



# USDA Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge

## Final Report Narrative

Housing Assistance Council (HAC)

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## Project Summary

The Housing Assistance Council (HAC) selected nine rural communities through a competitive process for the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge (RPIC). The selected RPIC communities were southern and economically distressed. HAC RPIC participants represented organizations or local governments with limited staff or were volunteer run. RPIC supported 15 months of capacity building and technical assistance tailored to local needs and fostered the creation of a robust peer to peer network within the cohort.

RPIC programming also linked cohort members with national and state-level USDA staff including broadband experts and state RD directors. Programming highlights included a May 2023 cohort summit hosted by Auburn's Rural Studio, which provided hands-on placemaking training alongside Rural Studio's staff, students, and clients. Enhanced placemaking capacity for each community was the overarching goal for all involved with HAC's RPIC programming.

As the RPIC program concluded, each community delivered a "Quick Pitch" detailing their placemaking progress, HAC's team and cohort members noted that staff time invested early in the RPIC process to assess each community's needs was integral to creating meaningful content for the cohort's monthly online gatherings and individualized technical assistance and capacity building during frequent check-ins with the cohort.

## Meet The Cohort

Nine communities (originally ten; one community exited early in the process) were selected to take part in HAC's RPIC program cohort and received 15 months of capacity-building support, connection to a peer cohort, and an in-person summit in rural Alabama that was hosted by fellow RPIC grantee, Rural Studio. Additionally, each community was supported with seed grant funding for their local placemaking challenge.

## Covenant Faith Outreach Ministries | Covenant CDC

### Placemaking Challenge

Covenant Faith Outreach Ministries is taking on housing supply—especially for seniors and broader community engagement strategies via its work with RPIC.

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## Helping One Another, Inc.

### Placemaking Challenge

Helping One Another, Inc. is working to implement the MiCASiTA model in the community. MiCASiTA gives homeowners design choices in modular homes along with a path to multi-generational wealth. Helping One Another's RPIC participation will bolster the organization's capacity for strategic planning, identifying resources, and related design assistance, including a charrette.

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## Mountain T.O.P.

### Placemaking Challenge

Mountain T.O.P. seeks to boost its cross-sector capacity via RPIC—especially toward addressing single family and multi-family housing needs, including exploration of housing tax credit programs.

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## Men and Women United for Youth & Families

### Placemaking Challenge

Men and Women United for Youth & Families addresses a wide range of issues from food security to environmental justice and leadership. Via RPIC, the organization will bolster its placemaking capacity in rural portions of its service area.

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## United Communities Assistance Network (UCAN!)

### Placemaking Challenge

UCAN! will tap RPIC's technical assistance and coaching for a strategic planning process. UCAN!'s longer term goals include a resource hub for healthy food access, economic development, and entrepreneurship.

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## City of Hinton

### Placemaking Challenge

Tourism and economic development are on the upswing in Hinton, WV as the region's recreation economy, anchored by the New River Gorge National Park, continues to grow. RPIC will help Hinton's city government navigate affordable housing, historic preservation, and other opportunities—especially the prioritization of community needs.

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## Philippi Grand Theater Project (Woodlands)/City of Philippi

### Placemaking Challenge

The Grand Theater building once anchored Philippi's downtown business district. But the building shuttered in the 1990s. RPIC will bolster ongoing restoration efforts as part of a broader economic development and placemaking strategy. In 2023, the org had to pivot to a new placemaking challenge- Local cycling event.

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## Seminole Arts Council, Inc.

### Placemaking Challenge

Seminole Arts Council's is actively engaged in reuse and preservation efforts for historic buildings and public parks. The organization is also working toward "commUNITY" gathering space to promote local cohesion. RPIC will connect the Council's work with resource development and placemaking best practices.

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## Prek-12 and Beyond

### Placemaking Challenge

Pre-12 and Beyond is a grassroots organization that addresses Tallulah's broad challenges tied to lumber mill closures—while building on underlying assets. RPIC participation will connect Pre-12 and Beyond with regional and national best practices tied to quality of life, economic vitality and broadband access.

Contact: Dr. Patricia Candler

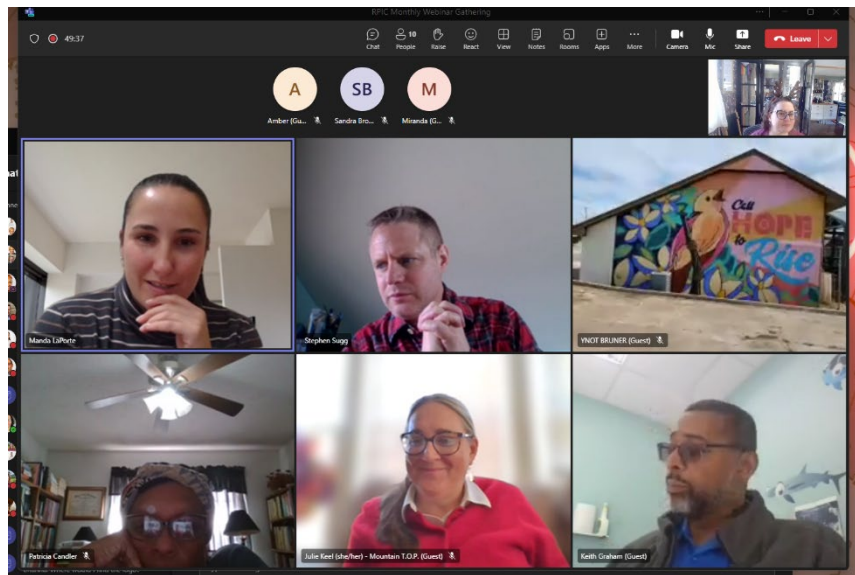
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# Capacity Building

The capacity-building component of the RPIC program commenced with informal introductory calls with each community. These discussions aimed to assess their strengths, weaknesses, and baseline understanding of placemaking terminology, while also identifying barriers that hinder progress toward placemaking goals. The insights gained from these assessments enabled HAC to tailor capacity-building and technical assistance to meet the specific needs of the cohort.



*Screenshot of one of the RPIC monthly virtual gatherings, 2023.*

To complement the resources provided, a general placemaking and rural design curriculum was offered, though to a limited extent.

The cohort's monthly virtual gatherings featured a range of external experts, including representatives from the National Endowment for the Arts, a USDA broadband specialist, and the Lead of West Virginia's RD Rural Partners Network. The inclusion of these external experts facilitated meaningful conversations within the cohort, utilizing a fireside chat format. In every instance, speakers were available for follow-up discussions with cohort members after each session.

Monthly gathering topics included:

### *Placemaking 101: A Fireside Chat*

Courtney Spearman with the National Endowment for the Arts shared rural creative placemaking best practices and resources. A key takeaway: Arts and Culture are levers for change at the local level within creative placemaking.

### *Resources For Your Work Federal and Beyond*

Kayleigh Kyle, West Virginia USDA RD Rural Partners Network Lead, shared actionable insights to help the cohort secure resources for their community and placemaking challenge. Kayleigh's remarks built on her past work as a local economic development director along with her current USDA role. Her key point: relationship building with USDA RD staff—letting them understand your goals and your community—is the best way to generate resources for your local placemaking work. Kayleigh also offered that placemaking is becoming an established tool for economic development in the eyes of federal agencies and private philanthropy.

### *Broadband 101*

USDA Rural Development's Shannon Legree shared an array of broadband resources with HAC's RPIC partner communities. In addition to sharing highlights of specific programs, Shannon also offered tips to help communities—even those just getting started with broadband—access broadband resources. *In summary, there are* USDA General Field Representatives along with local USDA Rural Development offices standing ready to help communities navigate broadband challenges.

### *Final Quick Pitches*

In March & April 2024, the nine cohort communities presented their Quick Pitch to peers and panelists detailing their placemaking challenge. Prior to the Quick Pitch, HAC's staff spent dozens of hours helping the communities with their presentations. This led to a smoother presentation while giving participants confidence and refined materials when presenting versions of their Quick Pitch in the future to funders, local officials, and other interested parties.

External quick pitch panelists were USDA RD's Sara Loe, Program Coordinator, Midwest Region, and Meghan Walsh, Senior Architect, USDA RD. Sara and Meghan are both trained architects and are noted for their placemaking expertise.

## 1:1 Coaching Sessions

Supplementing the monthly online gatherings, RPIC staff created wide availability for 1-1 coaching sessions with cohort members. For such, RPIC staff allotted 1–2-hour blocks of time during several of the pre-set monthly gathering times to coach communities in lieu of hosting and external speaker. This worked; attendance was robust and these sessions on several occasions turned into mini group coaching sessions that evolved into peer-peer exchanges organically.

RPIC's staff also set aside approximately 40 hours for call-in or appointment-based 1:1 coaching sessions that spanned capacity building and technical assistance. Coaching sessions were valuable to the communities and HAC's team as they helped HAC identify curriculum gaps in real time and tweak upcoming sessions. The sessions also afforded HAC multiple opportunities to link communities with resources beyond the RPIC program, including dozens of funding opportunities.

Examples include:

### *Delco, NC*

RPIC paired the community with a Georgetown University graduate design student seeking a capstone project in a rural community.

### *Seminole, OK*

RPIC linked Seminole with the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design (CIRD). Seminole's application to this program was successful, and it brought external rural design-focused resources to the community. Working with CIRD also brought Seminole an informal partnership with Hugo, Oklahoma, another CIRD community leading to an in-state peer exchange focused on rural arts.

### *Supply, NC*

RPIC's team generated a memo with 33 locally relevant external resource possibilities for the organization's proposed farm market project. This resource also included a summary of the best practices, links to other HAC partners, and several case studies.

### *Tallulah, LA*

RPIC's team generated a list of 15 funding and technical assistance resources when the partner noted an opportunity to link its work with an emerging education initiative. RPIC's team followed up with coaching in grant writing and linkages with a regional technical assistance and financing partner for the project.



## Mountain T.O.P (Coalmont, TN)

RPIC's team coached the organization as it took on a tiny homes project in conjunction with a high school-based program. RPIC introduced Mountain T.O.P. to a Kentucky-based organization doing similar work. Mountain T.O.P. staff noted that the connection "kept the ball rolling" on the project as the organization faced internal transitions.

## Site Visits



HAC's RPIC core staff traveled to three RPIC communities for site visits. HAC selected the site visit communities to reach the geographic breadth of the cohort (North Carolina to Oklahoma), and the diversity of communities within the cohort.

*Seminole Arts Council & RPIC Staffer,*

*Hillary Presecan, site visit, 2024.*



*Men and Women United RPIC site visit, 2024.*

The site visit goals included forging deeper connections with the partner communities and thus programming tailored to local needs. Additionally, the three communities RPIC staff visited were also the organizations profiled in the 3 case studies attached to this final report submission. In reflecting internally on the program, HAC's staff is resolute in noting the value of site visits—even while acknowledging the value of virtual engagement opportunities. HAC is building

additional site visits into future rural design programming (beyond RPIC) based on lessons learned from the RPIC program.



*City of Hinton, WV cohort, 2024.*

## Peer To Peer Engagement

HAC offered two in-person events for the cohort, building on the organization's long record of building peer networks as a powerful capacity building tool. The below-described summit was required for the cohort; the National Rural Housing Conference was optional. 2023 RPIC Summit in Newbern, Alabama



*Cohort at the RPIC Summit, 2023.*

HAC's RPIC Summit in Newbern, Alabama brought 17 cohort members representing 8 communities together for three days of interaction and learning at Auburn University's Rural Studio—a national leader in rural design and placemaking. Rural Studio is also a USDA RPIC grantee.



*HAC's RPIC cohort visiting one of the sites that Rural Studio students were working on in May 2023.*

Highlights of the summit included tours of Rural Studio's grounds and trips to dozens of sites in and near Newbern in which Rural Studio has worked with the community to create affordable homes, innovative community facilities including a city hall building, a fire station, and a library, and more. Rural Studio's staff noted that the community processes—more than bricks and mortar—are the key ingredient in sustaining successful rural placemaking no matter the scale. Rural Studio's staff also emphasized the value in modest initial goals in rural placemaking, then building on small victories.

Meghan Walsh, Senior Architect, USDA RD and several HAC staffers including Shonterria Charleston, HAC's Training and Technical Assistance Director, joined the Summit for its entirety, giving cohort members opportunities to interact with those in positions to bring additional resources to their work.

## [2023 National Rural Housing Conference \(NRHC\)](#)

For the first time ever, HAC's biennial National Rural Housing Conference (NRHC) included a placemaking and rural design track—a nod to the growing importance of placemaking and design in broader rural development

conversations. RPIC cohort members representing Philippi, WV, Tupelo, MS, and Delco, NC took part in the conference.



*Keith Graham (Left) from RPIC cohort Men & Women United, was a panelist for one of the placemaking workshops at the 2023 National Rural Housing Conference.*

Reverend Keith Graham, of Delco, NC, joined a placemaking-focused panel at the conference, giving his community and HAC's RPIC program a national platform. Keith's presentation touched on the value of RPIC's technical assistance in maximizing USDA Community Facilities funding that his organization secured while also highlighting the value of the peer network within the RPIC cohort.

Audience members of Keith's presentation included 3 USDA RD State Directors, several national funders, and senior design and placemaking staff from the National Endowment for the Arts. Keith shared that presenting his community's story at the conference was a "major boost" for his organization's work on the ground while adding that RPIC coalesced existing elements of his organization's work into a coherent frame for placemaking.

## Impact & Outcomes

The best examples of RPIC's outcomes are included in the (enclosed) case studies of RPIC's work in Hinton, WV; Delco, NC; and Seminole, Oklahoma. The case studies illustrate RPIC's ability to 1) foster local placemaking capacity; 2) generate external funding, including other USDA programs (e.g., Community Facilities in Delco, NC), to leverage CPM work; and 3) link the RPIC cohort with a robust peer network and to HAC's broader network of rural nonprofits to support future placemaking activities.

RPIC's examples of Seminole, Oklahoma's Arts Council generating external funding (linked directly by them to CIRD's assistance) from the Wal-Mart Foundation, the city government, and the National Endowment for the Arts, is the best example of RPIC's assistance generating sustained placemaking capacity in a community. An emerging pocket park in Seminole will be part of RPIC's legacy.



*By the end of the RPIC program in July 2024, Seminole Arts Council got City Council approval to move forward with a community pocket park.*

Other examples of the program's impact come from those who observed the program's participants displaying what they learned via the Quick Pitch that each community presented at the cohort's final gathering. Sara Loe is a Program Coordinator in RD's Midwest Region (Innovation Center), and she served as a Quick Pitch panelist. In her remarks to the cohort, she lauded the collective

impact that being in a cohort brought to each community's local work while offering several USDA programs (and contact information) to help communities beyond the RPIC cycle.

In a follow up with HAC staff, Sara called the communities' work "inspirational" and offered that they are an example for other communities looking to take on placemaking, even if they lack staffing or other traditional measures of capacity.

Another measure of the program's impact is near 100% participation from the cohort in both the RPIC Summit (in person) and the monthly online gatherings coupled with hundreds of "office hours" in which RPIC staff delivered coaching to the communities.

# Challenges, Advise and Opportunities

*Challenges: What have been the most challenging or unexpected aspects of this project?*

- One challenge we encountered was the frequent turnover of assigned USDA program staff. Although we were eager to engage extensively with the USDA liaison, this collaboration did not fully materialize as planned. Nonetheless, many other USDA staff members from both national and state offices stepped up, offering valuable support and interactive guidance to HAC's RPIC cohort. While staffing transitions are a part of the process, having a dedicated USDA staff member alongside an assigned administrative contractor would have further enhanced our collaboration on the initiative. Moving forward, a more stable USDA presence would strengthen collective efforts.
- Some of the most unexpected elements of HAC's RPIC work were also bright spots and indicative of rural America's latent placemaking capacity—even in the poorest communities. RPIC's flexibility and the broad spectrum of placemaking allowed HAC's team to first invest substantial time in listening to each RPIC community to gauge their needs. Several months of listening to mayors, city council members, arts council leaders, and other RPIC partners allowed HAC to tailor monthly trainings and the 2023 RPIC gathering to locally identified needs. This element of RPIC and lessons (and materials!) from it will inform future HAC work.
- Another unexpected aspect was that organizations with no paid staff excelled with RPIC. This is a reminder to the federal government and the nonprofit sector that some "low capacity" organizations and communities with modest resources can be highly impactful. RPIC was special in that it allowed HAC to find and nurture such organizations. The results included substantial external funding wins for RPIC communities, new regional partnerships, and long-term connections with HAC's national network.

*Advice: What advice would you give to other organizations planning a similar project? You should include strengths and limitations of the program. If an innovative approach was used successfully, you should describe the approach in detail so that other organizations might consider replication in their areas.*

- While virtual interactions are beneficial, in-person gatherings and/or site visits are invaluable. The face-to-face interactions significantly enhanced

online follow-up engagement and coaching. HAC has learned this through its other programs as well. There is no better investment of resources than traveling to RPIC communities for up-close engagement.

- Building on lessons learned in carrying out RPIC, HAC would require participants to take part in early-program training around reporting and other administrative requirements. This approach would streamline operations for all parties and enable organizations to concentrate on placemaking as the cycle progresses.
- Peer to peer engagement is essential for building capacity! For HAC, our successful RPIC Summit hosted in conjunction with Auburn's Rural Studio offers replicable elements including:
  - Unstructured time (e.g., meals and bus trips) for participants to engage with each other AND with HAC and USDA program staff, which according to participant feedback were a highlight. Such interactions continue to yield significant benefits.
  - Ensuring that placemaking programming is relevant to local needs is essential. For HAC's RPIC cohort, placemaking white papers and academic definitions were not important. Experiencing placemaking firsthand at the summit and having multiple opportunities to connect and exchange best practices were the key factors.
  - USDA RD national and state-level staff attendance at RPIC events was valuable. For example, Meghan Walsh, a Senior Architect at USDA, attended the HAC RPIC Summit. Her expertise and insight were helpful, but it was her presence for two days of touring and strategic thought partnership that led to long-term benefits for RPIC's partners. Meghan listened to RPIC participants and offered meaningful feedback while bringing a human face to USDA's work. Later in the cycle, Meghan joined Sara Loe, USDA Midwestern Region Program Coordinator, as SME panelist for HAC's RPIC partner "Quick Pitch" for the critique session.

*Opportunities: If you had the opportunity, what would you have done differently?*

- HAC would allocate additional RPIC resources to conduct listening visits early in the program cycle with each RPIC community. These visits would serve as both technical assistance opportunities and engagement activities. If individual visits are not feasible, HAC would consider combining



site visits by region to ensure that all communities are connected in person early in the program.

- In hindsight, it would have been beneficial for HAC to have encouraged every RPIC participant to meet with their nearest USDA RD office. When these meetings occurred, they proved highly advantageous. Although some participants faced challenges in navigating the relevant USDA RD local office staff and programs, establishing rapport with USDA staff often led to valuable referrals and connections. Such interactions consistently demonstrated their positive impact on all involved.
  - For example: USDA's West Virginia State Director Ryan Thorn joined a RPIC listening call with Hinton, West Virginia local officials early in the RPIC cycle. Director Thorn 1) requested regular updates of RPIC's work in West Virginia and 2) directed his team to support RPIC's work. This resulted in West Virginia's RPN Lead staffer keynoting a RPIC virtual gathering several months later and RD field staff joining HAC RPIC staff during a Hinton site visit. In short: An engaged RD state director and staff members were critical to RPIC's success in West Virginia.
- HAC encourages USDA—and all federal government—to reconsider MATCH through an equity lens. And in some cases, waiving or eliminating match requirements for persistent poverty communities. HAC's RPIC partners were effective and often well-established rural entities (usually nonprofit). But many small rural partners often lack the staff capacity to meet reporting requirements, especially for volunteer-run organizations. Waived requirements for organizations serving persistent poverty communities (especially) would allow high-potential and high-performing RPIC partners to focus even more on local needs.
- Placemaking lends itself to peer networks. Often, it was HAC's role to set the stage and allow peer-to-peer networking to bloom. This approach proved effective. Moving forward, it would be valuable to facilitate formal connections among RPIC grantees mid-cycle to exchange best practices for building local capacity, identify crossover opportunities, and share insights on working with USDA.