Learning Theme 8 – Finding the Right Intermediaries

The work of building entrepreneurial communities is long-term work – a familiar refrain across these learning themes. As a result, it is important that some rooted intermediary takes on the role of community capacity building partner. While the E Communities framework and the coaching tools and processes built over time are important, community leaders need a local or regional partner to guide, support, encourage them along the way.

The POWER grant included three different partners working at the regional and state levels. Each partner brought some unique skills and capacities to this work, and each has plans to continue the work in different ways.

Kentucky: The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky was created in 2006 as a non-profit regional community foundation working in southeastern KY. The foundation uses the strategic framework of rural development philanthropy to guide its community building, capacity building, and endowment building approach in communities. As part of that strategy, the foundation is host to eight community affiliate funds established by local people in 12 counties in the region. At the time of the E Communities POWER grant, the foundation agreed to contract with a community coach to guide the work since the foundation's staffing capacity was fully focused on the core work of the foundation. This coach was in the region and built additional capacity by partnering with staff of the Brushy Fork Institute – a leadership development initiative of Berea College. The lead E Communities coach was a solid figure across the entire grant process but leadership changes at Brushy Fork created challenges. The director at the start of the E Communities initiative left the Institute. The new leader brought capacity and passion for the E Communities work but was asked to re-focus the efforts of the Institute on its core leadership work – a focus with which entrepreneurial leadership was not believed to be well-aligned. As a result, the coaching capacity was reduced to the single lead community coach. Given more limited capacity, the E Communities work became sharply focused on the more promising communities, where there was energy and some momentum. In one of these communities, leadership from the community affiliate fund advisory board created an opportunity to engage those local leaders more effectively in E Communities efforts. While it is not clear that elements of the E Communities work have become embedded in the work of the foundation, the engagement of affiliate fund advisors as well as other community leaders is promising. For example, the E Communities coach networked with What's Next Kentucky, an emerging network of communities and resource providers in the region, and there is now interest in using elements of the E Communities framework in the work of that network.

Ohio: Rural Action was founded in 1991 as a membership network with a mission to encourage local, sustainable, and inclusive development. Over time, they have taken a sector approach, focusing on food and agriculture; forestry; zero waste and recycling; environmental education; watershed restoration; and energy. More recently, they have added a focus on social enterprise and local tourism. They serve 24 Appalachian counties as well as others outside the Appalachian region. Two elements of their core work – "helping small communities do big things" and "growing local businesses and jobs" – are well aligned with the E Communities approach. At the outset of the POWER grant, Rural Action made a commitment to hire a new staff member to serve as its lead community coach. This commitment was supplemented with AmeriCorps members who brought their own unique skills to the work. Rural Action staff were actively involved in discussions about sustainability for the E Communities work, looking for other partners and funding sources to continue the work

post-POWER grant. The result is a [Resilient Communities](#) team, including two community coaches, that is working on entrepreneur outreach and support networking in communities along with a focus on the outdoor recreation economy. In addition, Rural Action has formed a partnership with Cooperative Extension in Ohio to expand the E Communities work into three counties, working jointly with the extension specialists in those counties. Together they have identified grant resources to support this work and the goal is to embed elements of the E Communities approach into yet another rooted intermediary in the region, Extension. By weaving elements of the approach into Rural Action's ongoing work and building a more intentional partnership with Extension, Rural Action expects to continue building the capacity of communities to support entrepreneurs into the future.

West Virginia: The [WV Hub](#) is a statewide organization founded to help build the capacity needed for sustainable community development. Over time, the Hub designed a [Community Development Model](#) that moves from building a team to broad civic engagement, asset mapping and visioning to the creation, implementation, and evaluation of a plan. Using this model, the Hub works with community leadership teams in over 50 communities across the state. Specific community-building initiatives at the time of the E Communities work included their Blueprint Communities and HubCAP Communities. Hub staff took on the role of community coaches for the E Communities initiative and the E Communities work layered into this ongoing work when programs overlapped. These deep community relationships were instrumental in getting the WV team off to a very fast start – they were able to engage with community teams and leaders more quickly than in OH and KY because they were, for the most part, known and trusted in the targeted communities. These relationships greatly benefitted the E Communities work and contributed to early and sustained progress in the first two years. The hope was that elements of the E Communities work focused on economic development would become additional components of the community development model used by the Hub. While the intention continues, staff changes created challenges for the E Communities work. The lead E Communities coach left during the final year; an AmeriCorps-VISTA volunteer serving as part of the coaching team also left – to start her own business. With more limited capacity, it was difficult to prioritize building a strategy to embed E Communities tools into the Hub's work over actually doing the work itself. In some ways, the leadership capacity challenges associated with the E Communities work in WV mirror those faced in communities across the region – when a passionate, committed leader moves on, it is often difficult to fill the gap that is left by that departure.

Time will tell what an impact the E Communities work has on the three regional partners – whether it becomes more deeply rooted in the way-of-working of these partners going forward. There is evidence that the seeds of sustainability have been planted.

To learn more about launching an E Communities efforts and finding the right intermediaries with whom to partner, go to the **[Organizing for Action](#)** guide in the e2 Resource Library.