

# COSSUP Reaching Rural Class of 2024 to Communities Back Home: “We’re Here to Make Changes”

Catching Up With COSSUP, June 2024

*Sixty-seven Fellows From 21 States Leverage Partnerships, Innovation, and Lessons Learned From 2023 to Address Substance Use in Underserved Areas*

When the 2024 class of fellows from the [Reaching Rural Initiative](#), a demonstration project of the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP), convened for the first time on April 23–25, in Fairfax, Virginia, it became clear very quickly that the groundwork laid by the inaugural class had given the new cohort much to draw on.

Addressing substance use in rural areas—the goal of Reaching Rural—is a daunting challenge beset by barriers that were well known to everyone at the meeting: scarce resources, overstretched manpower, and geographical diffusion, among others. What the 2023 class of fellows showed the new class, however, was that these barriers are not insurmountable. With the right injection of expertise and tools and a commitment to cross-sectoral collaboration, innovation, and open-mindedness, solutions *can* be found and progress made. The strategic thinking and refined approaches evident in the work of the 2023 fellows invested the class of 2024 with enthusiasm and transformative hope.



*Reaching Rural fellows followed a presentation about using the Sequential Intercept Model to map their funding needs.*



*Bureau of Justice Assistance Principal Deputy Director Tammie Gregg opened the Reaching Rural meeting: “We recognize the unique strengths you have, and the powerful collaborations. Use the strategies you get here to make progress.”*

Midge Christianson, Community Corrections Director for 6W Community Corrections in Western Minnesota and a 2023 fellow, said her region “already had resources, but something was not clicking. So we used Reaching Rural contacts to connect with a consultant for an alternative response. And now we’re offering people without a felony conviction an opportunity [to get treatment], using funds to hire a rural recovery assistant, and looking at creating a sober living environment.”

The challenge for 2024 fellows, Ms. Christianson said, was “How do you use this program to get some knowledge and guidance and tailor it to what works for you? Use this to build something that doesn’t exist in your community. You’re going to come back with a product that makes things better in the community.”

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Shawn Davis, Chief of Corrections for the Stevens County, Washington, Sheriff’s Office, and another 2023 fellow, said that when his fellowship started last year, he only knew one other member of the Stevens County team. But a site visit to a drug rehab center in Kingman, Arizona, as well as consultations with Reaching Rural coaches, showed him “how helpful it was to see the resources we actually have, to leverage them and to build networks. I realized we had to start small and build from there. And so, I spent time with my team.”

The result? Chief Davis and his team began work to build recovery housing in Stevens County. Using Reaching Rural implementation funding, they took a building identified by the public works department, re-established it as crisis stabilization housing, and are in the process of converting it to recovery housing for graduates of the local drug court, which he hopes will be up and running by the end of 2024.

“Reaching Rural’s coaches had vastly more knowledge than I was expecting. They knew something about everything, and they’re on top of what’s happening,” Chief Davis said. “By the end of [the fellowship], the question of how we would benefit the community was answered. Trust the process.”

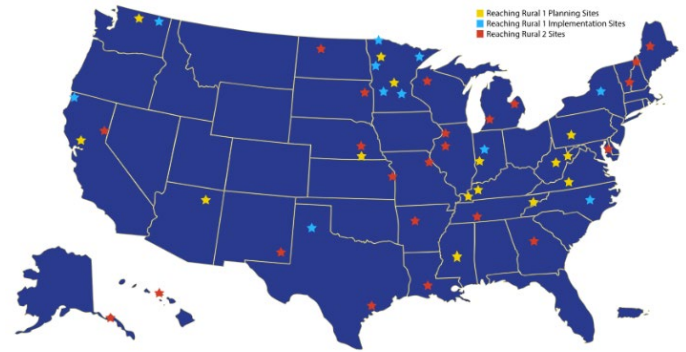
The success of the Reaching Rural model was made clear not only by the testimony of the 2023 fellows but by the scale of the competition for the 2024 fellowships: more than 100 applications were received, “which speaks to the impacts you’re having in your communities,” according to Tammie Gregg, Principal Deputy Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), one of the initiative’s sponsors.

“We’re talking about rural communities today: we recognize the unique strengths you have and the powerful collaborations you have,” Ms. Gregg said in opening the meeting. “We also recognize the barriers you face. Use the strategies you get here to make progress. We’re here today to make changes—we can’t wait to see what you do next.”

With that exhortation, the Reaching Rural class of 2024—67 fellows comprising 14 individuals and 9 teams representing 47 communities and 21 states, from across the criminal justice system and public health, behavioral health, and nonprofit sectors—got underway.

## Reaching Rural: From Planning to Implementation

Reaching Rural provides support to fellows over a year-long initiative to help them expand their leadership skills, engage them in project and systems planning, and assist them in the implementation of innovative strategies to address substance use disorder (SUD) in small and rural communities. They are selected through a competitive application process to participate along one of two tracks: either as part of a cross-sector team from their community or as individuals.



The 2024 community fellows represent the following:

- Jackson County, Texas
- Lea County, New Mexico
- Marshall/Putnam/Stark Probation Circuit, Illinois
- North Country Health Consortium, New Hampshire
- Second Judicial Treatment Court, Missouri
- Town of Springfield, Vermont
- Tuscola County, Michigan
- Watertown, South Dakota
- York County, Nebraska

Individual fellows for 2024 represent communities in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, North Dakota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

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Once chosen, fellows engage in virtual and in-person convenings, learn from each other and national experts, and identify areas of opportunity to improve outcomes for their communities and residents. Fellows also have ongoing access to a coaching team to provide support, connections to experts and resources, and assistance with project planning. Upon completion of the planning initiative, communities are eligible to apply for funding to implement a project planned during their fellowship.

Reaching Rural is co-sponsored by BJA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the State Justice Institute.

## "We Have the Passion; We Want the Know-how"

That substance use is a daunting challenge for rural communities was a given among the 2024 fellows and was reinforced during the first breakout sessions of Day One of the meeting, when participants were tasked with converting common obstacles into opportunities.

Erik Petersen, an SUD project consultant in New Hampshire and a member of the [North Country Consortium](#) team of 2024 Reaching Rural fellows, said a site visit to comparatively urban Portland, Maine, laid bare the lack of treatment options in rural northern New Hampshire.



*Erik Petersen, left, a substance use disorder project consultant in New Hampshire, discussed the challenges of treating SUDs in rural areas with fellow Reaching Rural participants from the state's North Country Consortium.*

"I could never stop thinking about [the] difference with [the] rural area," Mr. Peterson said. "The recovery capital was astronomically higher [in Portland]. And I wanted to address that in a larger demographic. So, I started working as a consultant in the same hospital in northern New Hampshire, where I had been treated myself. This is what I was supposed to be doing."

For the team from Tuscola County in Michigan, making use of scant resources placed a premium on partnerships and cross-sectoral communication. "We were forced to be more creative," said District Court Judge Jason Bitzer, who oversees mental health and juvenile mental health courts in the county. "We had to focus on things like transportation and housing and understand that when 17 of 18 members of one program have co-occurring disorders, that there isn't one clear path for most people."

"When everyone is working in their own silos and this group not communicating with the next, Reaching Rural is a good way to see what other places are doing," Judge Bitzer said, "We have the passion; we want the know-how."



*Thomas Redington, left, a treatment court judge from Missouri, recommended Botvin LifeSkills Training programming to Judge Jason Bitzer from Michigan to help youth steer clear of substance use.*



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To prove Judge Bitzer's point, Thomas Redington, a treatment court judge from the Second Judicial Treatment Court team in Missouri, recommended a life skills program for youth called [PROSPER](#) that the University of Missouri has established through extension offices in every county. Among its curricula is the highly regarded Botvin LifeSkills Training substance use and violence prevention program, which promotes mental health and positive youth development.

"That's a great way to reduce the number of people coming into the criminal justice system," Judge Bitzer replied.



*"There is a deeper passion this year than last year": Greg Puckett, a county commissioner from West Virginia and a Reaching Rural coach, summed up the first day of the meeting.*

By the time the plenary reconvened to assess the breakout sessions' programmatic recommendations—reentry initiatives, transitional housing, medication-assisted treatment (MAT), peer recovery support services (PRSS), and deflection programs chief among them—and the community buy-in required to realize them, Greg Puckett, Commissioner of Mercer County, West Virginia, and a veteran Reaching Rural coach, was prompted to say, "There is a deeper passion this year than last year—the issues are more understood."

"We learned today that rural means something, even though we come from different places. It's a passion, it's within us" Commissioner Puckett said. "We face a broad

array of issues, but there was a commonality in everything that was said today."

## Thinking Strategically About Responses to Substance Use

As Day Two of the Reaching Rural meeting began, Tara Kunkel, Executive Director of Rulo Strategies, a COSSUP training and technical assistance provider, aimed to convert Day One's recommendations into reality. She encouraged the 2024 fellows not only to learn from successful programs but to think strategically about substance use, its downstream effects on their own communities, and the existing assets they have to address them.

"Think about your community, your challenges, your needs. What sparks your excitement?" Ms. Kunkel said. "It's tempting to have a deficit mentality, that 'we don't have this.' But think about what you could do. I promise you, there are things you *can* do."



*Tara Kunkel, Executive Director of Rulo Strategies, encouraged Reaching Rural fellows to use the Sequential Intercept Model to map their programmatic and funding strategies.*

Given that substance use touches all aspects of community life—from first responders and EMS to reentry—Ms. Kunkel recommended the [Sequential Intercept Model](#), which plots points (or intercepts) at which individuals with SUDs come into contact with the criminal justice system, as a framework by which fellows could map their responses and funding needs.

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Intercepts 0 and 1, for example, which concern individuals’ relationships with community services and initial contact with law enforcement, present preemptive (and therefore cost-effective) opportunities to divert them away from arrest and toward treatment. Such initiatives, however, require buy-in from law enforcement agencies and prosecutors, among others, and their acceptance and rules vary by state.

Intercept 2, which involves initial detention and court hearings, offers similar opportunities for intervention, Ms. Kunkel said, since 65 percent of individuals in jails are at the pretrial stage and many suffer from SUDs. Likewise for Intercept 3, targeting jails and courts, where treatment courts, MAT and behavioral health treatment, and the embedding of PRSS specialists have proved to be effective strategies for preempting post-reentry problems. (She cited [Project North](#) in Massachusetts and the [Tennessee Recovery Oriented Compliance Strategy \(TN-ROCS\) Program](#) as standout examples.)

Finally, Intercept 4—reentry—places a premium on continuity of care, housing, and the provision of benefits after incarceration ends, Ms. Kunkel said. Funding is increasingly available to address all of them, she added.

When the 2024 teams took the recommendations back to their breakout rooms, Reaching Rural coaches advised fellows to apply them with intentionality to their own jurisdictions. The team from Lea County, New Mexico, described an ongoing challenge in getting community support for new approaches; Commissioner Puckett acknowledged that “it’s hard for people to get on board with change,” and pointed the team to resources such as [Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America \(CADCA\)](#), the [National Association of Counties](#), and the [Opioid Settlement Tracker](#) as potential sources of support.

“I suggest keeping this core team together but also bringing in new partners—schools, economic development offices, the local chamber of commerce—to bring in more money. They should be tied to what you’re doing,” Commissioner Puckett said.

### Peer Voices: Nothing About Us Without Us

Easily the emotional apex of the Reaching Rural meeting was a Day Two discussion among four experienced peers about ways to elevate the voices of people with lived experience to support others on their journeys of recovery. Taken together, their accounts presented a mutually reinforcing sequence of inspiration. Among their observations:

- John Nugent, Managing Director of Beacon Community Connections in Louisiana: “Lived experience gives me an authority to walk into darkness that other people don’t have. My recovery might not look the same as yours, but I want you to know there is hope.”



*John Nugent, right, Managing Director of Beacon Community Connections in Louisiana, participated in a peer panel discussion at the Reaching Rural meeting.*

- Jennifer Perdue, Executive Director of Minot Area Recovery Organization in North Dakota: “Lived experience gives me an edge and an insight into what people are going through; when working with people, it gives me almost everything I need to help them.”
- Michael Johnson, Chief Executive Officer of Turning Point Recovery Center in Vermont: “Recovery needs to be part of the solution to all the problems we have with substance use. We need to push to be at the table with the people who are making decisions about us, because our experience can help to create really great programs.”

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A final highlight of Day Two was Ms. Kunkel's rapid-fire quiz of BJA Senior Policy Advisor Michelle White about the range of COSSUP funding available to rural communities to address substance use challenges ("almost all things at the intersection of justice and behavioral health," Ms. White said), as well as effective grant-writing strategies.

The following is an excerpt of their conversation:

*Kunkel: Can COSSUP fund quick response teams or diversion programs?*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: Diversion from incarceration?*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: Peer recovery support services?*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program (ODMAP)?*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: Naloxone vending machines or leave-behind programs*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: Treatment courts?*

*White: Under a separate solicitation.*

*Kunkel: Provision of MAT or medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) in jails?*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: System-wide innovations, like embedding peers in every program?*

*White: Yes.*

*Kunkel: Housing?*

*White: COSSUP funding cannot be used to purchase a residence, but a contract for services with a nonprofit organization is allowable.*

As for writing a successful COSSUP application, Ms. White said, "It's not easy, but it's possible. Just follow instructions to the letter. But remember: once you get funding, then the real work begins, which is the stuff you're good at."



*BJA Senior Policy Advisor Michelle White, left, described the range of COSSUP funding available to jurisdictions nationwide.*