

## Rural solutions roundtables share innovative strategies with community leaders

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### AT A GLANCE

Rural leaders in western states benefit from learning about innovative community development strategies being effectively implemented in other small towns.

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### The Situation

Rural and urban communities may share common challenges and needs — housing for example — but solution design and resources available to implement them often look very different in the two environments. Effective strategies implemented in urban communities also tend to be well-publicized, while news about successful rural projects does not necessarily get the same attention, making innovation transfer to other remote areas less likely.

### Our Response

The Rural Solutions Roundtable concept grew out of a monthly Peer Learning Network meeting hosted by the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN), a University of Idaho Extension-led collection of programs designed to support and empower rural community leaders. In 2021, Peer Learning Network participants directed WeCAN to hold a virtual summit on housing, but they did not want a rehash of *why* housing is a problem in their communities. Instead, they wanted to learn about effective solutions being implemented in communities like theirs. In response, we searched across Idaho, Montana and Wyoming for housing solutions stories, ultimately recruiting seven peer leaders involved in implementing those solutions



Tiny home included in a solution story presented during the Housing Solutions Roundtable. Photo by Macy Miller.

to present what, why and how of a wide range of projects designed to increase housing stock, make it more affordable and codify policies for fair access. Two keynote speakers from organizations that support rural community housing efforts kicked off the event and there were two opportunities for participants to interact in breakout discussions with peers and presenters.

Since then, we have hosted four more roundtables in the workforce, mental health, artisan grain marketing and most recently, community accessibility solutions being implemented across the West. For each roundtable, a resource guide was created to provide guidance and resources for participants to implement solutions in their own states. The guides are posted on the WeCAN website under the [Peer Learning](#) tab along

with the video recording of all roundtable presentations and links to solution story slide presentations.

Three of the five roundtables were primarily marketed to Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The artisan grain marketing roundtable was conducted in partnership with the Northwest and Rocky Mountain Food Business center and included six western states. WeCAN co-hosted the accessibility roundtable with the Western Rural Development Center, so its reach was 13 states and territories of the western region.

### Program Outcomes

Participation in and response to the housing roundtable and four subsequent roundtables has been high and positive, with more than 600 total registrants and 350 participants. For all but one of the roundtables we did not limit participation from outside the targeted region. In the mental health roundtable, 106 participants hailed from more than 30 states, indicating significant interest in these types of forums as well as the critical need for mental health solutions in rural communities across the country.

Of 24 participants responding to the post-event evaluation following the mental health roundtable, 91.7% said that regarding “mental health solutions that could work in your community” their knowledge increased (50%) or increased a great deal (41.7%). In response to whether knowledge increased about “what your role can be in developing mental health solutions in your community,” 75% said their knowledge increased (50%) or increased a great deal (25%).

For the housing, workforce and community accessibility roundtables, evaluation responses were similar. These comments are representative:

- The housing toolkit is a winner. I have already sent it on to a dozen clients and fellow volunteers. I thought the case studies were excellent also in showing what small and rural communities can do. So much of the discussion is around big projects

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

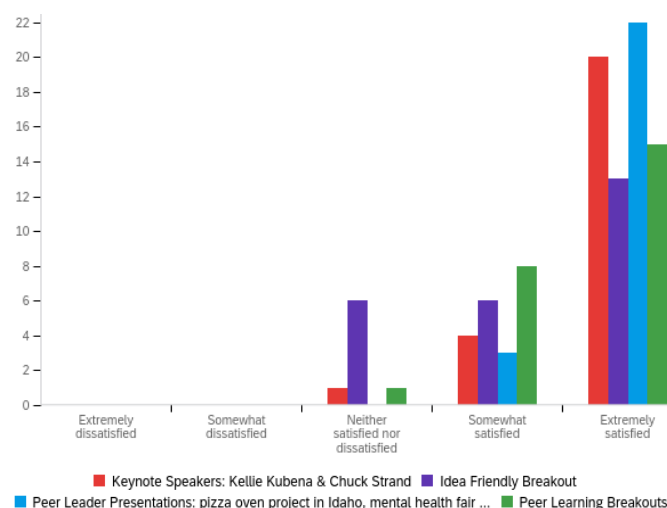
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and solutions that small communities don't have the resources to undertake.

- I loved everything about it. I'm not usually one to participate in breakout sessions like this but I just loved this one. Thank you so much. (community accessibility)

### Mental Health Roundtable Evaluation



Schooner Creek Discovery Park, which is accessible to people with a wide range of abilities, in Lincoln City, Oregon.

### The Future

WeCAN programs, including future solutions roundtables, will continue to be co-hosted with the Western Rural Development Center. This expanded reach and access to resources to organize roundtables will enrich peer conversations and increase awareness of solutions to rural community challenges.