Blandin Foundation™
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

# Final Report to the Blandin Foundation and University of Minnesota Extension

(for internal leaders only)


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**February 28, 2025**

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# Introduction

The Blandin Foundation and University of Minnesota Extension have supported rural community leaders and built community capacity for years, and understand the world is changing. Staying grounded in community is one way these organizations continue to keep a pulse on Minnesota's communities. As a result, the two organizations implemented a collaborative and asset-based reflection process to provide community benefits and inform organizational planning for future community leadership development programming.

The *Highlighting stories of community resilience in Minnesota* project invited rural communities across Minnesota to apply to participate in a Ripple Effects Mapping process to capture the elements and impacts of innovative community development efforts. The guiding questions for the project were:

- How have communities built resilience through an inclusive and collaborative project and/or through responding to crises or problems?
- What were the key contributors to resilience in these communities? and
- What is common across communities, and what is unique and different?

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is a group qualitative evaluation method that produces a visual mind map to tell the story of a program, depicting the effects of a program or initiative. As a participatory method, REM energizes participants, often leading to an increase in community action based on the lessons learned during the evaluation process. Ripple effects mapping reports are often used by organizations and communities to bring visibility to their work, apply for additional funding, attract media stories, recruit new residents, or otherwise strengthen a community.

# Application process

In January and February of 2024, project planners[1] issued an application inviting communities to participate in the REM process (see Appendix B). Communities needed to be located in rural Minnesota with a population under 35,000.

As an incentive to apply, communities would receive:

[1] The project planning team was Becky Adams and Ellen Squires of the Blandin Foundation, Holli Arp of University of Minnesota Extension, and Scott Chazdon, retired evaluation specialist from University of Minnesota Extension, who served as a consultant to the Blandin Foundation during this project.

- the opportunity to energize, motivate, and engage community members as they reflect, celebrate, and share your stories of resilience[2],
- the chance to capture what worked well and what could be strengthened so they can successfully do it again. (Examples of REM reports: Infographic, Report, Map)
- a way to inspire additional action by hearing stories of community resilience and other examples of leadership that spur others into action as well.

The application requested that organizations briefly describe a project in their community or communities where a group has shown resilience and moved important initiatives forward. Each applicant was asked to list five to ten community members who have been involved with the project and would serve as a planning committee for the community if their project was chosen.

A total of 23 communities applied to participate in the project. From this list, project planners agreed to invite up to ten communities to participate in the REM process during the late spring and summer of 2024. The planning team chose the ten community projects based on the following criteria:

- Fit: The community project was a good fit for REM methodology
- Readiness: The community project was at a point where REM will be impactful
- Topical relevance: The community project focused on a broadly relevant issue and
- Capacity: The community project appeared to have enough people and time to dedicate to REM

In recruiting and choosing the ten communities, the project planning team also paid attention to diversity in community size, diversity in geographic location/region, and diversity in culture. Applications from Native nations were encouraged.

In March 2024, the planning team selected ten community projects to move forward with the process. These were:

[2] We did not further define resilience in the application process, but for purposes of this end-of-project report, it is helpful to have one such as the RAND Foundation's. They define community resilience as "the sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations." https://www.rand.org/topics/community-resilience.html

- **The Bridge Center (Pelican Rapids)** - a youth center connecting generations and cultures that stands as a bridge toward a more connected, supportive, and thriving community.
- **Buffalo Lake Hector Stewart School Levy** - school district support for the Little Stangs Learning Center in response to community need for day care options.
- **CornerStone Community & Youth Center (Frazee)** - creation and support of a community youth center to improve youth mental wellbeing and resilience in Frazee
- **Heartland Lakes Development Commission (Hubbard County/Park Rapids)** - development of workforce housing units intended for the "missing middle" in the housing continuum – people who make too much to qualify for subsidies but can't always afford market rate housing.
- **The Honoring Dakota Project (Red Wing/Prairie Island Indian Community)** - a series of community engagement events, many art-focused, to address disparities and strengthen intercultural understanding between the Red Wing and Prairie Island Indian Community.
- **Lake City Port Authority Underwood Terrace Housing Development** - development of affordable rental housing including several supportive housing units for people with disabilities.
- **Lived Experience Leaders (Winona)** - a cohort program that provides resources, support, and mentorship to people of color and people from marginalized backgrounds to grow as community leaders.
- **Mesabi East Environmental Education Center (Aurora)** - repurposing of an over 50-year-old floral and greenhouse business as an Environmental Education Center offering youth opportunities to learn and develop needed workforce and life skills.
- **Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures (Onamia)** - creation of a Tribal Economy Business Incubator (TEBI) that provides training, lending, and one-one-one advising services to start and grow vital small businesses.
- **Torneo de basketball (Austin)** - creation of an annual basketball tournament begun by the Oaxacan immigrant community and has become an opportunity for all in the Austin community to learn about Oaxacan culture and connect people with resources.

## The REM process in each community

During the spring months of 2024, each of the ten selected community project teams worked with members of the Blandin/Extension project team to plan three-hour REM sessions in the summer. During this period, the Blandin/Extension planning team recruited several Extension educators to assist with the REM sessions,[3] provided training on REM facilitation, and created a facilitator guide so that each of the ten REM sessions would be implemented consistently. As part of this training process, the Blandin/Extension team developed a set of Appreciative Inquiry questions that would be used for all ten community REM sessions. During the REM process, participants interview each other in pairs using these questions:

- Please share a story about one or more highlights or successes that emerged from the [name of project] and what you think were the key elements of success.
- Please tell me about new or deepened connections with others (individuals, communities, organizations, educational institutions, government, philanthropic) you made as a result of your involvement with the [name of project]? What did these connections lead to?
- What unexpected things did you observe in the community that contributed to the success of the [name of project]?
- What lessons about community leadership did you take away from the [name of project]?
- Please share any insights you have about how your community was able to overcome barriers to the [name of project].

During the planning process, the local team from the Bridge Center in Pelican Rapids decided that it was too early in the Bridge Center's history for them to conduct the REM session and they withdrew from the project.

Each REM session was held in a community location determined by the local team and a meal was provided for participants during each session. After each live session, the project planning team provided a Google form with the Appreciative Inquiry questions to each community to elicit responses from people who were unable to attend the live session. The dates and number of participants for each of the remaining nine community sessions are shown below. The number of participants includes both

[3] In addition to the four core project team members, the following Extension staff supported the REM sessions: Rebecca Leys, an Extension Community Economics educator, supported the Lake City and Park Rapids sessions; Ellen Wolter, Leadership and Civic Engagement educator, supported the Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, Frazee and Mesabi East sessions; Isabel Huot, Leadership and Civic Engagement educator, supported the Lived Experience Leaders and Honoring Dakota sessions; Jennifer Aranda, Leadership and Civic Engagement educator, supported the Park Rapids session; Kim Guenther, Leadership and Civic Engagement educator, supported the Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart session.

participants who attended the live session as well as participants who responded to the Appreciative Inquiry questions using the online Google form:

**Table 1. The nine projects, REM dates, and participation**

| Project/location | Date | Number of participants |
|---|---|---|
| Mesabi East Environmental Education Center (Aurora) | June 12 | 26 |
| Austin Torneo de Basketball | June 28 | 26 |
| Lake City Underwood Terrace | July 26 | 11 |
| Lived Experience Leaders (Winona) | July 29 | 17 |
| Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart School District | July 30 | 20 |
| Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures (Onamia) | August 13 | 13 |
| Heartland Lakes Development Commission (Park Rapids) | August 26 | 14 |
| Honoring Dakota Project (Red Wing/Prairie Island) | September 16 | 28 |
| Cornerstone Community & Youth Center (Frazee) | September 17 | 21 |

After each live session, each community's ripple effects map was incomplete with only data reported out during the session. During the weeks after the session, project staff[4] added additional interview data to the map from interview notes collected during the session to create a rough draft. Staff then sent these rough drafts to each community team for review. In most cases, the local teams made edits and clarifications to the maps. Once the maps were finalized, staff wrote a report for each community. This report was then sent to the community for review. Once final comments were received for each community, project staff sent a final report in both Word and PDF format. As described in the "Lessons learned during the process" section below, this process did not always go quickly or smoothly.

## Overarching themes across the nine communities

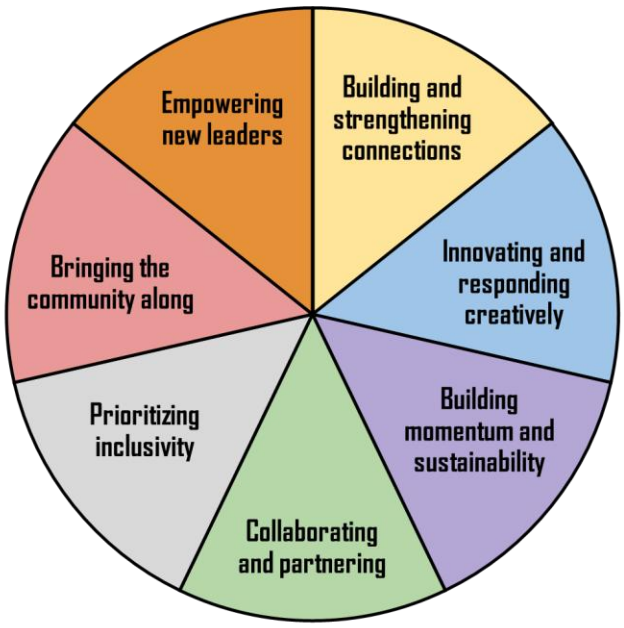
During the REM process, each community's interview data was grouped into themes that capture the primary pathways the community project had "rippled" out into their communities. While each set of community themes was unique, it is informative to examine the common themes across the nine communities — a "meta-theming" process

[4] Primary mapping and report writing responsibilities for each community were divided between Scott Chazdon and Ellen Squires. Chazdon mapped and wrote reports for Austin, Lake City, Lived Experience Leaders, Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart, and Honoring Dakota while Squires mapped and wrote reports for Mesabi East, Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures, Heartland Lakes, and Cornerstone.

— to gain insight about common elements of community resilience across the nine projects.

In November of 2024, the two evaluation leads for the project, Chazdon and Squires, met to conduct this meta-analysis. The process was an iterative process in which the evaluators searched for common meta-themes among the nine distinct projects and continued to revise the meta-themes to find the best fit with the themes from individual projects.[5] The distinct themes from the nine communities and the color-coded meta-themes, which we named the "core elements of communities resilience" are shown in the Appendix and in Figure 1 and Table 2 below. While not all of these meta-themes were present in the unique themes from each community, the presence of a theme in at least four communities was used by the evaluators as the minimum for generating a meta-theme. We should note as well that aspects of many of these meta-themes were present in communities even if the themes created for a specific project didn't explicitly fit. For example, while the meta-theme of "empowering new leaders" was only evident in four communities, there was interview data from other communities that validated the relevance of this meta-theme.

**Figure 1. Meta-analysis themes: Core elements of community resilience**




In this section of the report, we describe each of these meta-themes and provide examples from the community projects. In a later section, we discuss the implications of each of these elements for community development practice.

[5] This method is referred to as the constant comparison method in qualitative research and is attributed to the work of Glaser and Strauss. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. Chicago: Aldine.

**Table 2. Core elements of community resilience and their definitions**

| Core elements of community resilience | Definitions | Number of communities in which this core element was a major theme |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Building and strengthening connections | Creating connections in the community and contributing to social cohesion; building bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. | 8 of the 9 communities |
| 2. Innovating and responding creatively | Responding to problems and roadblocks creatively; thinking bigger and differently, even "outside the box," identifying a need in community and developing innovative solutions. | 7 of the 9 communities |
| 3. Building momentum and sustainability | Building momentum within their own communities one achievement at a time and inspiring more projects that build on what was created, setting up the community for future success by establishing new ways of doing things together. | 7 of the 9 communities |
| 4. Collaborating and partnering | Formal and informal collaboration among organizations in different sectors of the community. | 6 of the 9 communities |
| 5. Prioritizing inclusivity | Amplifying voices from historically underrepresented communities to bring their own cultural traditions into community decision-making processes. | 6 of the 9 communities |
| 6. Bringing the community along | Reaching out to and educating community members about the project, listening to voices from different perspectives and responding to concerns when they arise, meeting people where they are at to establish buy-in. | 5 of the 9 communities |
| 7. Empowering new leaders | Reaching out to nontraditional leaders, including youth, and giving them the tools they need to succeed. | 4 of the 9 communities |

## Core element 1: Building and strengthening connections

We defined this first core element as "creating connections in the community and contributing to social cohesion; building bonding, bridging, and linking social capital." While closely related to the meta-theme of collaborating and partnering, this theme was more about individuals connecting with other individuals, and not only with individuals who shared common backgrounds, but also with individuals from different backgrounds as well as community leaders.

Overall, this core element is about the importance of connectivity and networking. In a popular handbook on the power of social networks, Plastrik and Taylor (2006)[6] write that "in practical terms, networks can boost efficiency and effectiveness, attract

[6] Plastrik, P., & Taylor, M. (2006). *Net gains: A handbook for network builders seeking social change. Innovation Network for Communities.* Retrieved from https://soaz.info/network_handbook.pdf

supporters and resources, and help increase focus, sustainability, and capabilities. They transform one's capacity to act" (p. 23).

*Austin*
This transformed capacity to act was evident in Austin, where members of the Oaxacan immigrant community created and deepened connections with community leaders as well as members of their own community to create and grow a widely appreciated weekend basketball tournament and festival.

The Torneo has brought people from the Austin community together. A group member shared that ***the key is that the event is so large that it brings people who normally wouldn't get involved.*** He also noted that becoming involved with the Torneo has allowed him to create new friendships. Another participant shared that ***due to the Torneo, people gather who you haven't seen in many years. The people and interactions are amazing.***

As a result of the connections made between Oaxaca community members and local authorities, the Torneo has grown and now attracts people and organizations wanting to engage with the Oaxacan community. For example, the public health department came to the event to offer vaccines during COVID. In addition, the successful experience of community engagement between local authorities and the Oaxaca community has resulted in an increase in the capacity of local authorities to adjust to the different customs and needs of other new populations, such as the Karen, a refugee group from Burma.

A participant summed up the strong sense of connection between the Oaxaca community and local authorities by saying: ***I never thought we would be at this level interacting with leaders in the community***.

*Honoring Dakota*
The benefits of networking were also evident in the Honoring Dakota project, a process of community conversations and events to advance cultural awareness and Indigenous representation within the Red Wing community. In the case of the Honoring Dakota project, building and strengthening connections needed to attend to trust in these relationships.

A group member shared that it all ***started with the HDP team establishing connections with local organizations and individuals, building trust within these connections. These connections will only lead to better and greater things.*** Another participant commented that ***the value of relationships in building a strong community is strengthened because we took the time to build them.***

It is no surprise that building and strengthening connections would be such a prominent theme in this REM project about community resilience. These community projects were successful because of the quantity and quality of the relationships they built. As noted by

leadership eductor Kathy Allen, change flows along the lines of relationship.[7] As she writes: “The next time you engage in systems change, take stock of the quality of relationships and trust you have in the system. If you can strengthen both, the impact of the change will move beyond transactional to transformational, giving wings to the future you hope to realize.”

## Core element 2: Innovating and responding creatively.

We defined this second core element as “responding to problems and roadblocks creatively; thinking bigger and differently, even "outside the box," identifying a need in community and developing innovative solutions.” As noted by urban studies theorist Richard Florida, “the myth that urban areas are creative and rural areas are not is just that: a myth.[8]” In some of the communities we visited, this creativity was out-of-the box thinking by people who are normally associated with bureaucratic in-the-box thinking. In some communities, it was people from nonprofit organizations, often more nimble than large bureaucracies, that sparked the innovation.

*Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart School District (BLHS)*
For example, while it is not unusual for school districts in Minnesota to offer pre-kindergarten programs, the commitment on the part of the BLHS to provide childcare from birth to pre-K was noteworthy. The school district took on a considerable financial commitment with Little Stangs Learning Center, and participants in the REM session described many ways the district has innovated, working with local governments, foundations to bring Little Stangs into existence.

A group member shared that the Buffalo Lake EDA was very progressive to start something like this. As noted earlier, the land for the Little Stangs building was donated by a local family. The EDA came together with the school district with collaborative funding for the facility. The school district’s willingness to collaborate on this project was seen as a significant change by many participants, since there had not been school district support for a childcare facility in the past.

Furthermore, the financing for the Center was complex, involving creative thinking and flexibility among many entities from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

[7]https://kathleenallen.net/insights/trust-and-transactional-vs-transformational-relationships/
[8]https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-01/what-makes-a-rural-creative-hub-innovation-and-the-arts

*Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures (MLCV)*
In the case of MLCV, a nonprofit organization created by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, program leaders drew on a model that was developed in an urban setting and adapted it to rural and Tribal context. Rather than employing a traditional economic development model of recruiting businesses from the outside and bringing them to their community, they focused instead on identifying and lifting up entrepreneurs who were already in the community. In taking this approach, MLCV became a pioneer in Tribal economic development in the state. One participant noted that, ***if we and our partners are leading this, it can help normalize this across the state.***

Program leaders showed innovation in adapting the model used for the Tribal Economy Business Incubator (TEBI), and they are intent on continuing to innovate and grow the program. They are envisioning future additions including entrepreneurial alumni events and opportunities that are specific to retail or specific to industries. As it continues to grow, a core part of the TEBI model won't change: its inclusivity. Participants emphasized that this is a fundamentally inclusive model, intended not only for Mille Lacs Tribal members but for everybody who is within the Mille Lacs economy.

## Core element 3: Building momentum and sustainability.

We defined the third core element as "building momentum within their own communities one achievement at a time and inspiring more projects that build on what was created, setting up the community for future success by establishing new ways of doing things together." There was a sense of strategy in many of the projects that one accomplishment is needed to lead to other accomplishments – that success has to be proven one step at a time to the broader community.

*Frazee*
The momentum that the CornerStone Community & Youth Center has built is leading to other investments in the community. People shared that there are new businesses and projects that have fed off the energy. New restaurants have been popping up, and new events are taking place. This summer, a group of community members launched "Fridays in Frazee," another opportunity for the community to engage in fun activities together, to capitalize on the new energy that CornerStone helped create.

CornerStone's success is also contributing to changes in other organizations in the community. A participant shared that Becker County is now more involved and thinking differently about their community-based work. Similarly, CornerStone has helped to motivate a regional park team to keep moving things forward.

The energy that CornerStone built is perhaps best encapsulated by a new phrase floating around town: Frazee Forward. Frazee Forward is an actual initiative that meets monthly, where businesses and community members plan for events to continue the energy, but it is also a mindset. Someone said, it is great to see how this one idea has changed a negative vibe into Frazee Forward. People are planning for the future and thinking about new investments in their town that can make it a resilient and sustainable community.

*Park Rapids*
The Pine Crest project moved the community towards its goals of increasing housing stock. While Pine Crest added 58 new housing units to the community, participants acknowledged that the need for housing – both for more units and for more types of units – remains. In that sense, ***this was one step in their longer-term strategic plan in addressing the shortage across the board, whether it's senior housing, apartments, or single family.*** But it was a step that will pay dividends.

The community showed that it is thinking long-term and holistically about the housing issue. They acknowledged that for the community to be viable into the future, it is paramount to address the housing crisis. Their starting point is thinking about how to create a place where people want to move to or continue to live in. They ask themselves: ***what can we as a community do? What don't other places have? Right now that's housing.***

Successful completion of the Pine Crest project helped set the stage for future community development work. It built confidence in the people involved, and showed the community what can be done, perhaps building their own confidence and trust in their community leaders. Project leaders celebrate success while also noting they are ready for the additional work that lies ahead of them as they continue to create a sustainable, growth-oriented community.

People involved in Pine Crest made sure that it was a project that would be beneficial to the community at large. They believe that creating more housing in their community benefits others because it will draw more people to town who can fill vacant jobs and who will be patronizing local businesses. One participant described this as ***more of a holistic approach – is it good for the whole county, all taxpayers.*** They also emphasized that this benefits the community by assisting with the housing progression: ***people have to have a starting point but then they'll progress. It gives people upward mobility without having to leave town.***

## Core element 4: Collaborating and partnering

A more organizational form of social capital was needed for these community projects to succeed. We defined the fourth core element as "formal and informal collaboration among organizations in different sectors of the community." In some communities, this collaboration involved organizations from outside the community, while in others the collaboration was established among entities within the community.

*Lake City*
The Underwood Housing project was built on a foundation of collaboration among public, private, and nonprofit sector organizations. As shared by a participant, the initial spark for the project came from Lake City's EDA, and this led to building a stronger relationship with Three Rivers Community Action. A group member commented that the project helped the city organizationally build relationships with Three Rivers. ***We've had a relationship over the years. They've worked in Lake City***

***doing things, but this was the first time we've worked with them on the land development side. Three Rivers serves a large area in four counties in southeast Minnesota, but also serves 20 counties with housing projects.***

As the project evolved, more organizations became involved and this collaboration led to new thinking and decisions. The project was originally going to be 32 affordable units, but a group member shared that in order to increase the likelihood of receiving a federal low income housing tax credit, the project needed to include eight units of supportive housing for people with disabilities, mental health issues, or chemical dependency. A participant noted that ***Three Rivers also had experience with the Supportive Housing piece.***

Once the decision to include supportive housing was made, there was concern in the community that this supportive housing aspect would draw undesirable people to the community. In response to these concerns, proponents worked hard to share stories that humanized the people in need of these housing opportunities.

A group member shared that the collaboration needed to build Underwood Terrace was ***a great example of community leadership success and a benchmark for our community moving forward.*** To complete the project, collaboration was needed at every stage – to get initial approval, receive initial and supplementary funding, and during construction. A participant commented that proponents needed to think outside the box to get this project done, needing ***to look outside of local resources to learn about what works in Minnesota, the U.S. and other countries.***

*Mesabi East*

Leadership and participants in the Mesabi East Environmental Education Center (ME3C) have effectively integrated themselves into the community by identifying opportunities to form relationships, contribute to, or collaborate on something. A key component of the collaborative ecosystem created by ME3C is the program's strong relationships with farmers and producers. They have collaborated with a local ranch to get local meat in the cafeteria, which has been beneficial to the rancher, who said, ***The Farm 2 School provided our ranch with a way to guarantee we'd have a sale for a certain number of animals, which ripples to us being able to raise more and improve our ranch to hopefully provide more for the school.*** ME3C has found ways to support other producers with tenacity and creativity. They sent a school bus nearly 150 miles to pick up apples from an apple orchard, and worked with a farmer with surplus berries, making them into smoothies and other products. Even the superintendent has become involved, getting products like Red Lake walleye, Minnesota-made butter, and wild rice.

Finally, ME3C has contributed to a collaborative ecosystem within the Mesabi East school. The program works with the art teacher to create opportunities for students to decorate for a local Christmas festival, and the Family and Consumer Sciences class uses farm to school products to create new recipes that can be used in the cafeteria. Critical

to these efforts is the support of teachers. ***The teachers bringing their students shows the importance of ME3C. The teachers support makes it go!***

## Core element 5: Prioritizing inclusivity

The fifth core element is defined as "amplifying voices from historically underrepresented communities to bring their own cultural traditions into community decision-making processes." It was interesting to observe the consistent emphasis in these communities on broadening the invitation to participate and lead in projects. In some communities, the voice amplified were those of BIPOC individuals, while in others it was youth or people with disabilities.

*Winona Lived Experience Leaders (LEL)*
During the REM session, LEL staff described some of the history of the program, noting that an explicit goal of the program was to amplify voices that had faced barriers to leadership, including on the basis of race, gender identity, socio-economic status, and more. The program launched during the summer of 2020 at a time of heightened awareness of racial inequity following the murder of George Floyd. As stated by one of the REM participants, ***Engage Winona and others realized that a bunch of white people can't solve this problem, which led them to identify the need for a leadership program to amplify less-heard voices in the community.***

This language about amplifying voices was repeated during the REM session. One participant shared that ***quieter voices in our community were able to be heard and become louder. People were given the tools to be able to do this through the program.*** Another graduate added: ***LEL helped me find my voice, things I didn't know I had in me. It helped push me to be a leader. Made me reflect on my ancestors and their legacy of leadership.***

As a result of a few years of program cohorts, LEL has begun to shift how organizations in Winona think about inviting community voices to the table. A participant shared that ***people are looking to Engage Winona for referrals for community leaders and also for guidance on how to do meaningful and genuine community engagement.*** Regarding the effects of this genuine community engagement, a graduate commented that ***many events have likely brought people who don't participate as much out into the community, like the events at the beer garden, meetings, camps, art events, etc.***

*Mesabi East*
The leader of ME3C has found many ways for all kinds of students to be engaged in the program. Rather than being an offering for a niche group of students, the program engages a large number of students across the district. One participant said that ***it is amazing how many students are able to interact with ME3C - elementary school, high school, home school.*** For example, a parent described how her home-schooled child was able to come in and be part of the ME3C community by making wreaths for community members. If a student is not old enough to participate in the formal classes, the leader finds a way for them to still be involved. The program also has

a far reach through its collaboration with the school cafeteria. Almost all Mesabi East students are touched by the greenhouse when they're able to try new foods from local farms and growers that are occasionally prepared by ME3C students.

ME3C is a particularly welcoming space for special education students. The program started as an opportunity specifically for these students, and they continue to be engaged in impactful ways. A participant said that special education students are ***learning skills that can be life changing for them as it provides them with skills that could lead to employment later on.***

While the greenhouse is a welcoming space for students, it is also well-utilized by community members of all ages for a variety of purposes. Some community members ***visit the greenhouse during the cold winter months to be near plants***, and others take advantage of community education classes or maintain their own garden in one of the eighteen community garden plots. A participant also shared that ***people bring elderly residents to the greenhouse to relax in a safe environment.*** By providing this space, ME3C has become a "third space[9]" for people in the community to use in a way that serves them individually and brings people together.

## Core element 6: Bringing the community along

The sixth common element from the community REM sessions was "bringing the community along," which we defined as "reaching out to and educating community members about the project, listening to voices from different perspectives and responding to concerns when they arise, meeting people where they are at to establish buy-in." Many of the issues that communities were working on were a difficult "sell" for many members of the community, and this resistance from segments of the community needed to be overcome. Clear communication with stories of real people who would be positively impacted by the projects was key for bringing the community along.

*Park Rapids*
The Pine Crest project benefited from proactive communication and education that took place well before a decision was made or ground was broken on the project. Heartland Lakes Development Commission (HLDC) played a strong role in this effort, communicating and educating prior to the project so that there was a strong understanding of the need among community members and key players in the project. Because of these deliberate and proactive efforts, ***when the solution was presented, it wasn't education about the problem it was about why this was the right solution.*** This helped to speed up the approval process and bring people on board more easily.

Participants noted the intentional and timely nature of the communication efforts, noting that ***this had all been occurring well before the project started. Entities had been doing their homework.*** People and organizations from

[9] For more about "third spaces" see Oldenburg, Ray. *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Da Capo Press, 1999.

different sectors and parts of the community were engaged in the communication and education effort. This may have helped build momentum and buy-in among community members by showing that multiple entities saw this as an important problem to address for the benefit of the community.

People were also more likely to support the project based on trust that the Director of HLDC had built through the successful development of two housing complexes in the past. Because these projects had gone well, ***when there was another need - workforce housing - everyone went back to Mary then because she'd already demonstrated success.*** When entities like the school board showed their support for the project, that was another signifier to people in the community that this was a good project. Collectively, this all paid off by limiting opposition to the project, even on social media.

Participants involved in the Pine Crest development believed that their success in this project will build even more trust among the community for future projects. They were persistent, followed through, and did what they said they would do. ***The communication was excellent, transparency was excellent. [The project] didn't get stalled out and progress continued to be made.***

*Lake City Underwood Terrace Housing Development*
Participants in the REM session described the importance of clear and strategic communication with the public and the city council about the need for affordable housing in Lake City and the types of people this housing would benefit.

Proponents of the project from the Port Authority and Three Rivers Community Action needed to communicate regularly with each other and answer many questions from the City Council. A participant shared that a highlight of the process was this ***process of working through the initial questions and raising awareness for the need for affordable housing in Lake City, and the kinds of people that affordable housing would truly benefit in the community.***

Group members also shared that it was important to share stories to humanize the people who would benefit from the project:

> ***We had community members and community leaders telling stories of people they knew who would qualify for this as it was defined in the initial project rollout. 'I have a brother, I have a sister.' There were stories of people in our community who we knew would be eligible for this. It's small business owners, it's retirees, it's nurses, vet techs. These are the folks who would need a place to live in our community.***

Proponents of Underwood Terrace used a wide variety of platforms to communicate about the project. A participant commented that the local newspaper did a great job reporting out the progress during the project. This coverage reached people such as ***Lions Club members who always read the paper.*** In community meetings, the

planning team offered presentations on the project, with the property manager, a contractor, and the architect describing the project and answering questions. As shared by a participant, ***whatever questions we didn't get to were answered in a document. We did have a groundbreaking that was attended by a few city officials.***

The Open House event at project completion allowed everyone in the community to see what the apartments looked like. As noted by a group member, ***the open house gave people an opportunity to see it. It was very well attended. That transparency for the community's curiosity was helpful.***

## Core element 7: Empowering new leaders

The seventh core element from the REM sessions was about empowering new leaders. In some communities, this was more specifically about youth while in others it referred to people from marginalized groups who haven't traditionally been invited or supported to lead. We defined this core element as "reaching out to nontraditional leaders, including youth, and giving them the tools they need to succeed."

*Honoring Dakota*
The Honoring Dakota Project has significantly empowered students by giving them a voice and fostering pride in their identity as both students and Native individuals. Through increased interactions and collaboration with non-Native peers, students have developed confidence and assumed leadership roles, enhancing their cultural pride and sense of community. A group member shared with enthusiasm that ***certain students stepped up and got out of their comfort zone. So many people were willing to learn.***

Another participant noted how HDP has strengthened youth voices: ***People involved in this project have been willing for youth voice to matter - particularly around the Wacipi (Powwow). Having mentors has been a special part of this project. Genuine interest in what youth have to say is rare.***

The project has facilitated connections, particularly through events like the Wacipi (Powwow) and the unveiling of the mural, encouraging youth to express their cultural pride and support one another. Mentorship and genuine interest in youth perspectives have been vital, leading to improved mental health and a willingness to engage in their cultural community. A student shared that ***two years ago she was struggling mentally, and when the mural began it gave her something else to think about. Prior to this, she wasn't that involved with her own culture. Her mental health has improved through involvement in HDP activities and the willingness to teach one another.***

*Winona Lived Experience Leaders (LEL)*
Lived Experience Leaders has provided participants with the tools and support to strengthen their confidence and skills as community leaders. Several participants in the REM session shared that participation in the program has given them confidence, often

describing how the program helped them find and strengthen their voice. A program alum commented that the program helped her ***sit with discomfort of knowing that she felt previously that she had the potential to help people but didn't know how to do that. The program deepened her awareness and confidence in the ability to take risks and share something with [her] community that allows [her] to expand personally and professionally.***

Participants shared that an important part of their journeys has been learning how leadership works. An alum learned that ***everyone can be a leader given the right situation, circumstances, support and ability to move forward a dream or idea.*** Another learned that ***givers often morph into leaders simply because of what they do - their acts affect others and prompt others to follow them in thought, word and deed. A third participant added that not everyone is sure what community leadership is or if they even have the capacity for it. But I do think this helped people recognize some challenges that they didn't expect and develop skills to make them ready for this kind of community role.***

# Reflections on the process

In this section of the report, core team members reflect on the challenges and successes of each phase of this year-long project, from the kickoff request for applications to the follow-up and reporting on each community.

## Request for applications

The core team developed a project invitation message that was distributed via email to a broad range of organizations and communities across Minnesota. The text of this invitation message can be found in Appendix B. It was important in this early phase to clarify the criteria we would later use to select communities. These criteria were listed in the invitation message.

We shared this information with all of the alumni of the Blandin Leadership Programs and the U of M Extension programs. We also shared this opportunity with some of our networks, i.e. the initiative foundations, the Friends in the Field group, and other partners serving the eligible communities. The invitation was also posted on the University of Minnesota Extension website as an opportunity for communities.

We learned through this project that it was important to offer the opportunity broadly as we couldn’t predict what the response would be.

## Application review

We received 23 applications for the project with a goal of selecting the top ten proposals. We used a process to evaluate each application using a rubric with the following sections with a numeric grade from 1 to 5.

Rubric for selection:

- Fit: Project is a good fit for REM methodology
- Readiness: Project is at a point where REM will be impactful
- Topical relevance: Project focuses on broadly relevant issue
- Capacity: Project appears to have enough people and time to dedicate to REM

Each of the core team members reviewed the applications independently. We then met as a group to discuss the scoring. Once we determined the top 15 applications we looked at the other criteria that would help balance the final selections:

- Diversity in community size
- Diversity in geographic location/region. Community must be located in rural Minnesota with a population under 35,000
- Diversity in culture (we encourage applications from communities within the 11 Native nations that share geography with Minnesota)
- Highlighting a variety of topics and challenges the community has addressed

Once final selection was made, we discussed how to respond to each of the non-selected communities and crafted individual communications for each group. We also learned as we worked with community contacts that if readiness became a factor we could be flexible and work within their timeline. We did have one community that decided to wait until they were farther along in their project before conducting the REM evaluation process.

If this project were to be repeated in the future, it would be important to add an additional step, a readiness interview, before final project selection. In this interview, we would ask a few questions about the status of the project being evaluated, and the capacity and representativeness of the community team.

## Session planning and recruiting

Following the project selection, each core team member took the lead on working with specific community projects. The first thing each core team member did was reach out to the community contact and suggest a meeting with them and/or a planning team. Most of the communities were quick to respond and excited to have their project selected. Many also shared 1-5 other names who would be a part of a broader planning process.

This demonstrated to our core team the depth of the collaboration that was taking place in most of the communities.

Core team members and community leads then led the planning team meetings to provide an overview of the Ripple mapping session, clarify roles, confirm the focus of the Ripple Map and date of the event, and discuss the recruitment process and timeline. We provided a spreadsheet for the recruitment process to encourage the planning team to think broadly about the 20 people they would like to invite. In many cases, planning team members immediately started populating the spreadsheet collaboratively and had a pretty clear list of folks they wanted to invite before they left the meeting.

In one project, a collaborative between the City of Red Wing and the Prairie Island Indian Community, it was important to encourage a non-native core team member to step back as a facilitator and think about how they entered the conversation. They encouraged this planning process to model their work of relationship building in indigenous communities. In this case that meant slowing down the process to allow for questions and suggestions to emerge so that the session was truly collaborative and co-created. A few specific changes that were made to the process included not limiting the number of folks invited and having co-facilitators throughout the session. In the end we agreed that capturing the stories and allowing those present to share their story with someone was the most critical and we kept that at the forefront as adjustments were suggested. It not only strengthened the session, it allowed us to deepen our connection to the project as outside facilitators. With reflection there was recognition that when something is familiar to us we often move too quickly through things that other communities or cultures might want to process further and it was a reminder about when a sense of urgency or strict adherence to time can show up negatively in our work with others.

A few other key learnings for the planning process include:

- We focused a lot on logistics in our planning. As we reflected, next time we will add in planning questions such as: How can we as a facilitation team contribute to an environment of trust in this process?
- When working with the lead community member, it is easy to make assumptions about how much they are sharing with the full planning team. It is important to slow the planning down at times to make sure the full planning team has a shared vision of how we move forward
- Creating clarity with the community on being inclusive in the logistics is also important. This includes food options, room setup, language accessibility, etc.
- There was great intentionality in setting up clear expectations of roles in the work and also conversations about who had access to the report and how it would be shared. Having these discussions on the front end assisted with clarity and communication as we finalized the report and discussed next steps.

- In Minnesota, community development professionals have strong networks and many work together across various projects and in different contexts. Within this project there was a time when a community member mentioned a potential interpersonal conflict with one of the facilitators who also identifies as BIPOC. We as a core team needed to think carefully about how we recognized and understood the impact bringing this up would have on the facilitator and the project. A core team member reached out to this facilitator and asked how they would like to proceed. In this case, the facilitator appreciated being informed about the situation and was willing to step back. The core team also worked with that facilitator to craft the communication to the community contact noting that the facilitator has no concerns and was willing to step back from the project to keep the focus on the community's success. This is important to note as we as professionals learn better ways to better uphold and give voice to our BIPOC colleagues when in the past we may have assumed that we as White people can "fix" the situation without their input.

Following the planning meeting, the community planning committees led the recruitment. As core committee members we trusted that communities were inviting the people who needed to be a part of the process. The core team members and community leads were in communication about anticipated numbers and worked to make sure connections for food and logistics were covered.

## Session attendance/engagement

The energy of the events was a highlight for all. Core team members and members of the planning committee arrived about an hour in advance to set up for the session. That included confirming logistics, making sure the computer mapping software and projector were set up and visible to all and the arrangements for the meal had been made. Local recruitment paid off and all the sessions had good attendance ranging from 11-28. Participants were welcomed to the session by a member of the planning committee and the team of core facilitators led the rest of the session.

Participants that could not attend had an ability to share their story and reflections by completing a Google Form. This became more important in a couple of communities where mostly the "doers" were present but we did not have as many of the external ripples and in communities where there were not enough folks from the project who directly benefited present.

There were a few key learnings from the sessions, noted by facilitators:

- Many of the lead organizers held a huge amount of respect from those involved in the project.

- We heard stories of important formal and informal leadership showing up in each session in addition to the elements of resilience.

- One group encouraged the facilitators to share our reflections as part of the REM/storytelling event. The core team noted the mutual benefit of this practice and the reciprocity and vulnerability this brought to the table. There is value in being thoughtful about when to suggest this practice.

In the end it was notable that the community contact or contacts and their connection and relationship with community members were key to the success of the sessions. It reinforced the importance of having connected and engaged community champions for any successful project.

## Follow-up and reporting

It took two to three months after each REM session to finalize a report for each community. In some cases, members of the core project team had to follow-up to keep the process moving forward.

After each REM session, communities were given an opportunity to add stories from participants who were unable to attend the live session. The core team created a Google Form with the same Appreciative Inquiry questions as the ones used during the live session. Local planning team coordinators then sent out the link to collect additional data. This resulted in additional story threads to add to each community's ripple effects map.

About two or three weeks after each community's session, the lead mapper (either Chazdon or Squires) sent a draft ripple effects map for each community's planning team to review. Communities offered corrections as well as new story threads to the maps. In a few cases, community planning teams were able to get to this task in a timely manner, but in most cases, members of the core team needed to prod the communities for feedback. In some cases, this process took over a month.

Once the core planning team had received final edits of each community's ripple effects map, the two lead "mappers," Chazdon and Squires, began writing reports for their assigned communities. To ensure consistency, they co-developed a reporting template for use with each community. Chazdon drafted the reports about Austin's Torneo de Basketball, Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart's Little Stangs Learning Center, Honoring Dakota, Lake City's Underwood Terrace Housing Development, and Winona Lived Experience Leaders. Squires drafted the reports for the Bridge Center in Pelican Rapids, Frazee's Cornerstone Community & Youth Center, the Heartland Lakes Development Commission, and Mesabi East Environmental Education Center.

All members of the core project team reviewed drafts of each report before they were sent to communities. After making changes suggested by the core team, Chazdon and Squires sent the draft reports to each community for review. As with the review of the ripple effects maps, this process took time, sometimes over a month. But once these final edits were made, each community received a final report.

There were some reporting bumps along this road worth noting. The project lead from Lake City left his position shortly after their REM session and nobody stepped up to take his place. Three months after the REM session, the core team was finally able to contact a Lake City planner who was able to get further feedback on the report and move the project to completion.

The report for Austin's Torneo de Basketball was well-received, although in this case, the election of a U.S. President with an anti-immigrant agenda caused community leaders to worry about disseminating their report more broadly in Austin. While the report did not identify individuals, it did draw attention to the presence of a community of Oaxacan immigrants in Austin and local leaders were concerned that this could trigger deportation efforts.

At the time of this writing, there are plans to invite all the communities to an online celebration and information sharing about the findings of this project. Core team members have reached out to each community to ensure that they are comfortable sharing information about their communities at this session as well as in further communications about the project.

# Appendix A: Core elements of community resilience across the nine communities

| Mesabi East | Austin | Lake City | Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart | Winona | Park Rapids | Mille Lacs Corporate Ventures | Frazee | Honoring Dakota |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fostering connections across ages and roles in the community | Building relationships and connections | Spreading a strategic message about affordable/workforce housing | Building relationships and engaging support | Building supportive relationships to elevate community-led solutions | Identifying and filling a gap in the housing continuum | Creating a collaborative ecosystem of partnership, reciprocal learning, and trust | Providing a safe and fun space for youth | Bridging communities |
| Creating a space where everyone is welcomed and given opportunities to engage | Fostering a sense of inclusion, unity and mutual respect | Overcoming skepticism/stigma with a culture of openness | Resisting opposition and persisting | Enhancing leadership potential | Proactively communicating and educating to build buy-in and trust | Embracing, Indigenizing, and decolonizing entrepreneurship | Empowering youth to be community leaders and showing them that the community cares | Inclusive education and healing |
| Building a collaborative ecosystem within the school and community | Growing the local economy and community | Leveraging organizational collaboration within the community and beyond | Innovating within the school district | Creating an intentional and collaborative space to promote leadership | Leveraging community leaders with strong vision and skillsets | Recognizing, connecting, and growing great ideas | Strengthening connections in the community | Empower youth |
| Cultivating community support and buy-in | Blossoming into so much more than basketball | Building a housing community that supports its residents | Developing public-private-nonprofit partnerships | Developing ideas into impactful community change projects | Solving problems by identifying creative solutions | Cultivating a value-based and person-centered place for individual growth | Inspiring increased civic participation and community pride | Fostering spiritual connections through creativity |
| Empowering students to grow their skills and their confidence in themselves as leaders | Modeling leadership persistence, courage, creativity, loyalty and cooperation | | Attracting and retaining community members | Amplifying voices that reflect the culture of the entire community | Collaborating across sectors to show what can be accomplished together | Supporting entrepreneurs by creating systems that allow them to thrive | Acting as a stepping stone for other future-forward investments in the community | Inspiring individual and organizational impact beyond HDP |
| Maturing from an idea into a model for other communities through strong leadership | | | | | Setting the community up for long-term sustainability and growth | Innovating a model for rural economies that serves as inspiration for others | Expanding programming and serving as a model for others | |

| Core elements of community resilience | Definitions | Count |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Building and strengthening connections | Creating connections in the community and contributing to social cohesion; building bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. | 8 of the 9 communities |
| 2. Innovating and responding creatively | Responding to problems and roadblocks creatively; thinking bigger and differently, even "outside the box," identifying a need in community and developing innovative solutions. | 7 of the 9 communities |
| 3. Building momentum and sustainability | Building momentum within their own communities one achievement at a time and inspiring more projects that build on what was created, setting up the community for future success by establishing new ways of doing things together. | 7 of the 9 communities |
| 4. Collaborating and partnering | Formal and informal collaboration among organizations in different sectors of the community. | 6 of the 9 communities |
| 5. Prioritizing inclusivity | Amplifying voices from historically underrepresented communities to bring their own cultural traditions into community decision-making processes. | 6 of the 9 communities |
| 6. Bringing the community along | Reaching out to and educating community members about the project, listening to voices from different perspectives and responding to concerns when they arise, meeting people where they are at to establish buy-in. | 5 of the 9 communities |
| 7. Empowering new leaders | Reaching out to nontraditional leaders, including youth, and giving them the tools they need to succeed. | 4 of the 9 communities |

# Appendix B: Initial project invitation

**Measuring the impact of your community project**

How have leaders in your community shown resilience and moved important projects forward? Do groups across your community work to make it more welcoming and inclusive, pass a referendum, incorporate youth into their governance process? Have you celebrated a new festival or community event, repurposed a building, or created a successful housing or childcare initiative?

Have you seen short and long-term impacts from these projects, but aren't sure how to measure or articulate it? Do you want to learn more about how and why a project worked?

**Try a community ripple map!**

Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) is a qualitative evaluation method that helps show and tell the story of a project, and what effects it had. Communities and organizations often use REM reports to bring visibility to their work, apply for additional funding, attract media coverage, or recruit new residents.

**Interested in building a ripple map for your community?**

University of Minnesota Extension and Blandin Foundation seek up to 10 rural Minnesota communities to participate in a new ripple effect mapping project. Why are we doing this project? It's simple:

- Rural Minnesota's communities and Native Nations shine with community resilience. We take every opportunity to share that good rural work.
- Staying grounded in communities and their current successes and challenges is one way we can keep a pulse on rural Minnesota communities, so our resources help you build community capacity to meet the world's ever-changing dynamics.
- We want communities to have an asset-based process that delivers a tool you can use to take your good work even further.

**How will we select communities? Selection criteria include:**

- Diversity in community size.
- Diversity in geographic location/region. Community must be located in rural Minnesota with a population under 35,000.

- Diversity in culture. We encourage applications from communities within the 11 Native nations that share geography with Minnesota.

- Highlighting a variety of topics and challenges the community has addressed.

**You and your community will get:**

- The opportunity to energize, motivate, and engage community members as you reflect, celebrate, and share your stories of resilience.

- The chance to capture what worked well and what could be strengthened so you can successfully do it again.

- A way to inspire additional action by hearing stories of community resilience and other examples of leadership that spur others into action as well.

**What is your commitment?**

- **People and time.** Work with us to recruit a group of 10 – 20 people that bring diverse perspectives from your project. This group will participate in a three-hour, in-person ripple effect mapping process in your community led by two trained facilitators. You will also identify a key contact for assisting with community logistics (e.g., planning the location, a meal, child care).

- **Funding.** Free! Extension and Blandin Foundation will cover the cost of the Ripple Effect Mapping process, meeting venue, food, and beverage expenses. We welcome communities to provide in-kind support for other expenses related to the event; childcare, transportation, or other barriers participants may have.

**Timeline**

Applications due: February 29, 2024
Community selection: By March 29, 2024
REM Meetings: April-July
Story maps complete: Within four months of REM meeting
Questions? Contact us: Holli Arp (arpxx001@umn.edu) / Becky Adams (rmadams@blandinfoundation.org)

**APPLY NOW!**