

Collaborative Solutions, Inc. (CSI)

Successes to Date

CSI, in partnership with the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), led two Rural Supportive Housing Institutes in 2009 and 2011. The Rural Supportive Housing Institute was a 10-day training course that offered practical steps toward a housing project for a target population and community. Teams consisting of nonprofit developers, housing providers, supportive service partners, and property managers participated as a group and developed a specific project plan to address a housing need or gap in their own rural community. These teams leave the Institute with a detailed project development and management plan designed to successfully access funding. Included in the over 80 hours of training and individualized TA are topics such as project vision and concept development; supportive services; building community support; budgeting and property management; and tenant leadership. The Institute is beneficial as it reduces the time it takes to fund a project by helping build a strong development team equipped to navigate the complex process of developing housing with support services. Ten organizations participated in the two Institutes and CSI saw success with all of the participants. Several examples include the following. One mental health center partnered with a low income tax credit developer and was able to secure ten rental apartments for individuals with serious mental illness. The Executive Director of an AIDS Service Organization was able to bring her staff and board with her in her journey to create affordable housing for their clients and secured 5 permanent housing apartments for HIV-positive clients that were dually diagnosed with mental illness. And yet another AIDS Service Organization created a housing continuum in their rural community – with emergency shelter, housing, and permanent supportive housing – and its Housing Director is now the new Director of the Office of HIV/AIDS Housing.

Challenges

The lack of access to funding sources for housing development and rehabilitation continues to present as a challenge for rural providers. In general, rural providers cover large geographic areas with limited staff and community resources. But rural providers are creative and do a lot with limited resources. Having said this, there are few funding sources out there that can be used towards development and rehabilitation. Federal sources such as HOME and CDBG, both of which can be used for housing development and rehabilitation, are often spread thinly across rural parts of the state or aren't used for these activities. CDBG, for example, is competitive and projects that create permanent supportive housing units may compete with projects that improve infrastructure or community facilities. These projects are able to say they benefit a large number of low- and moderate-income residents (which is a CDBG requirement) when the permanent supportive housing project may only serve 10 households. So in this case the odds are stacked against the housing projects. This is only one example but illustrates a funding challenge for housing development in rural areas.

The other challenge to highlight is there are few organizations in rural Alabama (and many rural communities) that have the capacity to take on housing development. CSI used its funding to build the capacity of organizations in rural Alabama so they were able to create housing opportunities in their communities. CSI sought out service providers that were already providing services for vulnerable individuals such as those living with mental illness or with a chronic disease like HIV/AIDS. The clients of these organizations needed a safe and affordable home and the staff of these organizations realized that they needed to create these opportunities for their clients as a means to help their clients thrive. CSI worked with each of them to develop individualized housing plans so that they could better serve their clients. This meant strengthening boards and transitioning staff to think through the provision of housing within their organizations. It is CSI's opinion that this capacity building work must continue so that additional organizations can gain the capacity to better serve their clients through housing and services. After all, everyone deserves a safe place to call home.

What Lies Ahead

CSI was fortunate to receive funding through the Rural Housing and Economic Development program. CSI's good fortune has continued and CSI are now a grantee of the Rural Capacity Building for Community Development and Affordable Housing program. Through these funds CSI has been able to expand our work on a national scale and continue to build the capacity of organizations in order to create permanent supportive housing units for vulnerable individuals and families throughout the country. CSI believes that housing is health care, and that stable housing creates positive health outcomes.