

An Evaluation of Rural Support Partners: Understanding the Value of Its Work in Central Appalachia from the Perspectives of Its Partners

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Rural Support Partners
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Executive Summary

Rural Support Partners (RSP) is a social enterprise that works across Central Appalachia to strengthen organizations, develop collective impact networks, and help move sustainable economic development efforts to scale. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, RSP provides a variety of services to clients in the areas of management, strategy, and evaluation. RSP's clients, referred to as partners, include grassroots groups, nonprofit organizations, federal and regional public agencies, private foundations, and collaborative networks and coalitions.

In the fall of 2015, as RSP moves into its 7th year of operation, an internal evaluation was conducted to help staff assess the value of the organization's work across the region from the perspective of its partners. Its findings are intended to be used by RSP to guide its strategic direction, inform continual growth and improvement of its services, and reposition itself to better achieve its mission.

Methodology

Individual phone interviews were used in order to gather in-depth information from partners about their perceptions and experiences regarding RSP. Fourteen representatives from partner agencies were selected to be interviewed.

Five questions guided this evaluation:

1. How do RSP's partners describe the work of RSP?
2. Which of RSP's current services should be maintained, strengthened, or fundamentally changed?
3. What is the value of RSP's work in the region?
4. What are RSP's core strengths, skills, and abilities?
5. What are the future opportunities for RSP to grow or expand its services?

Findings

1. How do RSP's partners describe the work of RSP?

Interviewees see the work of RSP as advancing social and community issues across rural Central Appalachia. Interviewees referred to the type of work that RSP does as community and economic development. The services that RSP provides were described as facilitation, strategy development, organizational capacity building, leadership development, and network coordination.

2. Which of RSP's current services should be maintained, strengthened, or fundamentally changed?

Interviewees expressed that RSP should continue providing all of its existing services, most notably, network coordination, facilitation, and strategy development. In addition to continuing to provide all of its existing services, interviewees encouraged RSP to maintain its focus on rural communities. There were no services identified that need to be strengthened or fundamentally changed.

3. What is the value of RSP's work in the region?

Over the last 7 years, RSP has played a critical role in Central Appalachia by delivering a high quality set of services that the region desperately needs. RSP has contributed to the success of existing collaborative networks, strengthened organizations, increased the level of cross-sector collaboration, and created a movement around the economic transition.

4. What are RSP's core strengths, skills, and abilities?

RSP's core strength is building and strengthening collaboration across the region. Other skills and abilities include strategy developing, facilitation, and leading participatory work.

5. What are the future opportunities for RSP to grow or expand its services?

There is an opportunity for RSP to grow or expand its facilitation, organizational capacity building, and partnership development. There is an additional opportunity for RSP to offer trainings and workshops, partner with content experts, conduct and disseminate research on best practices and lessons learned related to rural communities and economic development, and engage in more sharing of success stories across the region.

Recommendations

This evaluation demonstrates that RSP plays a critical role in Central Appalachia by delivering a set of services that the region desperately needs. The following recommendations are based on the evaluation findings:

- ❖ **Continue current work focused on providing services to rural communities.** Clients recommend that RSP maintain a focus on supporting rural communities and continue all of its existing services. This recommendation stems from a continued need for these services in the region and from the skills that RSP brings in these areas.

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- ❖ **Consider expanding facilitation support.** Clients believe there is an opportunity for RSP to provide additional support in facilitation for leaders, organizations, and networks in Central Appalachia.
- ❖ **Consider providing additional organizational capacity building support.** There is a significant need for organizational capacity building support in the region and RSP staff bring a unique set of skills in assisting organizations with building their capacity.
- ❖ **Be intentional about continuing to build and deepen strategic partnerships across sectors.** Addressing the social and economic issues that rural communities face requires the work of public, private, and nonprofit sectors.
- ❖ **Consider hosting trainings and workshops to regional leaders in an effort to help strengthen organizational capacity.** Clients suggest that potential topics for trainings and workshops include facilitation, strategic planning, and evaluation.
- ❖ **Consider partnering with content experts.** Partnering with content experts is an opportunity for RSP to have an expanded set of tools to support groups with community and economic development.
- ❖ **Consider conducting and disseminating research on best practices, lessons learned, and success stories related to rural communities and economic development.** Clients are interested in learning about best practices in the field of rural development and in hearing the lessons that RSP has learned through being engaged in this work.

Significant social, economic, and environmental challenges to building more resilient communities continue to exist. This coupled with a growing vision and commitment throughout the region to create a more just and sustainable future, means there is ample opportunity for RSP to grow and strengthen its work. By using these evaluation findings to guide its strategic direction, RSP can reposition itself to better achieve its mission and create a greater impact in rural communities across Central Appalachia.

Background

Rural Support Partners (RSP) is a social enterprise that works across Central Appalachia to strengthen organizations, develop collective impact networks, and help move sustainable economic development efforts to scale. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, RSP provides a variety of services to clients in the areas of management, strategy, and evaluation. RSP's clients, referred to as partners, include grassroots groups, nonprofit organizations, federal and regional public agencies, private foundations, and collaborative networks and coalitions.

In the fall of 2015, as RSP moves into its 7th year of operation, an internal evaluation was conducted to help staff assess the value of the organization's work across the region from the perspective of its partners. Its findings are intended to be used by RSP to guide its strategic direction, inform continual growth and improvement of its services, and reposition itself to better achieve its mission.

To achieve these outcomes, the evaluation used an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach¹. Five questions guided this evaluation:

1. How do RSP's partners describe the work of RSP?
2. Which of RSP's current services should be maintained, strengthened, or fundamentally changed?
3. What is the value and/or impact of RSP's work in the region?
4. What are RSP's core strengths, skills, and abilities?
5. What are the future opportunities for RSP to grow or expand its services?

The purpose of this report is to summarize the findings of the evaluation and to guide discussion amongst staff for using the findings to help reposition RSP to better achieve its mission. Following this report is an Appendix that includes the interview protocol, list of interviewees, interview data, and a list of considerations for staff in pursuing the recommendations included in this report.

Methodology

Individual phone interviews were used in order to gather in-depth information from key stakeholders about their perceptions and experiences regarding RSP. Fourteen representatives from agencies that partner with RSP participated in 35-60 minute interviews during November and December 2015.

Interviewees were selected purposefully in order to meet three criteria: the client works in Central Appalachia, has demonstrated knowledge of the assets and needs of the region, and has

¹ Johnson, G. & Leavitt, W. (2001). Building on success: Transforming organizations through an appreciative inquiry. *Public Personnel Management*. 30(1), 129-136.

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had a long-term engagement with RSP (minimum 3 years). Interviewees included representation from federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, grant-making entities, and regional networks/coalitions. Interview protocols are included in the Appendix.

Prior to interviews, interviewees were informed about the purpose of the project, their voluntary consent to participate, and the confidentiality of the responses shared. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Western Carolina University. Interviews were audio-recorded and selectively transcribed and notes were taken during the interview to accurately record interviewees' responses. To ensure data quality, member checking was used during interviews.

Data analysis included developing interview summaries, coding the data according to theme, and synthesizing overarching themes for each evaluation question.

Limitations

Study limitations include potential exclusion of representatives from partner agencies that have historically had less frequent and less extensive involvement with RSP. This could have biased the results to be more positive in content and less representative of the full range of stakeholder perspectives on the work of RSP. Additionally, interviews were conducted by an internal evaluator who had prior professional contact and rapport with interviewees. This could have influenced the openness and forthrightness of interviewees' responses. To address these limitations, interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and encouraged to provide critical comments and suggestions in order to help improve the work of RSP.

Findings

Findings presented below are overarching themes organized by evaluation question supported by select quotations from interviewees.

1. How do RSP's partners describe the work of RSP?

Interviewees see the work of RSP as advancing social and community issues across rural Central Appalachia. Interviewees referred to the type of work that RSP does as community and economic development.

The services that RSP provides were described as facilitation, strategy development, organizational capacity building, leadership development, and network coordination. Over half of interviewees mentioned facilitation and/or strategic thinking and strategy development. According to one interviewee, RSP **"helps organizations go through the process of thinking through difficult work** and helping them find answers to some difficult questions."

RSP works to build the capacity of organizations. One interviewee noted that RSP **"allows [organizations] to really actively own and participate in economic transition as a region. I see**

them as **building the capacity of the people** that are actually going to do the work of transition.” In the words of another, RSP “**provides backbone support** to emerging or forming organizations in rural communities and **provides the capacity they need to become sustainable.**”

Other services that RSP offers include leadership development and network coordination. Interviewees described network coordination as bringing people together within the region and supporting them in collectively improving people’s lives. When describing the services that RSP provides, one interviewee talked discussed “**network weaving, facilitation, and coordination** to on-the-ground partners doing economic transition in Central Appalachia”. Part of RSP’s mission is “to **support leaders and networks for creating strong entities for economic sustainability** in the Appalachian region. They create strong, sustainable communities that are made up of **leaders.**”

In addition to being asked to describe RSP’s work, interviewees were asked to talk about what makes RSP unique. Interviewees noted that RSP’s rural focus, its commitment to working across sectors and with a range of partners, the staff’s skills, and staff’s willingness to provide support at all levels make RSP unique. According to one, “RSP can support individuals, leaders, groups, organizations, and networks – **they can work at all of those levels.**”

2. Which of RSP’s current services should be maintained, strengthened, or fundamentally changed?

Interviewees expressed that RSP should continue providing all of its existing services, most notably, **network coordination, facilitation, and strategy development.** Regarding the need for continued network coordination, one interviewee shared their vision that RSP would “create enough capacity to actually **continue to be the backbone for a fully-formed and functioning collective impact group.**” Others emphasized the importance of continuing to build strategic partnerships. According to one, “figuring out how you can form the right sets of partnerships to advance the strategic direction, I think, is a really critical piece of the next 5-10 years...**form strategic partnerships** that allow [RSP] to keep doing the core of the work.”

In addition to continuing to provide all of its existing services, interviewees encouraged RSP to maintain its focus on rural communities.

There were no services identified that need to be strengthened or fundamentally changed.

3. What is the value and/or impact of RSP’s work in the region?

Over the last 7 years, RSP has played a critical role in Central Appalachia by **delivering a high quality set of services that the region desperately needs.** One interviewee described RSP as “a **terribly important enterprise** in the region.” Another suggested that “a measure of its

value and impact is how embedded it is in the **region's community and economic development infrastructure.**"

RSP has contributed to the success of existing collaborative networks, strengthened organizations, increased the level of cross-sector collaboration, and created a movement around the economic transition. RSP's impact is most evident in the success of existing collaborative networks including the Appalachia Funders Network (AFN) and the Central Appalachian Network (CAN). Speaking to the success of the AFN, one interviewee expressed that "[they] **don't believe AFN could have gotten where we have gotten or done what [they] have been able to do** without the solid backbone support from RSP." Similarly, "for an organization that has been around for a very long time, [CAN] is **a stronger organization**...they have a stronger governing structure and a stronger voice. They were important in the region before but RSP's backbone support has been really critical."

As a result of RSP, interviewees expressed that there are stronger organizations in the region. RSP is "making **stronger, more resilient organizations** that can hold an alternative space." RSP has also increased cross-sector collaboration and has "helped **build relationships** between institutions that would not have otherwise happened." One interviewee asserted that "as a result of RSP's work, **a model of collective impact exists**. In the past 7 years, it was RSP that made that collective impact model work because RSP is the backbone support organization. This region now operates more like a region and it is through that collective impact model."

Lastly, RSP has created a movement around economic transition in the region by developing a framework for the broader transition movement, shifting and shaping the analysis of what economic development should look like in Appalachia, and empowering people to take ownership of their future. For example, "there's **lots of talk about [economic transition]** and that probably would have happened without RSP but RSP has moved it toward action."

Interviewees were asked to share examples of when RSP was at its best. Over half of the interviewees shared examples of RSP's facilitation. Other interviewees described their experiences with RSP's planning and coordination, strategic planning, and leadership development.

4. What are RSP's core strengths, skills, and abilities?

RSP's core strength is building and strengthening collaboration across the region. Other skills and abilities include strategy developing, facilitation, and leading participatory work. The most frequently cited strength was building and strengthening collaboration. RSP is "at the stage of bringing experience in **working with a wide variety of rural nonprofits, rural governments, and rural people**." In this way, RSP staff "are connectors; they are **good about connecting people**." A second strength identified was strategy development and

strategic thinking. One interviewee described the way in which staff “almost **methodically move through different iterations of a plan and keep people engaged** in the work.” A third strength that was identified was facilitation. When asked to describe staff’s strengths in facilitation, interviewees noted staff’s ability to adapt to the needs of the group and willingness to be flexible during the facilitation process. A fourth strength identified was leading participatory work. RSP is able to successfully engage communities, ensure that social change work is being shaped by community voices, and empower community members to find their own vision. One interviewee noted that “staff are skilled in making sure that the content, process, and way that they are working is being **guided by the people that they are working with.**”

Beyond the specific skills that staff bring, interviewees describes staff as excellent listeners, results-focused, and context-aware. RSP “*wants to get paid for results.*” Additionally, “they **understand and appreciate the context.** They don’t bring a particular strategy and cram it into a context.”

When asked to describe the values that RSP staff bring to their work, interviewees noted that RSP cares deeply about the issues that it works to address and brings a sincere commitment to its work. According to one interviewee, “there is a **high level of sincerity and personal commitment** that is brought to [the work].”

5. What are the future opportunities for RSP to grow or expand its services?

There is an opportunity for RSP to grow or expand its facilitation, organizational capacity building, and partnership development. The majority of interviewees indicated that there is an opportunity for RSP to grow or expand its facilitation. In the words of one interviewee, “facilitation is one of their really, really strong suits and **I wish they could do more of it.**” Another interviewee noted “they have been less available for facilitation recently...**the core need for facilitation in small organizations is still there.**”

Interviewees suggest that another area where RSP can grow or expand its services is organizational capacity-building, given the significant need for this service throughout Central Appalachia. According to one interviewee “I think the **capacity-building is the most strategic work that RSP could be doing** in Appalachia because I see that the need is really great.”

RSP is also encouraged to expand its partnership development, as cross-sector collaboration is becoming increasingly important. An interviewee suggested that “**working around the public, private, and nonprofit sectors** is where the future is at 5-10 years from now.”

There is an additional opportunity for RSP to offer trainings and workshops, partner with content experts, conduct and disseminate research on best practices and lessons learned related to rural communities and economic development, and engage in more sharing of success stories across the region. By offering trainings and/or workshops in these areas, RSP can “train the trainer” and further increase the capacity of leaders. Interviewees suggest that RSP “**host a facilitation workshop** and impart some of [their] knowledge and expertise in facilitation” and “**teach some of the skills** that they have to other groups.”

Interviewees would like to see RSP partner with content experts as a way to deepen their content knowledge. According to one interviewee, “given their deep knowledge of the region and the fact that they are weavers, I can see them having **better or stronger relationships with subject experts.**” In the words of another interviewee, “one model or variation of a model is to **have people on call that are more specialists in content areas.**”

RSP is encouraged to conduct and disseminate research on best practices and lessons learned related to community and economic development in rural communities. One interviewee shared that “at some point as you get further into this work and you have 4-5 years of experience, you’ve learned a lot about how this work happens. There’s probably a need to pause and figure out how to **capture it and share it.**”

Lastly, interviewees suggest that RSP share more success stories from the region because “they have **really good skills** in that. There aren’t good storytellers in the region that are reliable.”

Recommendations and Conclusion

This evaluation demonstrates that RSP plays a critical role in Central Appalachia by delivering a set of services that the region desperately needs. The following recommendations are based on the evaluation findings:

- ❖ **Continue current work focused on providing services to rural communities.** Clients recommend that RSP maintain a focus on supporting rural communities and continue all of its existing services. This recommendation stems from a continued need for these services in the region and from the skills that RSP brings in these areas.
- ❖ **Consider expanding facilitation support.** Clients believe there is an opportunity for RSP to provide additional support in facilitation for leaders, organizations, and networks in Central Appalachia.
- ❖ **Consider providing additional organizational capacity building support.** There is a significant need for organizational capacity building support in the region and RSP staff bring a unique set of skills in assisting organizations with building their capacity.

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- ❖ **Be intentional about continuing to build and deepen strategic partnerships across sectors.** Addressing the social and economic issues that rural communities face requires the hard work of public, private, and nonprofit sectors.
- ❖ **Consider hosting trainings and workshops to regional leaders in an effort to help strengthen organizational capacity.** Clients suggest that potential topics for trainings and workshops include facilitation, strategic planning, and evaluation.
- ❖ **Consider partnering with content experts.** This is an important strategy for deepening RSP's content knowledge and having the tools to support a range of groups working to support community and economic development.
- ❖ **Consider conducting and disseminating research on best practices, lessons learned, and success stories related to rural communities and economic development.** Clients are interested in learning about best practices in the field of rural development and in hearing the lessons that RSP has learned through being engaged in this work.

Significant social, economic, and environmental challenges to building more resilient communities continue to exist. This coupled with a growing vision and commitment throughout the region to create a more just and sustainable future, means there is ample opportunity for RSP to grow and strengthen its work. By using these evaluation findings to guide its strategic direction, RSP can reposition itself to better achieve its mission and create a greater impact in rural communities across Central Appalachia.