



ENERGIZING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES

A Pathway to Prosperity



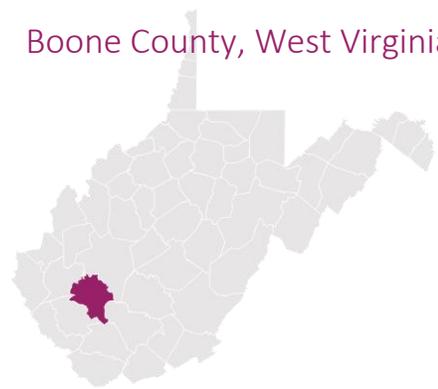
Becoming an Entrepreneurial Community: Madison, West Virginia's Journey

Don Macke, Dan Taylor, Deborah Markley, Dana Williams

Grounding in the Place

The work of building a more entrepreneurial community happens in place. It builds on the existing entrepreneurial ecosystem, whether robust or nascent. It is influenced by the local economy, history, and even culture of the place. To provide a snapshot of Madison, West Virginia – and some context for their journey – explore the *Madison-Boone County Community Profile*.

Boone County, West Virginia



Entrepreneurial Communities Project Background

In 2016, the national Center for Rural Entrepreneurship (now LOCUS Impact Investing) began conversations with organizations in central Appalachia about launching a rural community entrepreneurship initiative with funding from the then-new ARC Power initiative. POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) is a federally funded initiative **“to create a more vibrant economic future for coal-impacted communities by cultivating economic diversity, enhancing job training and re-employment opportunities, creating jobs in existing or new industries, and attracting new sources of investment.”** Since 2016, POWER has invested over \$195 million in 242 projects touching 350 coal-impacted communities. The Center, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, the West Virginia HUB, and Rural Action (Ohio) joined forces to develop, propose and receive a three-year grant to launch the Entrepreneurial Communities initiative in November 2016, one of the early rounds of the POWER initiative.

The successful transition of Appalachian communities requires a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem. At its most effective, that ecosystem is grounded in a community with the commitment and capacity to identify and support entrepreneurs, contributing an essential element of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Especially in more isolated rural communities, both start-up and even more experienced entrepreneurs often do not know where to turn to access the resources they need, when they need them. When community stakeholders are engaged in entrepreneurial development, however, they can provide the connective tissue between the entrepreneurs and the network of resource providers that work locally, at the state level, regionally, and even nationally. This project was designed to build the capacity of three place-based community development organizations – Rural Action, the West Virginia Hub and the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky – to help targeted communities in coal-impacted parts of their regions build the capacity to engage in entrepreneurial development, using the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship’s Entrepreneurial Communities’ framework. The goal was to create communities that are engaged partners with entrepreneurs and service providers, working at the local level to



lift up entrepreneurs and connect them to the help they need to create jobs, build their businesses and contribute to an economic transition in Appalachia. The E Communities (e2) Framework, built and field-tested over two decades, along with coaching support for the regional partners, was a key to the overall success of the initiative. The history of the framework is documented [HERE](#).

The initiative began with a three-part training for community coaches designed and facilitated by Don Macke and Deb Markley in early 2017. Community work was fully launched in the three states in spring 2017 and continued, with a no-cost extension, through June 2020. The two national partners to the initiative – **LOCUS Impact Investing** and **e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems** – provided content, coaching support, peer learning facilitation and learning capture over the course of the initiative. Each state partner identified ready and willing communities to implement the program and provided on-the-ground coaching support and resource connections needed for success. Across the three states, 16 communities were engaged in the effort, achieving varying degrees of success and sustainability.

In each state, we identified one “deep dive” story to document the timeline and evolution of their Entrepreneurial Communities journey. These stories are designed to illustrate the learning themes identified through this work and to demonstrate the core elements of success. They are written as timelines so that the journey – and the major turning points and roadblocks along the way – becomes clear and can serve as an example for other communities.

Entrepreneurial Communities in West Virginia

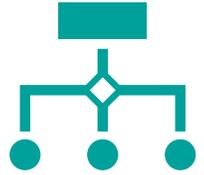
The West Virginia Community Development Hub (“The Hub”) was created to bring consistent, aligned capacity to communities across the state. Their approach – the **Community Development Model** – relies on engaged citizens and community coaches working together to set a vision, plan and build capacity to improve the community over time. In early conversations about the E Communities framework, Hub leaders felt that the framework brought an economic development focus to their work that might represent a “next level” set of activities for the communities with which they had been engaged. Targeted communities included two counties and two towns, including Madison. Hub staffer, Dan Taylor, was the lead coach for the E Communities work and the coaching team included Amanda Workman, Hub staffer, and two AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers.

The Hub’s past work with the targeted communities resulted in a fast start for the E Communities work in West Virginia. The WV Hub was quick to engage with communities in part because they had community coaches on staff and pre-existing relationships with the four targeted partner communities. All four communities were represented at the May 2017 cross-community gathering where the E Communities framework was introduced, and the teams began to do planning for the work ahead.



Spring 2017: Organizing

Madison, a coalfield community in southern West Virginia, participated in another Hub initiative in 2016-2017 focused on economic diversification planning. The Hub had built connections with the Boone County Community and Economic Development office, town council and some community groups, even bringing on a VISTA volunteer from Madison, Terry Bartley. Participation in the E Communities initiative was identified as a way to further engage around important economic sectors identified through that work, including downtown redevelopment and outdoor recreation, and to build up community entrepreneurship support. Madison agreed to organize a community team and participate in the planned E Communities gathering in May. The Hub coaches had a strong community partner in Kris Mitchell, director of county economic development, but there was limited representation at the May kick-off meeting. After some initial concern when community leaders involved in previous Hub work did not carry over into E Communities work, Dan Taylor, the Madison coach, set about rebuilding a program team in the community.



E Communities work in Madison started slowly with many small meetings and one-on-one recruitment conversations to build the team. As in many small communities, especially those with a recreation tourism component to their economy, energy and momentum waned during the summer. During this startup phase, Dan Taylor, an experienced community coach, was also building his own comfort and capacity around the E Communities framework. Similar to the coaches in Kentucky and Ohio, Dan took the time to understand and, in some cases, adapt the framework to the unique conditions in the West Virginia communities with which the Hub has engaged.

In **Fall 2017**, the regrouped Madison team and their coach began, in earnest, some survey work of local entrepreneurs and relationship building with entrepreneurial resource providers. Some free workshops based on the survey feedback also began during this time.



The Motivating Power of Data

Each community was provided with a Development Opportunity Profile – a set of demographic and economic data for the county similar to the data included at the front of this story – at the kick-off training. The teams, coaches, and local entrepreneurs got the most value from the retail leakage data included in the profile. Madison, in particular, is influenced by their close proximity (about 30 miles) to Charleston, the largest urban center in the state. Many people in Madison drive to Charleston for employment and stop on their way home in the evenings to shop at the retail developments on Route 119 in Kanawha County. This leakage of retail spending out of Boone County has hurt local, small businesses. The data showed what goods and services Boone County residents were spending money on compared to what was actually provided in the county. This discrepancy provided the team and local entrepreneurs with a better sense of retail opportunities that might be developed in order to recapture some of that spending.

One example is related to outdoor recreation. Many people travel to Boone County to float the Little Coal River, but most of the money for kayak and canoe rentals and sales was going to a Cabela's in Kanawha County. Since the inception of the E Communities program in 2017, two new river outfitting businesses have opened in Boone County.



The Madison team brought renewed energy – and new partnerships – to the work beginning in 2018. In **January 2018**, the team formed a new partnership with an Adventure Tourism class in the schools. The engagement with Boone County Career and Technical Center, specifically instructor Bobby Miller, gave the team an avenue to support youth entrepreneurship.

In **March 2018**, the team supported a successful Small Business Round Robin, building on a model used by the Kentucky E Communities team. The Round Robin brought together multiple resource providers and local entrepreneurs for the first time. It reflected positively on the work done to build relationships with service providers and gave those resource providers an opportunity to be on the ground in Madison.

The WV Hub: Resource Connector

The Hub has built a powerful presence across the state through its community coaches and other staff. These connections proved really important with the E Communities work. When Dan Taylor completed resource mapping for entrepreneurial service providers, he found that most resources were based in urban Charleston. While these resource providers theoretically serve Boone County and the community of Madison, most did not have the capacity to put staff on the ground. The Hub staff, however, were physically present in these communities. They had cultivated relationships with community leaders and local development groups. They could and did serve as a bridge between resource providers and communities like Madison. In addition to coaching, Hub staff played a resource networking role. Stepping into this role proved to be a powerful element of the E Communities practice in West Virginia. Examples of this resource networking role include the business round robins, small business workshops, and one-on-one referrals described above.



The lasting impact of this networking role is that members of the Madison team – and entrepreneurs supported – now know these resource providers. They have built relationships with them and can knowledgeably share information about their services with other entrepreneurs. The community has established points of contact that can be used to plan future events and workshops in response to local business needs. This capacity – these networks – will live on in Madison beyond the current E Communities grant-funded work.

In **Spring 2018**, with leadership from Kandi Workman, the Madison team began to collect more survey data as a result of the relationship building they had done with local business owners. After the lull in activity that typically occurs over the summer, the team participated in the **September 2018** regional gathering of E Communities, bringing results of their survey work to the session.

Also in **September 2018**, Dan Taylor, lead on the E Communities work, and Breanna Collins, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer working in Grafton, another E Community in West Virginia, took a **learning journey** to Kansas to meet with NetWork Kansas staff and learn more about the **E Community Partnership model** used to engage communities across the state. This trip was part of the Hub's strategic thinking about how the E Communities work would continue beyond the period of the ARC POWER grant. NetWork Kansas has developed over more than a decade an effective, deep network of community partners that have helped to build a strong and effective entrepreneurial ecosystem across the state.



Coaching Transition

In November 2018, Breanna Collins reached the end of her AmeriCorps VISTA term and stepped out of her role as community coach in Grafton. The good news for Grafton was that she left to start her own business, practicing what she had been coaching for the past year. While Amanda Workman, Hub staffer, was able to step into this role seamlessly, it provides another cautionary tale about how dependent this type of capacity building work is on a strong coaching team. It is important to have the bench strength to continue good work even when someone moves on.



This year marked a tipping point for Madison with the emergence of more deeply committed E Community champions and new resources from the Hub. In February, new AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer, Cynthia McComas, began at the Hub, renewing both coaching capacity and communications efforts focused on the E Communities work. Cynthia was an active supporter of many of the events that took place in Madison in 2019 (described below). Kris Mitchell, head of the Boone County Economic Development Corporation (EDC), emerged as a supportive connection for the team. While she was not engaged directly in the E Communities work, she was a **strong ally** and helped make important connections within the county and beyond. Her support was critical as the Hub made a strategic decision to reallocate some E Communities resources to provide mini-grants to the community teams. These small grants had been part of many other Hub programs and the coaches recognized that these small investments would be valuable in giving the communities something concrete to plan around and solidify their work. The Boone County EDC agreed to serve as the fiscal agent for these mini-grants.



Joining Forces – Leveraging Resources

An important lesson from the E Communities work in Madison was the power of connections. A real tipping point in the community occurred when leaders of related efforts began to see the power in joining forces and leveraging their resources. Rev Up Madison is a community group focused on revitalizing, energizing and visualizing (R...E...V) Main and State streets in the community. Two community leaders, Carolyn Mullins and Trish Price, had struggled to see their role in the E Communities work and how it aligned with their efforts. But in 2019, they saw the value in bringing entrepreneurial support to Main Street businesses. One of the mini-grant investments helped to support a spring street fair designed to highlight local businesses and activities. Other activities supported by these investments helped to generate additional energy around Main Street, supporting the goals of the E Communities team and Rev Up Madison.

A total of four \$2,000 mini-grants were awarded in early 2019 and **Winter 2019** was a planning period for these activities and projects, implemented over the period **April – June 2019**:

- A series of three **small business meet-up events** was held in the community providing opportunities for entrepreneur networking and technical assistance support.
- A spring street fair on Main Street brought people into the downtown and highlighted local entrepreneurs.
- A county small business directory was developed for residents and visitors to be able to learn about local products and services.
- A **river float event** was run by students (in the Adventure Tourism class at the school) and highlighted outdoor recreation opportunities in Madison and Boone County.

While these concrete and recognizable activities were important in boosting team morale and creating renewed energy around the E Communities work, it was the emergence of committed leadership that marked the real turning point for these efforts.



The Emergence of Community Leadership

A central role of the Hub is to build the development capacity of partner communities and to help develop community leaders. Dan Taylor recognized such leadership potential in Kandi Workman. Kandi was a serial social and business entrepreneur. Her “day job” was to lead programming at Step by Step, a nonprofit focused on substance abuse recovery and re-employment, and the Big Ugly Community Center. At Step by Step, Kandi saw how entrepreneurship might be a key to helping people in recovery re-enter the workforce. At the community center, she integrated entrepreneurship education for youth into programming, something that was missing before.



As part of the E Communities team, Dan watched Kandi emerge as a committed leader. While she had passion, she needed support in building some basic leadership skills like running meetings. Fortunately, Kandi was open to being coached by Dan to become more comfortable and effective at leading groups. Beyond the E Communities work, Dan observed her growing in her role as a community leader, coming to other meetings and making presentations. She emerged as a true community champion and strong leader for the E Communities team. She led past business surveying efforts in Madison and was instrumental in organizing the three small business meet ups and spring street fair. As important, she recruited new team members including local business owners, Teena Merlin and Myria Wad, who brought a keen interest in arts development as a way to drive revitalization of downtown Madison.

In **June 2019**, Kandi helped lead a discussion within the E Communities team about rebranding their efforts to give them more local flavor and generate greater community buy in. The team was inspired by the All Aboard Grafton team. The team chose Dig In Madison as their new name and brand. The team also began to plan for the Madison Artwalk in August 2019 and the launch of a Buy Local, Buy Boone campaign. Teena Merlin and Myria Wade, owners of Gypsy Sisters Tattoo, provided strong leadership for these efforts, becoming another community champion in Madison.

The success of the **August 2019** Artwalk resulted in it becoming a monthly event. This month also marked the end of Dan Taylor's role as a Hub community coach. Dan moved on to a new opportunity. However, he left Madison in a strong place in terms of community leadership. It was always a stated goal that the E Community teams would become self-governing, needing little support from the Hub beyond their larger role as resource networker. Kandi Workman was established and respected as the leader for Dig In Madison. She had enhanced capacity to guide the team through her work with Dan Taylor over time. And new champions like Teena Merlin had emerged to broaden the ownership and buy in for the work of supporting entrepreneurs. Through these intentional efforts to build community leadership capacity, Dan's departure was melancholy but did not derail the work of supporting Madison's entrepreneurs and connecting them to the resources needed to be successful.



Reflections on the Journey

Madison's journey is a story about leadership as much as it is a story about entrepreneurship. It began with the Hub's leadership for community development in West Virginia and its commitment to expanding the capacity of communities to engage in and determine their development future. This leadership included recognition that entrepreneurship has a critically important role to play in that future and their willingness to be a partner in the E Communities initiative supported by ARC.

The journey continued and was accelerated by the emergence of committed and skilled community leaders, both formal and informal. The leader of the county's Economic Development Commission provided support and connections at a critical point in time. Kandi Workman grew into her leadership role for the E Communities team, strengthening participation, achieving noted victories, networking to other local initiatives, and encouraging other leaders to emerge. One of those leaders, Teena Merlin, created a strong connection to the entrepreneurs themselves in her role as local business owner and champion for arts-related economic development.



This leadership journey was aided by the Hub’s strategic decision to create the mini-grant opportunity. These small investments proved critical in creating momentum, raising the profile of the E Communities work, and broadening support for local entrepreneurs and downtown businesses. While the dollar value of the investment was not large – only \$8,000 in total – the leverage and goodwill created in the community was significant. In some ways, it provided the strong foundation that enabled the team to come together, create a new brand, and continue the work even as their support from the Hub wound down.



Connections to the Learning Themes

The E Communities work in Madison has indeed been a journey. It has exemplified several of the learning themes from the E Communities work overall.

- **Community Coaching** – Madison provides a strong example of the value that a community coach can bring. Dan Taylor’s role in recognizing and nurturing an emerging community leader as she moved into a leadership role with the E Community team was critically important. Their work together helped build the capacity needed for the team to “own its future” and keep the work going after the Hub’s deep engagement was done.
- **Momentum, Momentum, Momentum** – Slow and steady progress in the first two years set the stage for a number of activities that generated strong momentum in Madison. The relationships built during that time – with the schools, Rev Up Madison, county economic development, local entrepreneurs, regional resource providers – positioned the team to successfully launch a series of momentum-building events. These events, in turn, helped to draw new partners and champions to the work, creating a reinforcing cycle of activities and additional momentum. While the mini-grants provided resources to make these events happen, it was the creativity, vision, and leadership of these champions that really contributed to their success.
- **Finding the right intermediaries** – It is hard to tell Madison’s story without recognizing the **important role that the Hub has played** – and continues to play – in West Virginia communities. The Hub lives by a community engagement model focused on capacity building. In this way, the Hub was the perfect intermediary in which to embed the process and practice of building entrepreneurial communities. The E Communities work is all about community capacity building. How the E Communities work continues to influence Hub programming in the future is yet to be seen. But the success in Madison was due in large part to the Hub’s commitment to and skill in community capacity building, and their embrace of the E Communities framework as a capacity building tool.
- **Progress Linked to “Energy Areas”** – The E Communities work in Madison took on new meaning – and new energy – as the link to downtown revitalization grew stronger. The partnership with Rev Up Madison and support for the spring street fair along with engagement with Teena Merlin and support for the Madison Artwalk both marked a decision to leverage “energy” in Madison toward downtown renewal. These partnerships served to engage new people, to generate increased focus and attention, and to help more people see the importance of supporting local entrepreneurs as a core development approach in Madison. These connections were solidified in one important way with the rebranding of the E Communities work to Dig In Madison.

