

U.S.D.A. Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge - Performance Progress Report

Recipient Organization: County of Hawai'i

Reporting Period End Date: 09/30/2024

10. Performance Narrative

Triannual Revitalize Puna Activation

Building on the success of the Puna Food Summit and ten community activations, the County, July 13, from 10 am to 2 pm, at the Billy Kenoi District Park Gym in Pāhoa, Puna, Hawai'i., a significant milestone marking three years of collaboration through Revitalize Puna. The focus of the event was on supporting families and enhancing resilience throughout the region. These community activation events have consistently featured county and state leaders involved in recovery efforts, along with resource booths, plant and food giveaways, and interactive engagement activities designed to evaluate challenges and identify solutions for Puna's resilience and recovery.

The Revitalize Puna activations facilitate meaningful connections between government officials and community leaders involved in eruption recovery and resilience projects across Puna. These activations uplift the community by providing essential resources and fostering connections, all while demonstrating the County's steadfast support six years after the Kīlauea eruption. These events are critical in uniting government officials and residents, bringing together efforts to strengthen Puna's recovery, preparedness, and resilience. They also serve as a platform for the County, State, and Federal leaders to provide comprehensive updates on ongoing projects and initiatives, ensuring the community remains well-informed and engaged. These events serve as a beacon of unity, bringing together the County of Hawai'i and local residents in a collective effort to enhance Puna's recovery, bolster preparedness, and strengthen resilience.

A key component of these activations is the involvement of the Resilience Capacity Areas, which focus on social, cultural, economic, and environmental recovery efforts. The RCAs, led by both County and community members, collaborate on implementing projects outlined in the Kīlauea Recovery and Resilience Plan. The July event's "Resilience Resource Row" focused on providing vital 'ohana and keiki resources through displays from local nonprofits addressing food security, childcare, women's healthcare, Alzheimer's, pet care, conservation, emergency preparedness, and more. A long-awaited update on road restoration was also shared by the Hawaii County Department of Public Works.

The event further supported the community by distributing over 400 lunches from local vendors, 700 plant starts from local growers, and 130 family food boxes from Hawaii Island Food Basket, all of which contributed to the event's largest turnout to date, with more than 500 attendees.

Attendee feedback reflects the event's ongoing impact, with participants highlighting the opportunity to engage with County decision-makers, the value of continuous events to strengthen community bonds, and the visible progress being made in Puna. As one attendee shared: "Events like this build community and present opportunities to develop future leaders,"

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while another noted, "I see progress and people working together to make Puna a great place to live."

Learning by Doing

During this performance period, Resilience Capacity Areas successfully executed on short-term projects identified within the framework of 'Resilience Commitments,' forming the basis of our logic models by capacity area and overarching objectives.

Cultural Resilience

- Continued to lead the *Revitalize Pohoiki* effort, focusing on restoring Isaac Kepo'okalani Hale Beach Park, and implementing a stewardship plan for the broader Pohoiki area. The RCA engaged with State and County officials and project consultants to strategize park restoration next steps.
- Provided feedback on a community engagement toolkit project developed by the University of Hawai'i Manoa Community Design Center. Currently in its final stages of development, the toolkit aims to foster dialogue and enhance cultural awareness.
- Worked with Natural Environment RCA to co-develop and organize the next Hala Festival on Saturday, September 20, 2025. Hala is an integral part of Hawaiian culture, serving as a crucial resource for weaving, lei-making, and various other cultural practices. Given the increasing threats from invasive species and habitat loss, it is imperative to protect hala. The now annual Hala Fest will continue to play a significant role in raising awareness and appreciation for Hawaiian cultural practices across all generations, from kūpuna to keiki.
- Leaders from the Cultural and Natural Environmental Resilience Capacity Areas, Leila Kealoha with Pohaku Pelemaka and Ana Kon with Na Maka Haloa o Waipio, participated on a panel at the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement's Annual Convention on September 17, 2024, to share about lessons learned in recovering from events such as the 2018 Kīlauea eruption. They participate in this conference panel as part of the County's Puna Strong grant-making program. They spoke of their own journeys experiencing this event, as well as the growth of their organizations and the impact they have had supporting members of the community through biocultural revitalization and collaboration.

Economic Resilience

- With the County and Ho'oulu Lāhui serving to host a Fellow through the Economic Recovery Corps funded by the EDA, the Economic Resilience RCA worked with Fellow, Mina Viritua Jr. to shape and prioritize projects that would serve the Lower Puna region in strengthening local economy and workforce opportunities. During this period the RCA has worked with Mina to engage community and business leaders to set a solid foundation for the work ahead and inform design and execution of proposed solutions.
- Leadership is planning next steps for future engagement to make meaningful strides on food sovereignty through work of the Food Summit that was kicked off in March 2024.

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- Complete work on *Paint Pāhoa Town*, involving local artists and cultural practitioners in refreshing the historic town center. To date, four murals and five buildings have been completed. Hosted the *Paint Pāhoa Town* Art Walk and mural unveiling, on May 4th, 2024, to celebrate public art that celebrates Puna's culture and stories, and to honor the collaborative efforts that made the refresh possible. Plaques will be installed on historic buildings that identify previous businesses that occupied those spaces.
- Supported implementation of strategies from the Pāhoa Public Safety Partnership Crime Prevention Summit, including the installation of a surveillance system in Downtown Pāhoa.
- Collaborated with the Recovery Division and Built Environment RCA to reframe how to revitalize Downtown Pāhoa outside of a Village Master Plan. The RCA will continue to support community engagement and advocacy efforts led by Council District 4 and Recovery Division once ordinances and projects are introduced.

Social Resilience

- Worked with a local nonprofit (Vibrant Hawai'i) to execute an MOA between the County's Civil Defense Agency and Resilience Hubs around Hawai'i Island so a formal connection and communication flow between community and local government is in place ahead of future disasters.
- Collaborated with Civil Defense to support homeowner associations in creating emergency response plans.
- Aligned emergency response needs with animal rescue advocates and Puna representatives to collectively tackle animal issues, creating collateral to support animal owners in ensuring they have what they need to care for their animals should a natural disaster occur.
- Meet twice a month to stay in touch, share information, and support members in their resilience work.

Resilience of the Built Environment

- Engaged with community members and property owners on the County's Voluntary Housing Buyout Program.
- Supported activities across Resilience Capacity Areas including Paint Pāhoa Town, Revitalize Pohoiki, the Puna Food Summit, and supporting resilience hub sites.
- Collaborated with the Recovery Division and Economic RCA to reframe how to revitalize Downtown Pāhoa outside of a Village Master Plan. The RCA will support community engagement and advocacy efforts led by Council District 4 and Recovery Division once ordinances and projects are introduced.

Resilience of the Natural Environment

- Built systems and networks to coordinate mitigation and restoration efforts. The RCA successfully advocated for annual funding to support invasive species mitigation efforts.
- Leading *Malama 'Āina*, hands-on learning experiences for environmental awareness.

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- Identified priorities for community-based projects addressing invasive species and ecosystem restoration.
- See updates reported with the Cultural Resilience RCA above regarding collaboration with the Natural Environmental RCA in their participation with the Council for native Hawaiian Advancement's Annual Convention on September 17, 2024; and to plan the next Hala Festival on Saturday, September 20, 2025.

Youth Resilience

- Led Ku'ikahi Na'auao, organizing recurring lunchtime gatherings aimed to promote 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language) and cultural approaches placemaking, work, and decision-making among County staff. 25 sessions have been completed. Moving forward, the class will be officially offered in the Hawai'i County HR course catalog, ensuring broader participation and institutional support for the initiative.
- Weaved leadership and youth perspective into various activities across RCAs.

Our co-chairs meet monthly to maintain strong connections and understanding among the Resilience Capacity Areas. These meetings have evolved into dynamic learning circles that foster integration and collaboration, keeping our efforts aligned and effective. To ensure sustainability and document the impact of Revitalize Puna through the Strategic Placemaking Implementation Plan and Puna Placemaking Playbook, we continue to hold work sessions with our co-chairs, focusing on identifying essential program elements. These sessions reinforced the sense that the work is far from over. The group and the connections we've built have provided a grounding and supportive space during a time of pain and rebuilding. As Revitalize Puna transitions away from USDA grant funding, the recovery team and co-chairs remain deeply committed to Puna's future recovery.

Community Engagement

The Revitalize Puna Facebook and Instagram accounts are key tools for promoting activities, sharing resources, and engaging residents. With an average reach of 400 people per post, our social media campaigns are effective in keeping the community informed and involved. Feedback from activation surveys highlights these platforms, along with email, as primary sources of information for projects and events. Posts featuring community members consistently receive the highest engagement, inspiring others to volunteer and participate in recovery and resilience efforts. This visibility has strengthened our ability to mobilize the community and drive meaningful action.

SPIP Deliverables and Outcomes

In June 2023, the County of Hawai'i requested and received a 12-month no-cost extension from the USDA for its Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge, extending the performance end date to September 30, 2024. The extension allowed time to complete key deliverables, including the Just-in-Time Training and Technical Assistance, Logic Model, and Strategic Placemaking Innovation Plan (SPIP), addressing identified program challenges.

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A key component of this Revitalize Puna initiative was the delivery of Just-in-Time Training and Technical Assistance and exploring innovative avenues to secure non-federal funds for community-led Resilience Capacity Area projects and initiatives. After surveying our RCA co-chairs and nonprofit partners that have received a Recovery Grant or Puna Strong Grant to understand what kind of assistance would be most beneficial. The following topic areas were of most interest to our community: running a nonprofit (nuts and bolts, legal and compliance essentials, tax obligations), financial literacy for entrepreneurs (accessing capital, loans and credits, growth planning), and tech tools (project management, tracking productivity, business efficiency).

After not being able to secure vendors for this Just-in-Time Training and Technical Assistance through a request for proposals process in December 2023, the County worked with the Purchasing Division to prepare a competitive solicitation of these services through a Request for Quotes. Unfortunately this Request for Quotes did not succeed in attracting vendors to whom the County could award contracts for these services. As a result, the County is exploring other ways to provide this type of technical assistance to partners following the conclusion of this USDA grant.

The SPIP is now complete and captures stakeholder experiences, lessons learned, and the ongoing collaboration beyond the USDA RPIC award period. We believe the time invested in building relationships and strengthening community partner capacity has been crucial to Puna's continued recovery and long-term resilience.

The Puna Placemaking Playbook serves as a practical, hands-on resource that complements the SPIP by providing detailed tools and strategies for community engagement. It offers accessible guidance and key lessons learned, making it a valuable resource for all. The Community Engagement toolkits are physical resources available for community members to borrow from the county, similar to a library system.