



Request for Qualifications (RFQ)

Thriving Rural Communities Learning and Evaluation Partner

About the Foundation

St. David's Foundation is one of the largest health foundations in the United States, funding \$80 million annually in a five-county area surrounding Austin, Texas. Through a unique partnership with St. David's HealthCare, the Foundation reinvests proceeds from the hospital system back into the community, with a goal of advancing health equity and improving the health and well-being of our most underserved Central Texas neighbors. St. David's Foundation also operates the largest mobile dental program providing charity care in the country and offers the largest healthcare scholarship program in Texas. Through strategic grantmaking, the Foundation seeks to center people and communities in all that we support and partner with institutions that promote health and well-being across the following areas of opportunity:

- Resilient Children
- Healthy Women and Girls
- Older Adults Age in Place
- Thriving Rural Communities
- Clinics as Community Hubs for Health

To learn more about St. David's Foundation, please visit www.stdavidfoundation.org.

Overview of Thriving Rural Communities

Our work with rural communities emerged from the Foundation's recognition that rural health improvement is strongly influenced and tied to social determinants of health (SDOH). Social determinants of health are described as critical social and economic drivers that significantly impact health outcomes that are ultimately influenced by the community context in which people live, learn, work, and play. Consequently, it was important for the Foundation to build on existing local assets to partner with the community in new ways to address, over time, the complex social problems contributing to the negative health outcomes as shown in the [County Health Rankings](#).

The negative health outcomes consistently illustrated that rural communities experience a disproportionate burden of disease morbidity and mortality on several health indicators. And while rural communities in Central Texas experience significant health disparities, they are also home to adaptive and resilient residents and possess several key assets, including a strong sense of community; a culture of caring; and a commitment to strengthening local capacity, which often translates into a shared responsibility to address issues and an innovative spirit to do more with less.

It is from this place of strength that St David's Foundation works to build a culture of health that explicitly focuses on improving population health and shifting power dynamics using a health equity lens to address the social determinants of health in rural communities.

What is our Definition of a Rural Community?

In defining rural communities as those that are non-metro, our work prioritizes Bastrop County, Caldwell County, Hays County, and the eastern part of Williamson County. These communities were thoughtfully identified for deeper investment using multiple criteria including but not limited to the following: community readiness to engage in a community change effort; existing momentum to build on

community capacity; Community Health Needs Assessment; County Health Rankings & Roadmaps; and community guidance gathered from field trips and listening sessions.

As a Foundation, we are eager to learn alongside communities to ideate and co-create community-designed solutions that, over time, tackle complex social issues while building community capacity and amplifying voices not often heard. We are humbled to do this work with the community by leveraging the expertise, wisdom, and lived experiences of multiple partners, including residents, community groups, nonprofits, government entities, school districts, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and others.

Our Approach

Our work with Central Texas rural communities is grounded in the core principles of place-based investment that acknowledges that this work is complex and long-term success is contingent on efforts that honor the rich cultural, human, and community assets of each place; requires intentional partnering with those most impacted; takes an ecosystem approach that builds strong alignment between institutions, communities, and resources; and requires incremental and interactive strategies that embrace an emergent approach of testing, acting and learning. We work together with our partners toward a shared vision of:

- A strong [culture of health](#);
- Reduced economic and social barriers that impede health, particularly for economically vulnerable populations, communities of color, immigrants, young children, and older adults;
- Increased community engagement, alignment of networks working across/among sectors, communities, and institutions;
- Increased community capacity and infrastructure to build a robust ecosystem for change to address the social determinants of health (SDOH);
- Increased leadership capacity that is diverse, aligned, and working collectively to shift power dynamics, policies, practices, behaviors, and resources to align with an agenda focused on building and sustaining a culture of health.

Our work with rural communities requires a more comprehensive community approach that includes a diverse mix of investments, cultivation of new relationships with non-traditional partners, and adoption of an emergent posture that is grounded in testing, doing, and collaborative learning. This approach builds community capacity, empowers residents to work collaboratively to address their own community problems, invests in improving the conditions for residents to live healthy and thrive, and brings together all segments of the rural infrastructure to identify multi-sector solutions that support the health and well-being of residents. This includes:

- Engaging and empowering rural communities to strengthen networks and transform policies, practices, and alignment of resources to address prioritized social determinants of health;
- Building the capacity of people and places, including formal and informal leaders, within communities and organizations to lead community-centered change;
- Strategically investing in solutions that harness community assets and strengths to support testing new ways of working, relating, and leading, new ideas and innovations, ecosystem building, and other promising rural-relevant approaches that can be scaled.

Strategic Investments through grantmaking are focused on seeding, deepening, and scaling initiatives/approaches that have the potential to make a significant and measurable impact toward addressing the economic and social drivers that impact health disparities over time. This particular focus will include an investment in general operating support, projects/initiatives, programming, resident and organizational networks, and data/research in three distinct investment areas:

- **Innovation:** Supports innovative projects/initiatives that target specific populations impacted by health disparities in multiple SDOH Domains;
- **Infrastructure Building:** Seed, build, and strengthen infrastructure from grassroots to institutions necessary to support SDOH through supporting alignment, coordination, research/data, technical assistance, and training toward addressing systems change within SDOH; and
- **Promising Approaches:** Tied to specific outcomes within one or more SDOH that is informed by lived experience, data, best practices, or research.

Health Equity Lens. We believe in working with the community to amplify voices least engaged and elevate community-driven solutions that could collectively, over time, make positive progress on rural health and well-being. [Our approach](#) is explicitly grounded in the belief that good health begins in places where we live, work, learn, and play; that when we create a strong culture of health, everyone has the opportunity to live a healthier life, no matter who we are, where we live, or how much money we make; and that system-change approaches that address systemic issues grounded in health equity are critical to addressing health disparities in the long-term. The Foundation has adopted a collaborative learning agenda as we know that we don't have all the answers and intend to be informed by those most impacted by rural and systemic inequities.

Goals for Thriving Rural Communities

Our goals include co-creating solutions with the community and investing in place-based initiatives that are community-designed and community-led to address prioritized social determinants of health and support thriving communities that:

- Develop a culture of health that transcends beyond healthcare access;
- Nurture strong social connection among rural residents;
- Ensure residents are engaged in thriving cross-sector and community-based networks that promote health and well-being;
- Encourage rural systems change, including policies, practices, behaviors, and resources to better promote health and well-being;
- Foster a strong infrastructure with adequate capacity among rural organizations;
- Engage and empower a diverse, civic leadership to activate and improve community well-being.

The purpose of the RFQ is to identify a learning partner to assist the Foundation to better understand and communicate the above goals, measure progress when appropriate, and incorporate learnings to inform future strategies including alignment with other Foundation portfolio areas. Following the details of the consultant partnership is an in-depth description of our theory of change, a description of work-to-date, and key partners to consider.

Objectives of the Learning and Evaluation Partnership

We are seeking a partner, or collaborative of partners, who can oversee the learning and evaluation components of this work. The partner's role is to 'hold' the entirety of the framework around learning

and evaluation for this project – conceptually in terms of how we think about the learning and evaluation work, as well as ensuring the implementation of learning and evaluation activities. This is extraordinarily complex work that draws on a multitude of understandings about evaluation, community, strategy, and learning – it requires a team who can bring deep expertise in multiple types of practices and disciplines, and who is willing and able to flex and change with the needs of the work over time. Keeping the macro framework in mind means that the learning and evaluation partner needs to consider multiple (and at times divergent) perspectives and actions by other stakeholders who are engaged with this work – e.g., considering what is being done by our communications team to analyze local narratives – and how these fit into the broader scheme of what we are learning about and through this work. Therefore, anchored by the theory of change, the learning and evaluation partner should:

- **Understand community context, document what work is happening in communities, as well as the outcomes of this work.** Understand the context and history of the community and the dynamics and narrative within the local system in which the Foundation is implementing our approach. Track (at a high level) and document what the Foundation is doing with its various tools, assess what this is feeling like and how the community is responding, and consider how this compares to what the Foundation is expecting given the stage of the work in any given community. Be able to trace the threads of activity that are surfacing to determine which merit deeper exploration. Shape the evaluation to capture not only the outcomes that accrue to community members, but the shifts in the actors and organizations themselves who are engaging in this work. Additionally, since over time we are supporting specific strands of work to help communities solve specific health issues, we want to know whether that work made a difference for the people experiencing that issue.
- **Monitor, track and observe how the rural network is evolving, adapting, and responding to community needs and where energy and opportunity are happening within the network.** This aspect of the project would assess the extent to which network members have opportunities to connect, learn and share their skills, and grow through action. Guiding evaluation questions might include to what extent is the network creating opportunities for community residents to connect to others within the network; is the network adding more residents and expertise; are residents self-organizing new projects to test and try out responses to pressing resident needs; is the network growing more diverse in terms of geography, demography, and connectivity. Collaboration with the network's technical assistance team and the Foundation will be necessary to shape a developmental evaluation approach by leveraging existing evaluation strategies already being implemented by the rural technical assistance team such as network mapping, ripple effect mapping, capturing stories, and use of surveys that have served primarily as a monitoring and feedback system in the past two years.
- **Test key causal linkages (hypotheses) in the theory of change about the effectiveness of the Thriving Rural Communities approach.** Assess the core hypotheses underpinning the community capacity building strategy, about the ways in which doing work in this way does or does not effectively support the community to deepen resident capacity that can potentially influence community health outcomes, and how it affects the capacity of the community to deal with future health challenges. We don't believe that we necessarily have the 'right answer' in our approach to community capacity building toward better health and wellbeing, but we have a hypothesis about how to do this type of work, and we want to test what about our thinking is

working and what needs to change to create greater impact. Thus, as a member of the strategy team, we anticipate the selected learning and evaluation partner will help the team clarify their thinking, test assumptions, and facilitate learning conversations. We also want to share with the field what we are learning about this approach – what works, what doesn't, and what we are discovering it takes to work in close partnership with community.

- **Support the development and improvement of how the Foundation functions internally to support this work.** This includes providing reflective opportunities for the foundation's program team to think about how network structures, processes, culture, mindsets, workgroups, etc. are playing out in terms of supporting or hindering this work. The learning and evaluation partner should also be prepared to serve as both a full member of the Rural Network Balcony team (which provides macro-level oversight of the growing rural network) and a critical friend, observing patterns of behavior, challenges they are seeing internally, etc. and reflecting that back to the team in ways that supports our improvement.
- **Understand how equity is playing out, both in the Foundation's approach and in the work of communities.** This includes assessing how well the way in which we are doing the work reflects principles of equity, who is driving change in communities and who does not have a voice, and who is benefitting from the changes taking place (not just as recipients, but as actors). We are interested also in how equity is reflected within the rural network (e.g., does the network embody equity in terms of diversity and inclusion of all types of residents especially persons of color, non-English speakers, those living in poverty). How is the network seeking to create opportunities for greater inclusion as well as build community capacity to embody and act in equitable ways? The learning and evaluation partner should also be prepared to examine how their own practice reflects equity, and to critically reflect on the choices they are making about how the evaluation process is contributing to equity as part of this work.

Evaluation Design Considerations

The Foundation's work is focused on serving those facing discrimination and putting equity at the center of everything that we do. We have recently released our [strategic refinement](#) that centers health equity in all we do. To learn more about how the Foundation is considering equity, see our [health equity purpose paper](#).

We are seeking a partner who is deeply committed to practices of equity in their evaluation work. We are looking for you to intentionally consider how to embed equity within your work, and to reflect with us on how equity is or is not showing up in the evaluation and in our investments. Our goal is to learn with you on this journey and seek a relationship where you can push us beyond our current practices around equity and evaluation.

In addition, we are seeking a learning and evaluation partner who can bring to the work a strong belief and capacity that rigorous evaluation is possible for work that is highly emergent, developmental, and ambiguous. The partner should be able to apply rigorous thinking and methods to answer learning and evaluation questions at every stage of the work, while ensuring that learning and evaluation activities are coherent and support long-term questions around impact and are grounded in a strong core theory of change. The learning and evaluation partner needs to be able to have a mindset that allows them to hold these apparently opposed concepts in tension, and to engage in an evaluation practice that rigorously

assesses the work despite the inherent ambiguity, while being able to quickly adapt and modify activities. We believe this work will continue to develop and change over time based on what we are learning about how to do this work most effectively. Because our macro strategic framework is network weaving, there is a high degree of emergence and unprojected evolution and change that happens across individuals, groups, organizations, initiatives, and community. The evaluator needs to be sensitive to and methodologically capable of capturing the subtle changes that move through the community as a result of small beginning efforts.

While we have laid out here some of our thinking about what is most important and useful for supporting the Thriving Rural Communities work, part of what we're seeking in a learning and evaluation partner is the ability to bring new thinking, methods, and approaches to the table – **being aware of network evaluation, developmental evaluation, and community change evaluation methods is essential**. And we are looking for a partner that will help us create compelling narratives around this work and help us advance what it would take to do community capacity building well. We are curious to discover new ways of thinking about and doing learning and evaluation work that will enhance our understanding of how to assess community capacity building and community change around complex, adaptive, and emergent strategy. We are looking for a partner who can be a co-learner and thought partner who will embrace participatory evaluation that includes the community.

Activities and Deliverables

We anticipate that this will be a multi-year project. During the first 18 months (the focus of this RFQ), the following are some of the types of activities and deliverables the learning and evaluation partner will engage in. The proposer should suggest other activities and deliverables worthy of consideration:

1. Participate in co-design discussions and planning with the Foundation, technical assistance provider, interested residents and network weavers to develop an evaluation plan for the Thriving Rural Communities work. The first deliverable for this project will be a co-designed scope of work and line-item budget to carry out the evaluation;
2. Understanding of the history of the work and the approach:
 - a. Meet with Foundation program officers, rural leaders in the Foundation's service area, grantees, technical assistance providers, and other evaluators working with grantees to better understand the full scope of the Foundation's investments, programs, and initiatives that are underway or planned for the Thriving Rural Communities portfolio;
 - b. Revisit the theory of change underlying the community network approach to pressure test the assumptions, connections, and hypotheses about how change will happen;
 - c. With the co-design partners, revisit and update the current learning and evaluation framework and develop an associated work plan for the next set of activities;
 - d. Collaborate with a variety of Foundation partners involved in the work – e.g., our communications team, our evaluation team, the technical assistance team, the equity consultant – to understand their pieces of the work, and how this fits into the overall view we need to hold around learning and evaluation.
3. Deepen your knowledge of networks, network weaving, and evaluation of community networks. For reference, the rural network building initiative is informed by the work of three specific authors

- a. Holley, J. (2012). Network Weaver Handbook: A guide to transformational networks.
 - b. Plastrik, P., Taylor, M., & Cleveland, J. (2014). Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the power of networks for social impact.
 - c. Moore, W. P., Klem, A. M., Holmes, C. L., Holley, J., & Houchen, C. (2016). Community Innovation Network Framework: A Model for Reshaping Community Identity. *The Foundation Review*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1311>
4. Understand what's happened and is happening for each of the three groups of network weavers and the communities they are working in:
 - a. Review existing data (network maps, ripple effects, stories, surveys) for group 1 (the longest running group of weavers in Bastrop County);
 - b. Develop an understanding of the context and dynamics for each group;
 - c. Develop methodologies and data collection strategies and schedules to capture activities and change in individuals, groups, and community (both projects and systems dynamics).
 5. Become familiar with other Foundation investment portfolios that are addressing pressing health problems in rural communities and advise and support efforts to create greater synergy between the Thriving Rural Communities portfolio and other rural investments.
 6. Support strategy development and the Foundation's understanding of what it takes to do this type of work:
 - a. With the Foundation's rural strategy team, support refinement of the stages (which describe what changes we expect to see in community and what actions we are taking to help that happen) and the understanding of what it takes to do this work;
 - b. Create regular (e.g. yearly) detailed reports that summarize activities, impact, and learning;
 - c. Attend monthly meetings of the Rural Balcony Team and other project-based teams and develop notes and insights.

The specific approach and methods will be co-constructed between the evaluation partner, the Foundation, and the technical assistance advisor for the Thriving Rural Communities portfolio after a contract is awarded.

Timeline

A few key events include:

- The first group of network weavers was selected, trained, and supported in 2019-2020. Weavers in the first group were largely based in the region around the City of Bastrop;
- Community capacity building via network weaving was initiated in January 2020;
- Seed funds for the first group of weavers were disbursed in 2020; the first and second weaver groups participated in a shared gifting process that occurred in summer 2021;
- The first annual Network Weaver Summit was held in November 2020; the second annual summit will occur in March 2022;
- A second group of network weavers was convened for the first time in spring 2021 and represents persons of color in Bastrop County;
- A third group of network weavers was convened for the first time in summer 2021 and represents organizational leaders from the Foundation's entire service area;

- The Libraries for Health Investments will begin in 2022;
- We anticipate selecting the Learning and Evaluation partner in November 2021 and beginning the onboarding process in January 2022. The selected partner will participate in three orientation and history meetings during onboarding with the Foundation and its key partners. Each meeting will likely last two hours. At this time, the meetings are expected to be conducted remotely using Zoom;
- We anticipate that the Learning and Evaluation partner will attend Community of Practice meetings, monthly Learning and Evaluation Workgroup meetings, and monthly Rural Balcony Team meetings, as well other structured learning opportunities for network weaver groups.

Reporting Structure

The learning and evaluation partner will report to Jesse Simmons, Senior Evaluation Officer and Abena Asante, Senior Program Officer for the Thriving Rural Communities portfolio. The evaluation partner will need to collaborate closely with other individuals, including the Foundation's Strategic Learning and Evaluation team, other internal foundation staff across functional departments (especially Communications), and the external partners supporting the work.

Budget

For the first 18 months of this project (January 2022 to July 2023) the entire budget (inclusive of all expenses) should not exceed \$175,000. At the RFQ phase we do not expect partners to provide detailed proposals and budgets, but we are sharing the maximum budget to ensure that we have a mutual understanding of the potential scope of the project. Cost effectiveness is considered in review of applications, and partners are expected to revise the budget appropriately (during the co-design phase of the project) if the needs of the evaluation turn out to be less than the maximum anticipated.

Responding to the Request for Qualifications

If you are a firm, group or individual and are interested in being considered for this work, please submit answers to the following questions:

1. **Why is this a compelling opportunity?** Tell us a little bit about why you want to respond to this RFQ. What sparked your interest? What makes this the kind of work that you want to spend your time on? (no more than 1 page)
2. **Why do you think your team would be a good fit for this project?** Tell us a little bit about who would be on the project team (collaborators and staff) to complete this work. Why is this the team you want to involve, and why are they a good fit for this particular project? What experience would this team bring to the work that would help make them successful on this project? We will assume that the people/organizations you propose will be available for the project if your proposal is selected. (no more than 4 pages)
3. **How would your team approach this work?** Provide a brief narrative (no more than 7 pages) about how you would approach this project. The goal is not to provide a project plan, but to help us understand how you would think about approaching this work and what you'd take into consideration. A few things we'd like to hear about are:
 - a. How do you think about centering equity in this work?

- b. Given this work has been ongoing for almost three years, how would you get up to speed with the work?
 - c. How would you approach the developmental nature of this work and the need for the evaluation to be developmental, flexible, and emergent?
 - d. What strategies would you use to gather data about the activities, learning, and ripples of activity and change occurring in the community that network weavers (and the network as a whole) are generating?
 - e. Share your understanding of networks (see June Holley's work as reflected in *Network Weaver Handbook: A guide to transformational networks*¹) and how evaluation of networks might be different than traditional evaluation engagements.
 - f. When you look at what is needed for this work, what do you see as a major learning curve for your team? Tell us a little bit about what you will need to wrestle with and learn, and how you'd think about doing that.
4. **Budget:** Please provide some general ideas about how you would allocate time and resources for this project. You *do not* need to provide a detailed or line-item budget, but please tell us about the types of fees and expenses you anticipate being a part of the project. Please indicate the hourly rate of the types of individuals you would staff on this project, and the total hours you would anticipate spending on the project. This is designed to be an estimate only, and subject to change based on co-design and contracting to complete specific work agreed upon with the Foundation. Cost effectiveness will be considered in the review of responses to this RFQ. The first deliverables of this project will be a co-designed scope of work, staffing, timeline and revised budget.
5. **Legal Status:** Your organization's legal status (e.g., 501c3, LLC, or other for-profit organization).
6. **References:** Please provide three references who are very knowledgeable about your work relevant to this project. For each reference, please include the contact's name, organizational name, a description of working relationship, and contact information.
7. **Deliverable Samples:** Please provide us with two deliverables from other projects that you feel are great examples of the types of skills you'd bring to this project. These can be any format, such as evaluation reports, presentations, briefs, etc.
8. **Primary Contact:** Include the name, title, phone number, and e-mail address for the primary point of contact for your response to this RFQ.

The Foundation and its partners will keep confidential any materials sent to us and will not use these in any way other than for this process. Please limit application length to no more than ten pages excluding budget, references, writing samples, and any resumes (if you choose to include these).

How to Apply

The purpose of the RFQ is to provide an opportunity for us to learn about interested applicants and for them to learn about us. To this end, the RFQ includes the following process steps:

¹ <https://networkweaver.com/product/network-weaver-handbook-pdf/>



Available Q&A Office Hours:

October 7, 2021, 12:00 – 2:00 pm (CST)

October 8, 2021, 10:00 – 12:00 pm (CST)

October 22, 2021, 11:00 – 1:00 pm (CST)

These calls are optional and does not preclude you from consideration. It's an opportunity to ask the Senior Program Officer and rural technical assistance team questions about the Foundation, Thriving Rural Communities work, RFQ, or process. To schedule a 20-minute call during these hours, contact RFQ@stdavidsfoundation.org

Proposal Deadline: November 1, 2021 by midnight (CST) – please send proposal and supporting documentation electronically in PDF format to Jesse Simmons, at RFQ@stdavidsfoundation.org

Review of Proposals: November 1 – November 19, 2021

Interview of Selected Applicants (estimated): November 22 – December 3, 2021

Award Announcement: No later than December 10, 2021

Work Begins: Mid-January 2022

If you have any questions about the Thriving Rural Communities work, RFQ, or process, you are welcome to reach out to Abena Asante or Jesse Simmons at RFQ@stdavidsfoundation.org

Terms and Conditions

Application Rejection

The St. David's Foundation reserves the right to reject any or all applications and to waive informalities and minor irregularities in applications received and to accept any portion of an application or all items proposed if deemed in the best interest of the Foundation.

Modification or Withdrawal of Applications

Applications may be modified or withdrawn prior to the established deadline.

Expenses

The St. David's Foundation is not liable for the costs incurred in the preparation of a response to this RFQ.

Review

The review will identify the applications that most effectively meet the requirements of this RFQ. The work will be offered to the contractor whose application conforming to the RFQ will be most advantageous to the St. David's Foundation, price and other factors considered.

Appendix

Additional Information to Inform RFQ:

- I. Strategic Framework
- II. Description of Work-To-Date
- III. Key Partners

Strategic Framework Supporting Thriving Rural Communities

In order to create a synergistic approach that supports the three investment targets of 1) Engaging and empowering rural communities to strengthen networks and transform policies, practices, and alignment of resources to address prioritized social determinants of health; 2) Building the capacity of people and places including formal and informal leaders within communities and organizations to lead community-centered change; and 3) Strategically investing in solutions that harness community assets to support innovation, ecosystem building, and other promising rural-relevant approaches that can be scaled, the Foundation has adopted Network Weaving (Holley, 2012) as their macro-level strategic framework. Network Weaving is an approach that seeks to connect previously disconnected people into a larger “network,” working collaboratively toward a common vision or to solve persistent community problems such as those commonly defined as the social determinants of health (i.e., affordable housing, food insecurity, unemployment, barriers to physical and mental health, etc.).

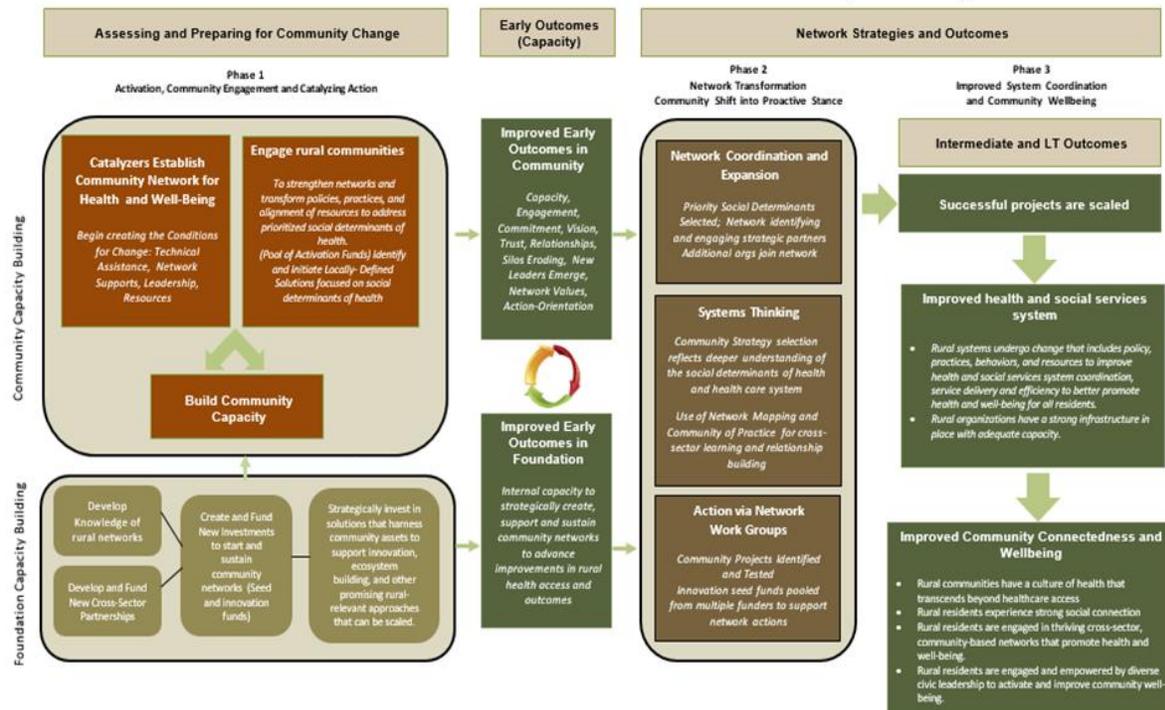
Focusing on locally determined solutions that support residents to tackle the social determinants of health will ultimately contribute more toward improved health and well-being than opening another health clinic. That is not to minimize the importance of adequate health services – it is very important – but ultimately, the complex interplay between genetics, history, place, and environment in health must be both preventive *and* responsive to the health and well-being needs of a community. Growing the community’s capacity to work collectively to prioritize the social determinants of health and then actively partnering with technical assistance teams and the Foundation as informed co-equal creators of strategies and solutions that will best meet the needs of the community is essential to changing the course of health outcomes in the Foundation’s rural communities.

St. David’s Foundation has focused on place-based, locally-determined investments because we want communities to have the capacity to solve their own problems – waiting for local or national government to solve community problems is slow, and when it does happen, it can take many years for political conditions to be right, for solutions to be identified and funded, and for the resources to flow to communities. In the meantime, smaller, locally defined solutions can improve community conditions and empower residents to solve their own problems. In the end, communities emerge stronger, more collaborative, more confident from their smaller wins, and more capable of tackling the next problem.

The Foundation’s decision to invest in Network Weaving as their overarching rural strategy is founded on the strengths of the approach: 1) Network Weaving empowers and supports residents to bring about community change; 2) Network Weaving prepares residents to be leaders in their communities; and 3) Network Weaving provides the tools and supports for communities to gain experience with change so that the next issue or crisis is handled effectively. This focus on community capacity building and empowerment puts community improvement in the hands of those who have a vested interest and who are not traditionally seated at the table of privilege and power.

The process is outlined in the theory of change in the figure below.

St. David's Foundation Rural Health Network Theory of Change



Work to Date

Strategic Investments through grantmaking are focused on seeding, deepening, and scaling initiatives/approaches that have the potential to have a meaningful impact on improving the health and wellbeing of rural residents by addressing the economic and social drivers that impact health disparities over time. This particular focus includes an investment in general operating support, capital investments, projects/initiatives, seed funds, community-wide capacity building, supporting resident-led networks, programs, and data/research in three distinct investment areas:

- **Innovation:** Supports innovative projects/initiatives that target specific populations impacted by health disparities in multiple SDOH domains;
- **Infrastructure Building:** Seed, build, and strengthen infrastructure from grassroots to institutions necessary to support SDOH through supporting alignment, coordination, research/data, technical assistance, and training toward addressing systems change within SDOH; and
- **Promising Approaches:** Tied to specific outcomes within one or more SDOH that is informed by lived experience, data, best practices, or research.

The Thriving Rural Communities contemporary body of work formally began in December 2017 with an intentional period of listening, researching, learning, and co-designing an approach to community capacity building in rural communities in the Foundation's service area (defined as Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson counties). In June 2018, a series of community conversations were facilitated by The Strategy Group (TSG, the Foundation's rural advisor; www.thestrategygrp.org) in four rural communities located in two counties with the poorest health outcomes in the Foundation's service area. As part of a larger assessment of community readiness to engage in community capacity building, a pair of reports were prepared and delivered to the Foundation in October 2018 that described the conditions



and capacities of these two rural counties (Bastrop and Caldwell) and offered design considerations for an initial investment to build community capacity in each of the two counties.

In January 2019, the Foundation identified one county, Bastrop, to partner with, and preparations began to establish the purpose, partners, and investment targets for the first round of community capacity building. TSG was contracted to serve as the lead technical assistance provider. In May and June 2019, TSG convened a series of internal and external meetings with local county nonprofit leaders, Foundation staff, and other engaged stakeholders and partners to tailor the technical assistance and support in the county.

Over the course of the next 18 months, the Foundation, TSG, and their local partners established a county health and well-being network; recruited, trained, and supported 30 local residents to become network weavers; held Community of Practice convenings to share and learn together; provided newly minted network weavers with two rounds of seed funds to implement projects that would begin to address some of the urgent or pressing needs of vulnerable populations of residents; convened a first-ever Network Summit in November 2020; and identified several other communities in the county to expand the network and support additional residents as weavers.

Throughout these 18 months, the county and its weavers persevered through the COVID-19 pandemic and used the skills and tools they learned as weavers to help their community respond effectively to the crisis that dramatically impacted individuals and families through unemployment, food insecurity, and inability to obtain needed PPE.

In 2021 the network continued to expand and two new groups of weavers (1. persons of color in Bastrop County and 2. organizational leaders in each of the five counties in the Foundation's service area) were identified and supported by the technical assistance team. These new weavers are currently participating in structured learning opportunities, cross-group convenings and opportunities to connect, learn and grow. Two rounds of shared gifting circles were implemented in 2021 to give weavers the opportunity to collaborate and work on issues of importance.

In addition to the investments described above, the Foundation is beginning an initiative in 2022 focused on building the capacity of libraries as an important community hub in rural communities. Based on a listening tour with local libraries as well as national research, the work will largely focus on addressing mental and behavioral health needs of community members through connection to services and resources. In-depth information pertaining to the Libraries for Health initiative and request for proposals, which launched on August 2, 2021, can be found [here](#).

Key Partners

The Thriving Rural Communities portfolio of work has established key partnerships with several organizations that are important to the success of the Foundation's investment impact:

Bastrop County, TX – Bastrop County is located approximately 30 miles southeast of Austin and is a part of the Austin-Round Rock-San Marcos Metropolitan Area. Bastrop County was among the original ten counties established by the Republic of Texas in 1836. Bastrop County is a rural county that lies within the Rural Capital Area JTPA service delivery area and the Capital Area Quality Workforce Planning region. The County is the first geographic region to participate in the Foundation's community capacity building investments. In 2021, the County will serve as the fiscal agent to distribute grant funds to several partners. The first cohort of network weavers consisted of residents residing or working in Bastrop County and predominantly residing in and around the City of Bastrop. The second cohort of network weavers (kicked off in January 2021) was galvanized in Bastrop County and focused on inclusion of persons of color. An additional network weaver learning series kicked off on August 13, 2021 specifically tailored to organizational leaders. This eight-month intensive introduction to networks, network weaving, and the power of networks for mission-driven organizations includes 15 individuals from all counties in the Foundation's service area.

Bastrop County Cares (BCC) – BCC is an important and influential partner in Bastrop County. The organization has played an intermediary role in the County and loosely served as the network guardian during the first year of technical assistance to network weavers (2019-2020). BCC brings people together to collaborate around large community challenges that no one organization can solve on its own to improve the conditions where residents live, work, pray, and play. Several members of BCC participated in the structured learning opportunities of network weavers as well as supported the training process for the county network. BCC supports about a dozen community coalitions and is an important community convener and supporter of county-wide initiatives, such as the community health and well-being network in Bastrop County. In 2021 BCC supported the network as the fiscal sponsor for the Foundation's network grant.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service (Extension) – Extension is a unique education agency with a statewide network of professional educators, trained volunteers, and county offices. It reaches into every Texas county to address local priority needs. Some of their major efforts are in mitigating drought impacts; conserving water use in homes, landscapes, and production agriculture; improving emergency management; enhancing food security; and protecting human health through education about diet, exercise, and disease prevention and management. Extension in Bastrop County partners with and supports collaborative programs that enable extension educators and their partners to extend resources and prevent duplication of services. Extension provides programs, tools, and resources that teach people how to improve agriculture and food production, advance health practices, protect the environment, strengthen our communities, and enrich youth.

Hogg Foundation for Mental Health (Hogg) – The Hogg Foundation invests in programs, policy analysis, research, and education through grants, scholarships, and fellowships to transform how communities promote mental health in everyday life. The Resilient Bastrop County Initiative is a county-wide initiative funded through The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. Bastrop County Cares is one of five organizations selected for the Well-being in Rural Communities initiative to build a community



collaborative that will assess, plan, and implement strategies to become a healthier community that supports resilience, mental health, and well-being.

The Strategy Group (TSG) – The Strategy Group is a consultancy based in Kansas City supporting foundations and nonprofits to achieve their potential as agents of the common good. TSG has served as a rural advisor to the Foundation since 2018 and is the primary technical assistance provider for the community capacity building work in Bastrop County. TSG also supported elements of the BCC Strategic Planning process and is partnering with other initiatives in the area. TSG leads, coordinates, and partners with other agencies in establishing the community health and well-being network in Bastrop County and in the expansion to all counties in the Foundation’s service area through the structured learning opportunities and support of a growing group of network weavers in Central Texas. The Strategy Group partners with other organizations such as Johnstad and Associates, Rooted Strategy LLC, and Breakwater Light, LLC to staff the technical assistance, training, and overall support and growth of the rural network.

The Indigo Innovation Group (IIG) – Indigo Innovation Group prepares partners to address complex social change by activating leaders and leaderful organizations. IIG uses process as a strategy to support decision-making, innovation, and getting proximal to the work. IIG serves as an equity advisor to the Foundation and provides coaching and thought leadership to Resilient Bastrop. IIG is partnering with TSG to deepen understanding of racial equity in Bastrop County and in the broader Bastrop County Health and Wellbeing network.

Texas Health Institute (THI) – Texas Health Institute will be joining the network in January 2022. While THI will not have significant experience with the history of the Foundation’s rural community capacity building investments nor with the specific background of community networks in the region, the organization will be a key thought partner and will be tracking and reporting on the financial transactions and activities of pools of funds used to stimulate action, learning and relationship building within the network. THI was engaged by the Foundation to conduct aspects of the Community Health Needs Assessment.

Episcopal Health Foundation (EHF) – Bastrop County is one of six communities participating in EHF’s Texas Accountable Communities for Health Initiative (TACHI). Funding will support the establishment of an Accountable Community for Health (ACH) – a community-based partnership formed by local organizations from different sectors to address underlying, non-medical community health needs like safe housing, food security, safe places to exercise, and more. TACHI will grant funds to each ACH site, depending on specific needs, over a four-year period.