



# New Initiative Raises Up Champions of Recovery for Rural Communities

*Reaching Rural Gathers 67 Leaders From Across Country to Address Substance Use: "Something Good Is Going to Happen"*

## Catching Up With COSSUP, April 2023

Rural communities combatting substance use are deep talent pools of the very resourcefulness, dedication, and connectedness needed to turn the tide toward better shores, not forgotten backwaters of despair and scarcity incapable of addressing challenges on their own: that was the unmistakable message delivered at the launch of the [Reaching Rural Initiative](#) at its inaugural 3-day meeting in Leesburg, Virginia, in February 2023.

Virtually all of the participants, including the 67 Reaching Rural "fellows" selected by the program, recognized that from the outset.

"You all have what it takes to do what you want to do. It's really about relationships and knowing what you need in your communities," said Dr. Jean Bennett, Regional Administrator for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), during one of the opening panel discussions. "Success will breed success."

Summing up the first day of the meeting, Greg Puckett, County Commissioner in Mercer County, West Virginia, said, "Rarely do we have a chance to reflect on the



*The inaugural meeting of the Reaching Rural Initiative, held February 22–24, 2023, in Leesburg, Virginia, brought together 67 fellows from rural communities across the United States to brainstorm innovative solutions to substance use challenges.*

importance of what we do. We did that today. The intellectual capacity in this room is phenomenal."

"You are phenomenal fellows; you all are forward thinkers," Mr. Puckett added. "You all are the reason why we're people-rich in our communities. The energy you bring to the room promotes the work you do."



*From left, Reaching Rural fellows Lisa Staggs, Becky Graham, Jessica Carr Culpepper, and Jennie Hill*

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So profound was the fellows' enthusiasm for the task ahead, in fact, that an opening introductory session originally scheduled to take 90 minutes ended up consuming the entire morning of the first day—a tribute not only to the moving personal narratives of each fellow but to the rarity of the opportunity to promote intracommunity collaboration afforded by the initiative.



*"I don't know why we haven't had this conversation before." —Meagan Miller (left), Behavioral Health Manager at the Lubbock, Texas, Health Department and a Reaching Rural fellow*

"I don't know why we haven't had this conversation before," said Meagan Miller, Behavioral Health Manager at the Lubbock, Texas, Health Department and a Reaching Rural fellow, repeating a common refrain among the fellows. "I'm just excited that we are together doing this. Something good is going to happen."

Reaching Rural is indeed designed to bring together rural practitioners from different professional backgrounds and communities throughout the country to build a national network of rural communities committed to adopting bold solutions to the persistent challenge of substance use in rural communities. The inaugural class of 67 fellows reflects diverse disciplines and unique experiences, including law enforcement, public health, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation, judges, behavioral health, elected county leadership, recovery support organizations, and other community-based providers.

Fellows participate in the Reaching Rural Initiative through one of two tracks, either as part of a cross-sector team from their community or as individuals. Fellows meet monthly, virtually and in person, to examine their local and regional challenges and identify opportunities to serve

justice-involved individuals with substance use or co-occurring disorders more effectively. Throughout the year-long program, fellows learn directly from rural practitioners and each other, receive coaching, and participate in skill-building workshops and peer-to-peer learning experiences.

Reaching Rural is co-sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the State Justice Institute (SJI).

After BJA Deputy Director Ruby Qazilbash opened the meeting with a simple vote of confidence—"You are in phenomenal hands"—the opening roundtable discussion fulfilled one of the gathering's primary objectives: informing fellows of the myriad of federal support available to rural communities in their efforts to address substance use.



*BJA Deputy Director Ruby Qazilbash opens the Reaching Rural meeting: "You are in phenomenal hands."*

In addition to SAMHSA's Dr. Bennett, representatives from BJA, the Office of Justice Programs' Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, SJI, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) encouraged fellows to expand their thinking about rural development and consider applying for funding from seemingly unlikely sources. Among those sources were the USDA's [Rural Partners Network](#), which helps rural communities find resources to create jobs, build infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability, and OVC's [Protecting Futures](#), which enables community-based organizations to provide subawards to support direct services to children and youth who are crime victims impacted by substance use. Another source

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was SAMHSA's [Addiction Technology Transfer Centers](#), a multidisciplinary resource that accelerates the implementation of evidence-based treatment and recovery practices; enhances the skills of the treatment and recovery workforce; and fosters alliances among practitioners, researchers, policymakers, funders, and the recovery community.



*BJA Senior Policy Advisor Michelle White (left): "Don't limit yourselves: partner with other applicants, delineate different roles, and rely on collaboration."*

BJA Senior Policy Advisor Michelle White said, "My advice is, don't limit yourselves: partner with other applicants, delineate different roles, and rely on collaboration. Be thoughtful and intentional—think about what you need funds for, then be competitive in applying for it."

A second roundtable, featuring representatives from the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, the

Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness, the Fletcher Group, the Housing Assistance Council, the Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR), JBS International, the National Association of Counties, and the Opioid Response Network, similarly invited Reaching Rural fellows to think expansively about solutions for substance use challenges in their communities, particularly around the issues of recovery housing and workforce development.

"Think a bit more broadly about your role," said Brendan Buff, Director of Rural Development for the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness. "Recovery is more sustainable if you get people in recovery employed; it also tends to get the attention of elected officials."

Added JBS International Project Director John Roberts, "The solutions are in the communities themselves. Find the things that fit for you, take a deep breath, and think long-term."

It was during the second day of the meeting that Reaching Rural fellows set about the practical work of mapping out specific solutions for their communities. Breakout sessions enabled groups of five to six fellows to voice challenges common to many, if not most, rural areas battling substance use: growing awareness of the intersection of substance use disorder and co-occurring mental health disorders; lack of affordable housing and reliable transportation; high turnover rates among treatment and prevention providers; and difficulty in making program impacts sustainable.



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One such breakout session featured a team of Reaching Rural fellows from Navajo County, Arizona. Each candidly acknowledged the county's challenges—the correlation between the dearth of affordable housing and employment opportunities was only one of many—and together agreed that a successful response would hinge on the establishment of a core group of stakeholders with a shared mission to work collaboratively.

Ideally, team members said that the core group would comprise the county prosecutor's office, public defenders, probation and parole services, the sheriff's office, judges, peer recovery services, public health services, veterans services, youth prevention programs, the local community college, homeless advocates, tribal services, and the housing authority. That diversity would enable the county to address another challenge, expressed by County Attorney Brad Carlyon: "We realize there are other resources we haven't tapped into. Part of the process is to figure out what resources we have."



*Navajo County, Arizona, Attorney Brad Carlyon (left) encourages Reaching Rural fellows from the county: "This is not just positive change for those we are helping, but positive change for the community."*

Ken Maruyama, strategic initiatives manager for the county, said, "I am excited to be part of this team, because they will help me learn what needs to happen. If we identify the key players in each project and come up with great ideas for seeking funding, I would get really excited about that. We are here because we are taking action."

Added Mr. Carlyon, "This is not just positive change for those we are helping, but positive change for the community. We need to show that investment in these programs is paying off in the quality of life of the community."

### TEAM NAVAJO COUNTY, AZ

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**LONNA YOUNG**  
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Board of Supervisors



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