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Perspective on Substance-Abuse Recovery Ecosystem from the Appalachian Regional Commission Federal Co-Chair

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Abstract

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is a local, state, and federal partnership focused on economic development in the communities of the Appalachian Region. ARC Federal Co-Chairman Tim Thomas provides his perspective on how an economic development entity, such as ARC, can support efforts to address the Region's drug crisis in a way that both saves lives and strengthens economic opportunity in communities throughout Appalachia.

Keywords

Appalachia, health care, rural health, economic development, substance abuse, recovery

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Cover Page Footnote

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Shortly after I was confirmed as Federal Co-Chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in April 2018, I was presented with a sobering fact: In 2017, residents of the Appalachian Region were 63% more likely to die from a drug overdose than residents of the rest of the nation, according to an ARC-sponsored NORC study. As I travelled throughout the region in the early part of my term, I heard from local government and business leaders how their communities were being adversely impacted by the substance abuse crisis. This is an issue that touches everyone, from every walk of life. In addition to the tragic toll of lives lost and tremendous costs to local public resources, I heard how this crisis often creates negative impacts on the local workforce and holds back local economies.

As an economic development entity, ARC's mission is to build capacity and encourage economic growth in the Appalachian Region, specifically addressing the five focus areas in the Commission's strategic plan that include improving or leveraging resources in the areas of economic opportunities, ready workforce, critical infrastructure, natural and cultural assets, and leadership and community capacity. The fourteen-member Commission is a unique federal-state partnership made up of the governors of the thirteen Appalachian states, one of whom serves as States' Co-Chairman with an annual term. The fourteenth member, the Federal Co-Chairman, is nominated by the President subject to Senate confirmation.

As substance abuse has become so prevalent as to constitute a barrier to broader economic development, it falls squarely within ARC's mission mandate. Significant federal, state, and local resources are devoted to address the health impacts of this crisis, such as increasing community prevention efforts and expanding access to treatment. With that in mind, and by listening to experts and practitioners in the Region, ARC determined that the best use of our limited, but effective, taxpayer dollars is to focus primarily on where our expertise lies, and that is addressing the economic and workforce challenges presented by this pervasive threat to Appalachian communities, and which must be a part of the broader solution to the problem.

To better understand the impact of this crisis in the Region, ARC hosted a series of listening sessions in 2019 in multiple states throughout Appalachia. We learned that guiding individuals with a substance-use disorder from treatment to the workforce is a critical component to a successful recovery. We heard in these sessions about the importance of employment in supporting successful, long-term recovery, and how a job for someone in recovery can provide a sense

of self-worth, fulfillment, economic stability, and a network of support and positive reinforcement. In short, recovery and employment go hand in hand.

Following the listening sessions, we created the Substance Abuse Advisory Council (SAAC), a group of leaders and experts drawn from across Appalachia including representatives from state and local governments, treatment experts, mental health professionals, vocational educators, law enforcement, the business community, nonprofits, and others, to better inform ARC efforts in this space. Importantly, we also made sure that the Council included representation from those in recovery themselves. The Council put in significant time, effort, and applied expertise, and submitted recommendations on strategies to build and sustain community-based Recovery Ecosystems, a model that ARC has adopted and will work to support throughout the Region. Recovery is not just treatment, but rather is a process that typically requires additional support services along the way, such as peer supports, outpatient care, soft-skills and workforce training, health care, housing, and transportation, among others. Services that are tailored to the resources of a community, coordinated, and focused on the recovery-to-work transition make up an effective Recovery Ecosystem. ARC is a leader in seeking to define and map the features necessary to support a holistic community-level recovery support system and use that framework as a guide for broad investment and grantmaking.

In 2020, ARC has been directed by Congress to develop and fund a pilot round of grants to address the workforce challenges presented by this crisis; building and strengthening community-based recovery ecosystems will be an important component of that effort. This will be a competitive grant process, and the nature of these projects will be based on the applications received, but we have strong guidance from our experts, and some good examples of successful programs ARC has been supporting already.

As an example, one such program, Rides to Recovery, a ride-share pilot in Huntington WV, is directly responsive to one of the biggest issues voiced in our listening sessions, and is an example of innovation, using modern technology and a community approach to address an issue that many do not connect directly with substance-use disorder recovery, but that frequently plays a large role in the success of recovery. Often, legal barriers such as loss of one's driver's license and a general lack of transportation access in rural areas can prevent individuals in recovery from getting to court dates, counseling, job interviews, and other important recovery appointments. This pilot is an effort to explore potentially sustainable solutions to fill this gap in local recovery ecosystems, ensuring those committed to recovery can stay on track.

Throughout our listening session tour of the region, issues like work experience, access to transportation, housing, educational financial aid, and other supports were brought up consistently by Appalachians on the front lines of this crisis. These components may be particularly lacking in rural areas, and where present, they may be siloed in a way that limits their effectiveness. By identifying those supports that may be lacking, and by better understanding any deficiency in linkages between existing services, we can more effectively help individuals in the journey of recovery. By supporting community-driven solutions to these types of challenges, ARC can play an important role in enabling sustainable recovery in communities impacted by substance abuse.

The articles^{1,2} submitted to the University of Kentucky's *Journal of Appalachian Health* detail ARC's data-collection process and the lessons the Commission learned about helping individuals in recovery obtain the services and training they need to secure sustainable employment, which both encourages long-term recovery and contributes to stronger Appalachian economies. We appreciate the *Journal's* attention to this important issue and ARC's efforts to be a part of the solution. This is the beginning of an important collaborative process that has been and will remain results-oriented, and adaptable. The goal is not to develop a one-size-fits-all model, but to continue to better understand how ARC activities and investments can serve the challenges faced by communities throughout the Appalachian Region, an effective approach that ARC has employed since its founding in 1965. It is our hope that these articles can benefit communities in Appalachia and beyond as they continue to develop and refine their own approaches to countering the substance abuse epidemic.

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