is how we build a brighter future in rural America.