A Year of Strength



The 2015-2016

Annual Report

New York State Rural Housing Coalition, Inc

79 North Pearl Street, Albany, NY 12207

[www.ruralhousing.org](http://www.ruralhousing.org)

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A Message from the Acting Executive Director

Transition can be a scary word, and over the years we have seen many other non-profits stumble and right themselves when an Executive Director leaves. When Blair Sebastian announced his retirement in 2015, fear of change and the unknown was certainly present for me. All sorts of questions presented themselves, including how big was the learning curve going to be for the staff remaining, while we continued to do our *other* jobs? We faced some challenges certainly, but I’m pleased to say that we’ve not only weathered the challenges, but I truly believe we’ve completed the year in a strong position, both financially and programmatically. I would be remiss if I didn’t credit Lorraine Wynne for her role keeping the good ship Coalition moving steadily through some choppy seas.

From a fiscal standpoint, we constructed a budget that took a very conservative stance in regard to our income streams. If we did not absolutely know that an income source was definite, we did not include it. We also worked very hard to anticipate all of our expense obligations, and the good news is there were no surprises. We managed to secure some consulting work that we did not expect, which improved our bottom line, and we found a short term tenant to sub-let the former Executive Director’s old office. That transaction has been very fortuitous, as we were able to rent the office to one of our members, who is developing an affordable housing complex nearby. We benefited from some additional income, and were able to help a member organization to complete the rent-up of their project.

This year has given us the opportunity to go through a number of our contracts, internal policies, and operating procedures and clean house, resulting in a leaner, more efficient operation. This has resulted in some cost savings, as well. We have jettisoned some old ways of doing business, along with a fair amount of outdated electronic gear and old file folders.

Our biggest contract is with the NYS Homes and Community Renewal in support of training and technical assistance to build the capacity of the Rural Preservation Companies across the state. One of the key activities supported by that contract is a series of regional trainings for the preservation companies that are intended to provide opportunities for the staff of these mostly-small nonprofits to get together, share war stories, laugh a bit, and have a dialogue about common problems in the region. This year, these trainings proved to be jam-packed with brainstorming about common problems, sharing of resources and ideas, and left me beyond impressed with the store of information and creativity found in our industry.

A year ago, transition was a very scary word. Looking back on the year, I am proud of the opportunities that the Rural Housing Coalition has found in the transition experience, and I firmly believe that our organization is substantially stronger for having faced the challenge.

Respectfully submitted,

Colin D. McKnight

Acting Executive Director

Fulfilling Contracts

One of the primary activities of the Rural Housing Coalition is to support the development and efficacy of the network of Rural Preservation Companies under contract with the State of New York. We provide training and direct technical assistance to enable RPCs to access new funding, begin new projects and programs, and in many cases do more with less. The impact of our contract for these services has eroded over time simply due to inflation, and during the 2015-16 year it became apparent that this work needed additional support. We were able to secure additional support for this work through grants from Kinderhook Bank, the John Ben Snow Foundation, and The Community Foundation of South Central New York. These additional layers of support have become critically important in our ability to achieve the Coalition’s mission.

The Coalition’s contract with HCR contains three key elements: direct technical assistance services to work with RPC staff on specific concerns, projects, or capacity development; training workshops to keep RPCs up to date on the latest innovations in the industry; and development of content for inclusion in a report to the state legislature on the impact of the RPC program.

Our direct technical assistance services generally work one on one with the leadership of RPCs to resolve technical concerns, devise creative strategies for dealing with new community development challenges, address staffing and succession issues, assist with strategic planning efforts,

Geographic isolation of RPCs limits access to the regular interchange of ideas and concepts for new program activities or project ideas. The Coalition operates an active training program to bring together RPC staff, provide opportunities to network, and learn about advances in the affordable housing and community development industry. The primary training activity of the Coalition is our fall conference, which was held for the second year in Oswego during September. The HCR contract supported several workshops at the conference as it is the best opportunity to make training available to the broadest audience each year.

In addition to the conference, the Coalition organizes a series of peer trainings that organize the RPCs regionally. This year, the Peer to Peer trainings were held in Brunswick, hosted by ROUSE, RPC, in Tupper Lake at the Wild Center, in Owego, hosted by Tioga Opportunities, and in Lyons, hosted by CASH, Inc. [Ed. Note: if you have not had the chance to visit the Wild Center to learn more about the natural history of the Adirondacks, go! It’s an amazing place.]

All of the trainings that the Coalition has ever organized have been open to members of Boards of Directors of RPCs, but historically those invitations have gone un-used. Typically, we find that Board members do not have the time to travel long distances to participate in training workshops. This year, we developed a series of Board trainings for an RPC located in central New York. To make it feasible to deliver short monthly trainings as part of the regular board meetings of the organization we turned to Skype as the delivery technology, and have found it works quite well for this purpose. We are looking forward to doing more of this type of training in the future.

This year, the Coalition developed four RPC project profiles for inclusion in the report to the legislature. Every effort is made in project selection to avoid re-profiling an RPC that has been featured in the report in the past. The goal is to show, over a period of years, the breadth of creativity across the network, and the range of challenges being solved in rural New York’s diverse communities.

One of the projects profiled in this year’s annual report was the opening of the Lace Mill, a factory conversion by RUPCo that created affordable artist’s housing in a former industrial building. While this project is noteworthy for its targeted audience (there aren’t many artist residence projects in rural communities in New York so far), we didn’t profile the project as much as we focused on the community engagement effort that was wrapped into the grand opening of the project. The ‘party’ was a well-thought-out effort to introduce the new residents to the neighborhood businesses, and the neighbors to the rehabilitated building. This engagement has already resulted in significant measurable benefits for the neighborhood, and is encouraging nearby private investment. Another profile included in the report described the challenges of a disabled resident of a dilapidated mobile home in the Finger Lakes region who chopped wood to keep his home warm, despite needing crutches to stand. With the assistance of Community Progress, Inc., he now lives in a handicapped accessible doublewide unit with a working heating system. Another disabled homeowner was profiled in the City of Cortland. She received assistance from Cortland Housing Assistance Council to purchase a home of her own, AND the home was ramped to provide her with full access, thanks to a modular ramp program operated by the RPC. The fourth profile detailed the re-development of a vacant former five and dime in the downtown of Lyons by CASH, Inc. The vacant storefront was a blight in the downtown, and the RPC took on the project to create a new business called the Community Co-op at Newberry. The new business is a subsidiary of the RPC, and offers local crafters, artists, and cooks the opportunity to sell their merchandise locally. Part of the building is an antique center, as well. With a full schedule of community events and activities, the Co-op is attracting new traffic to the downtown and improving the economy of Wayne County.

In addition to our work with RPCs, the Coalition completed consulting work as part of a team organized by the Housing Assistance Council in Washington, DC. This year, HAC contracted with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to create a toolkit of resources for rural housing development agencies, including some resources on using HUD funding in partnership with USDA issued-and-guaranteed mortgages. We also were approved by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance as contractors for homeless shelter monitoring activities, and completed 2 small consulting contracts- one for training on Main Street revitalization, and the other to assist with Board development of a small senior living facility.

1) Success Stories

In April, 2016, Governor Cuomo announced the award of development funding for a number of supportive housing projects, including 2 projects that had a Coalition role. St. Joseph's Addiction Treatment and Recovery Centers was awarded $5,564,085 for a project in Malone in Franklin County. Keuka Housing Council in Yates County was awarded $1,569,513 for a project in Dundee. The Coalition had a key role in accessing consulting and grant writing services for these projects.

2) Site Visits to RPCs

New York’s Rural Preservation Companies remain a core constituency for the Coalition. Recognizing that our services are best delivered face-to-face, a conscious decision was made to try to visit each of the nearly 60 RPCs across the state during the program year. While that goal proved ambitious, we made some serious headway, making an appearance at the offices of 23 of the preservation companies all across the state. This effort will continue.

3) Grants Received

In order to supplement our technical assistance contracts, the Coalition has pursued philanthropic and corporate funding sources since summer, 2015. We are pleased that we have been able to secure a number of grant awards to support our ongoing work. During this past year, funding has been received from: Kinderhook Bank, Berkshire Bank, John Ben Snow Foundation, Community Foundation of South Central NY, TD Bank Charitable Foundation. The grants from Kinderhook Bank, the John Ben Snow Foundation, and the Community Foundation of South Central New York have allowed us to provide increased technical assistance services to housing and community development agencies in targeted geographic regions.

We are extremely pleased that we have subsequently received grants from the John Ben Snow Foundation and TD Bank to continue our work in the coming year.

4) Program Development

Coalition staff is pursuing several new program ideas as a result of a new effort to solicit feedback from our membership and the larger community using Survey Monkey surveys as an information-gathering tool, among other efforts. The data collected from these surveys will be used to inform policy makers as appropriate and to guide decision-making at the Coalition on new initiatives.

5) Fiscal Management

The financial accounts of the Rural Housing Coalition were audited by staff of EFPR Group, CPAs in August, 2016, and the audit report is scheduled to be presented to the board of directors on September 16, 2016.

6) Partnerships

The Coalition is a member of both the National Low Income Housing Coalition NLIHC), the National Rural Housing Coalition (NRHC), and the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC). These partnerships at the federal level allow us to bring issues from rural New York to the attention of policy makers at the national level. In addition, we can support the efforts of the national organizations when they are working on New York-specific issues. As an example, the NCRC worked extensively this past year on the merger of Key Bank and First Niagara Bank and the impact on access to banking services for lower income New Yorkers. The Coalition was at the table to ensure that the needs of rural communities were not ignored in the development of the final community benefit agreement signed between Key Bank and NCRC.

7) Technology

The Coalition has long struggled to keep abreast of the ever-changing world of office technology. This year, we began the process of exploring how we might structure our technology package differently in an effort to reduce the cost of replacing and updating much-needed hardware. By the end of the fiscal year, we had replaced some of our desktop hardware, and began planning for changing from an in-house server to a cloud-based server. That conversion will continue in the 2016-17 fiscal year.

1. As of January, 2016. Mr Brown succeeded Steve Hack as Treasurer [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As of January, 2016. Mr Vogt succeeded Mr Brown, who had previously served as Secretary [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Leave of Absence, 2015/16 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)