

Revitalizing a Community Begins with its Residents

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WHILE THE ENTIRE NATION FELT THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT RECESSION IN 2009, RURAL AREAS LIKE EDGECOMBE AND NASH COUNTIES WERE PARTICULARLY HIT HARD.

At the time, the region led North Carolina in unemployment at 15 percent, as the traditional drivers of the local economy – textile and tobacco – slowly eroded, and affordable housing was hard to come by.

In Rocky Mount, where life expectancy rates were among the lowest in the state, leaders decided to take on the mounting crises by tapping into one of its greatest assets—the people who live there—and crafting a regional revitalization plan to

improve the quality of health and overall life of those residing in Edgecombe and Nash Counties. This vision also drives the work of the National Association of Community Development Corporations (the Association), a recent recipient of funding from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust as part of its [Healthy Places NC initiative](http://www.kbr.org/content/healthy-places-nc) (<http://www.kbr.org/content/healthy-places-nc>) to improve health in rural areas. The Association is focusing its efforts on promoting fair housing and food access, and is also providing residents in 14 of the counties' most vulnerable communities with leadership training and skill building.



Driving Change From the Center

The Association saw an opportunity during its initial planning process to reinvigorate Rocky Mount's downtown, which separates Edgecombe and Nash Counties and is dotted by vacant storefronts, as an opportunity to drive change from the center.

The Association knew that the neighborhoods near downtown Rocky Mount were largely inhabited by underserved families and decided to directly engage these community members in their efforts.

"For us, this work and progress we're hoping to achieve relies on increasing grassroots engagement of those impacted the most: that underserved and in-poor-health community," said Sue Perry Cole, president and CEO of the Association. "From the very beginning of our work, we've wanted these low income residents to be the drivers of change. We want them to be the stewards of their own community, and be comfortable defining and articulating their problems."

Community Involvement

From the beginning, Perry Cole and her colleagues at the Association knew that without the engagement of marginalized residents, progress would not be made. Leaders wanted to get the community involved at the very beginning, and encourage residents to participate in planning events, meetings, and voice their opinions about the re-development of their neighborhoods.

"As a community, we don't want to become extinct, and without the Trust, this wouldn't be possible. They've been our long-term sustainer. And the fact that they understand that these non-health factors affect health is amazing. It's really what creating a culture of health is about. These root causes will help impact health outcomes," added Perry Cole. "By expanding residents' leadership skills to stimulate collective action, residents are able to drive long-term systemic change to permanently improve housing and health conditions in underserved communities."

The Association set out to focus on residential segregation and housing — both of which are predictors of health. The Association now regularly hosts a Community Academy, which includes skill-building sessions for neighborhood residents and leaders to attend to learn how to speak about the fair housing process. The Association puts on presentations, provides flyers and pamphlets, and preps community members on what they need to know should they choose to attend a public hearing to state their case on fair housing issues.

"Thanks to the Community Academy, I'm now able to better advocate for Southeast Rocky Mount," said Mary Warren, a Community Academy participant and president of the Southeast Rocky Mount Community Organization (SERMCO). "I recently helped organize a rally to enlist support for dealing with the challenges facing neighborhood residents. The support I have received from the Community Academy has inspired me to keep fighting the good fight."

The change since the launch of the program is striking. After attending sessions at the Community Academy, residents take what they learn back into their own neighborhood. And when there are public hearings about fair housing, residents have the tools and leadership skills they need to confidently talk about the issues personally affecting them and their families.

The work being done in Edgecombe and Nash Counties is far from over. As part of Healthy Places NC, the Association collaborates with the Twin Counties Partnership, which is a collective group of agency, health department and local organizations that convene to discuss how to improve the health of those living in the area.

"If you want permanent change, you need to change the system," said Perry Cole.

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