

Meeting Rural Needs through Faith- and Community-based Organizations:

The South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project

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Rural communities and small towns are subject to the same life changing social forces affecting the rest of America. Major trends, including the changing structure of families, an increased mobility within society, economic transformation, and immigration all have profound effects on the well-being of rural families. In addition, the isolated nature of many rural communities often presents logistical challenges to achieving community well-being. To be sure, rural grassroots groups and non-profit organizations often rise up to meet these challenges but they frequently are in need of support. In an effort to build support of these organizations, it has long been the mission of land-grant universities to provide innovative and state-of-the-art assistance to rural faith- and community-based organizations.

This paper describes a university-based, multi-year project that targets building the capacity of faith-based and community-based organizations in rural areas. Like all innovative large-scale projects, the lessons learned and described in this paper may not generalize to other universities or other rural areas. The hope is that others may be guided from the unique experiences of the South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project to address the needs of rural communities.

The paper begins with an overview of the needs present in rural South Carolina and a description of what is required to build the capacity of rural faith- and community-based organizations responding to those needs. Next, a brief history of an approach taken by Clemson University is presented. The goals, objectives and activities of the South Carolina Rural Communities Project are then described. Finally, the paper concludes with lessons learned as a result of the project.

Addressing Rural Needs through Faith- and Community-based Organizations

A primary reason to focus on rural areas in South Carolina is that many rural areas are plagued by poverty, an indicator that often serves as a proxy for a variety of social and economic community distresses. In South Carolina, the majority of poor counties tend to be rural ones (South Carolina Budget and Control Board, 2007). In addition to economic poverty, several state-wide assessments indicate a high degree of social misfortune in rural areas in South Carolina (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2007; South Carolina Budget and Control Board, 2007). As the rural poor are at a higher risk for economic and social ills, a reasonable first strategy for aid is to identify social institutions that are effective in delivering rural social services. Historically, faith- and community-based grassroots groups and non-profit organizations have served rural populations when governmental services have been scarce or weak (Levine& Levine, 1970). Thus, to improve non-governmental services, a logical step would be to seek out and strengthen exemplary rural organizations.

A first step to build capacity of organizations serving distressed rural populations is to identify the needs and types of assistance required by faith- and community-based organizations that would help to accomplish their respective missions. Although the types of technical assistance typically provided to most non-profits fall into well-defined categories (e.g., board governance, fundraising, marketing), little is known about the types of technical assistance that would be of most help to rural faith-based organizations.

In order to survey the specific technical assistance needs of faith-based organizations, in 2002, Clemson University organized a conference entitled “The Role of Faith-based Organizations in Community Development”. More than 60 rural leaders listened to presentations on Charitable Choice legislation, capacity-building, and best practices service

provision. The leaders subsequently participated in focus groups and identified the following types of technical assistance as critical to the future of increasing the capacity of rural churches and faith-based organizations to serve the community: (1) a need for leadership and structured processes for church leaders to cooperate, (2) a need to build and enhance the capacity of rural church community services, (3) a need to understand successful models for faith-based community development, especially economic development (including information on how to obtain funding under Charitable Choice legislation and establish individual development account (IDA) programs), and (4) a need for better communication among rural faith-based organizations to maximize the use of resources.

In summary, although research revealed there to be considerable overlap between faith-based and community-based organizations in the areas requested for capacity-building, there were also unique capacity-building subjects listed by faith-based organizations that could enhance their abilities to socially serve their communities. At the top of the list was declared a desire for understanding how faith-based organizations might be able to access Federal funding either independently or in collaboration with other community-based organizations.

A University-based, State-wide Approach to Addressing Rural Needs

Primed with a deeper understanding of both rural needs and the capacity-building needs of rural grassroots groups and non-profit organizations, faculty and staff at the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life [Institute] at Clemson University [Clemson] began to seek out opportunities to build the capacity of rural faith- and community-based organizations. As a land-grant university, Clemson's mission is to advance knowledge related to improving health and well-being of rural communities through research, education and extension programs (see also

mission statement of Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Services, USDA)¹.

To accomplish these respective missions, the Institute developed a record of assisting organizations seeking to improve rural community well-being.

Consequently, based on a strong record of reaching and helping grassroots and non-profit organizations in the most rural areas of South Carolina, the Institute was awarded and completed 2002 and 2005 Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) Demonstration Grants from the Department of Health and Human Services. In October, 2007, the Institute again was awarded a Compassion Capital Fund Demonstration Grant. Combined, the three CCF grants have continuously funded the South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project [Compassion Project], a *university-based, state-wide initiative* to build capacity of *rural* grassroots and non-profit organizations that provide social services.

Goals and Objectives of the South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project

The overarching goal of the Compassion Project is to build the capacity of rural faith- and community-based grassroots groups and non-profit organizations to provide services to children and families in rural South Carolina.

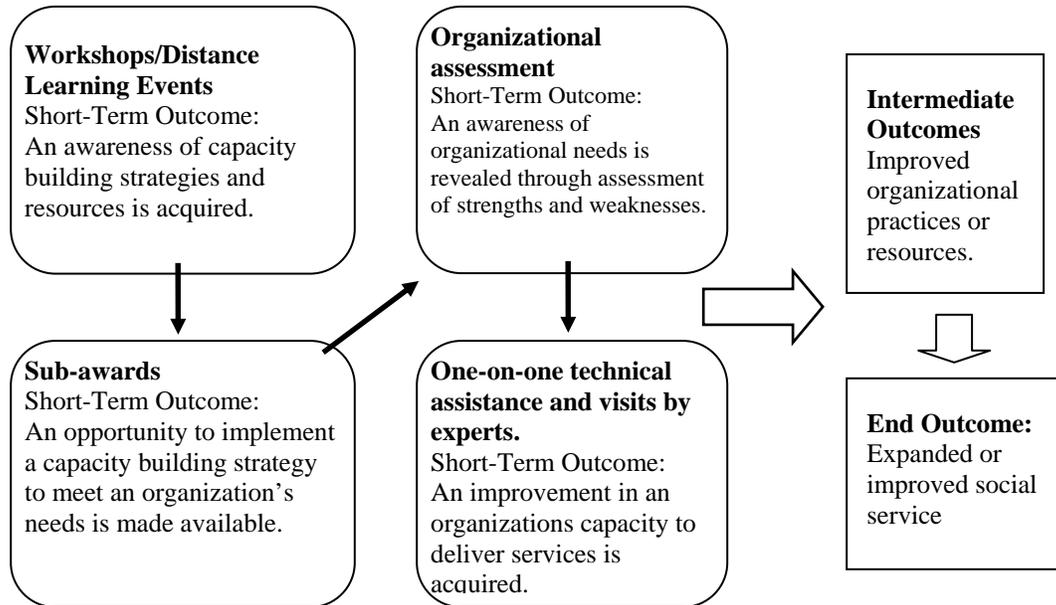
The twin objectives to accomplish this goal include (1) providing sub-awards (mini-grants) to meritorious rural organizations and (2) providing technical assistance to organizations through distance learning events, workshops, site- visits and one-on-one consultations.

Although funding streams from the three Federal grants have each contained a slightly different set of requirements, the Compassion Project has been able to use a common logic model throughout the duration of the project (2002-2010). The project logic model describes

¹ The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), is charged with managing Federal resources to advance knowledge of agriculture, the environment, and human health. CSREES works through partnerships--with Federal, university-based, and citizen partners.

how the activities of the project (technical assistance and sub-awards) are inter-related as well as how they produce measurable results and outcomes.

Compassion Project Logic Model



The workshops and distance learning events have been made freely available to any interested organization. In contrast, the sub-awards and individualized technical assistance have been made available solely to those organizations selected through an open competition process.

Activities of the South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project

Three core activities characterize the Compassion Project. The first core activity is the formation of important partnerships between the Institute and other relevant entities with similar missions to build capacity of rural grassroots and non-profit organizations. A second core activity to develop technical assistance strategies tailored to meet the needs of rural faith- and community-based organizations. Finally, a third core activity involves the selection, awarding, monitoring and evaluation of sub-awards to rural faith- and community-based organizations.

Partnerships.

In order to understand how the Compassion Project successfully engaged important partners, a little history is needed. More than a decade ago, the Institute organized a meeting of South Carolina leaders responsible for funding and building the capacity of faith- and community-based organizations. These leaders subsequently formed the South Carolina Collaborative on Grassroots and Non-profit Leadership (Collaborative). The Collaborative included representatives of all the major philanthropic foundations in South Carolina, namely, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina, Self Family Foundation, Fullerton Foundation, Mary Black Foundation, Springs/Close Foundation, and the Spartanburg County Foundation. State agencies that participated in the Collaborative included the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, the South Carolina Department of Social Services, South Carolina Educational TV (Public Television), and the South Carolina Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Services. Other major non-profit faith-based organizations and networks that participated as part of the Collaborative included the South Carolina Grantmakers Council, the South Carolina Association of Nonprofit Organizations, Bethel African-American Methodist Episcopal, United Way of South Carolina, and the South Carolina Christian Action Council.

Because collaborative capacity-building activities were underway among these organizations prior to the issuance of the Request for Proposals (RFP) by the Department of Health and Human Services for Capital Compassion Fund Demonstration Grants, a structure was present from which to build a state-wide strategy to address the capacity-building needs of rural grassroots groups and non-profit organizations. When the RFP was issued, Clemson University called upon suitable Collaborative partners to participate in a project that would focus on *rural* areas statewide and involve a diverse set of approaches to technical assistance.

Over the years, partners have contributed to the Compassion Project according to their unique abilities. For example, philanthropic foundations provided cost-share funding and facilitated access to communities; statewide faith-based organizations and networks of religious organizations provided access to mailing lists and facilitated workshops; the South Carolina Educational Television Station provided studio space and time that allowed technical assistance broadcasts to be made across the state; and state agencies helped to coordinate workshops for technical assistance. Additionally, within Clemson University, the Extension Service was utilized so that community outreach workers disseminated information throughout rural South Carolina regarding funding opportunities from the Compassion Project as well as assisted in providing technical assistance to rural organizations. Simply put, a state-wide strategy required state-wide partners and the Compassion Project was able to take advantage of pre-existing working relationships.

Training and Technical Assistance.

The task of providing state-wide training and technical assistance to rural faith- and community-based grassroots groups and non-profit organizations is daunting. First, there are the traditional issues to be resolved regarding deciding upon an appropriate curriculum and how advanced the content should be. Next, there are issues regarding the delivery system for the curriculum as well as the most appropriate strategy for utilizing technology in rural areas. All of these decisions necessarily involve a consideration of cost and the most efficient uses of time. Over the years, the Compassion Project has utilized a combination of approaches, the most important of which include (a) distance learning events, (b) workshops, and (c) personal consultation through site-visits, and phone and/or email contacts. The following reflections are

offered for each of these approaches based on experience gained through the Compassion Project.

Distance Learning Events. The most innovative strategy to provide training and technical assistance has been accomplished through a partnership with South Carolina Public Television and Clemson University's Video Production Services. As a means to reach rural audiences, experts were chosen to deliver content on capacity-building topics and their presentations were broadcast live and simultaneously downloaded across the state in community colleges, libraries and schools. During the broadcast, a local contact (e.g., a Clemson University Extension Services employee) was present to answer questions and coordinate calls for two-way interactions with the expert. Subsequently, video duplicates of these broadcasts were distributed to all libraries and United Way Agencies in South Carolina. In total, 12 events were broadcast to an average of 8 different sites across the state. Approximately 170 people attended each event. The tapes have proved popular and requests are still made for additional copies. Unfortunately, the most recent funding of Capital Compassion Fund Demonstration grants to Clemson have de-emphasized mass trainings and focused on individualized technical assistance to organizations. Consequently, broadcasting and recording distance learning events for stateside distribution are no longer an activity of the project.

Workshops. Of the 30+ workshops conducted to date by the Compassion Project, the most innovative feature has been the use of panels of local experts. Although it is common to bring an outside expert to discuss capacity-building strategies for fund-raising or board development, what has proven successful in conducting workshops in rural areas is for local faith- and community-based leaders to be put together on a panel and through facilitated discussion, speak of successes and failures. In addition to learning about substantive issues, the

local leaders often learn enough about each other's organizations that genuine opportunities for collaboration emerge.

Individual Consultations. Technical assistance has been provided through individual consultations made available on-site, in-person, over the phone and through email. In total, over 1600 grassroots and non-profit organizations have received some form of training and technical assistance. Institute faculty and staff have delivered technical assistance over the past five years on topics related to leadership development, organizational development, programs/services, funding and community engagement. The great number of requests for technical assistance and the variety of topics requested underscores the need for rural organizations to receive timely and appropriate help. Indeed, during most site-visits to sub-awardees, leaders from faith-based and community-based organizations expressed the opinion that the technical assistance received was more valuable than the money.

Sub-Awards.

To date, the South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project has distributed over \$1,500,000 in sub-awards ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000 to 121 rural organizations. Moreover, the project anticipates providing \$720,000 in sub-awards to approximately 40 rural organizations over the next three years. The culmination of experience from the distribution, monitoring and evaluating of these mini-grants has led to the following conclusions and recommendations for organizations desiring to act as intermediaries in rural areas:

(1) *The definition of "rural" should be made explicit.* As those working in rural policy know, there are many definitions for "rural." When the Compassion Project first began, an agreement about what constitutes "rural" for the purpose of eligibility for sub-awards became an important (and contested) issue for the partners to decide. Ultimately, for purposes of the

Compassion Project, “rural” became defined as those counties outside the three urban areas in South Carolina (i.e., Charleston, Columbia, Greenville). The next issue involved defining what constituted a “rural” faith- or community-based grassroots group or non-profit organization serving a rural population. The crux of the issue was whether an organization headquartered in an urban area yet serving a rural population either through outreach or a satellite office would be eligible for Compassion Project funding. The answer was that such an organization would be eligible, though admittedly, experience in grant review committees has betrayed a decided preference for rurally located organizations.

(2) The purposes for which rural organizations might make use of the sub-awards should be broad. The Department of Health and Human Services gives potential intermediaries the option of selecting among some or all of several potential purposes for sub-awards. Because of the expense associated in outreaching to rural faith- and community-based organizations and the general applicability of technical assistance on topics related to organizational capacity-building, it makes sense to allow eligibility for as wide a range of organizations as possible. Accordingly, the Compassion Project has always allowed applicants for sub-awards to list any Federally-approved purpose. Currently, that list includes sub-awards to build capacity to adopt effective models to address homelessness, elders in need, at-risk children, people transitioning from welfare to work, those in need of intense rehabilitation services such as prisoners and addicts, prisoners re-entering the community, children of prisoners, and couples who need skills and knowledge to form and sustain healthy marriages.

(3) The purposes for eligible capacity-building activities should be broad and detailed. A difficult challenge for many rural organizations is to understand that it is possible to receive funding for organizational needs unrelated to direct service provision. Because many

organizations are constantly seeking funding in order to deliver services, there is little internal reflection on how the organization might itself be improved. In order to aid in this self-reflection, the Compassion Project specifically lists the following eligible capacity-building activities: (a) infrastructure development; (b) planning; (c) coalition building; (d) capacity development; (e) training regarding best practices and how to establish demonstration projects; (f) identification of underserved populations and methods for outreach, access and support (g) grantsmanship; (h) leveraging fiscal resources; (i) technical assistance to conduct projects according to Federal guidelines; (j) reporting of activities; (k) fiscal management; (l) compliance with federal rules and regulations; (m) pinpointing gaps and duplications in services; (n) developing community priorities; (o) needs assessments; and, (p) outcome measures for service areas.

(4) *Rural faith-based organizations should be advised about appropriate uses of Federal monies.* During workshops to raise awareness about the Compassion Project, rural faith-based organization leaders typically revealed two misconceptions about Federal faith-based initiatives.² The first misconception arises from a belief that there is Federal money specifically available for faith-based organizations to enhance their capacity to deliver social services. A second misconception arises from a belief that once receipt of Federal monies takes place, an organization is susceptible to having a Federal audit of all accounting practices. To dispel these misunderstandings, the Compassion Project not only provides advice during workshops and other consultations but also makes explicit all activities that are prohibited by the Compassion Project. Because many of these prohibitions cut across Federal agencies, understanding these

² Over 30 workshops were conducted between October, 2003 and May, 2008 as part of the technical assistance provided to rural faith- and community-based leaders of grassroots groups and non-profit organizations as part of the South Carolina Rural Communities Compassion Project.

restrictions better prepares organizations to apply for funding from other governmental programs.

For example, in the Compassion Project, sub-awards may not be used for direct services to needy individuals or families, shall not supplant existing funding for similar activities and may not be used to support religious practices such as religious instruction, worship or prayer. Sub-awards may not be used to build capacity to provide programs that support inherently religious activities. Additionally, costs of organized fund raising, including financial campaigns, endowment drives, solicitation of gifts and bequests, and similar expenses solely to raise capital or obtain contributions, are unallowable. Finally, sub-awards may not be used for construction, for the purchase of real property, or to pay for capacity-building activities that support medical/health care related activities or items such as medical equipment or supplies or medically oriented trainings, certifications or licensures.

(5) *Outcome and impact measures must necessarily be modest.* For the Compassion Project, the evaluation of sub-awards ranging from relatively modest amounts of \$5,000 to \$20,000 requires a customized approach and reasonable expectations regarding the impact of the award. For every organization receiving a sub-award, an outcome measure is decided upon and a plan for reporting progress toward the outcome is developed. Depending on the purpose of the sub-award, the impact may be temporary (e.g., training of a board of directors that are replaced within a year or two) or more long-lasting (e.g., purchase of accounting software allowing development of a donor base). While measuring individual organizations' outcomes is relatively straightforward, assessing the impact of the Compassion Project statewide is more difficult. One obvious measure of the state-wide impact of the Compassion Project is that it has doubled the number of funding sources available for many rural organizations to receive sub-

awards and technical assistance. Because of the relative dearth of philanthropic organizations located in South Carolina, there is only one other organization with a statewide mission that provides philanthropic funding to rural organizations across the state.

Lessons Learned: Implications for Future Research, Policy and Practice

The lessons learned from Compassion Project have implications for future research, policy, and practice regarding capacity-building for rural faith- and community-based organizations. For research, important unanswered questions revolve around the use of land-grant universities as intermediaries. Within universities, including land-grant universities, there has been a trend away from social development of communities and a movement toward an almost exclusive focus on economic development (Fischer, 2006). Although most land-grant universities have similar assets to act as an intermediary (e.g., an Extension Service, broadcasting capability, familiarity with Federal grants), few have embraced the many Federal opportunities to take part in faith- and community-based initiatives.

An unrelated set of research questions pertain to the assessment of the various approaches to technical assistance utilized by the Compassion Project. A more thorough evaluation of the innovations used might provide useful information to other statewide approaches to technical assistance.

The implications of the Compassion Project for practice are more specific. In many rural areas, but particularly in the rural South, faith-based organizations are the only credible institutions capable of reaching underserved populations to deliver needed social services. For this reason alone, these organizations along with their secular counterparts are especially worthy of consideration for capacity-building. To reach these organizations requires innovative strategies and partnerships between many different organizations, and because these partnerships

take time to develop, a sustained effort is needed. But as the Compassion Project aptly illustrates, when there is a collective recognition of the need to serve rural populations by those with common missions, then the possibility exists for important accomplishments to take place.

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