

Building Options: Flexible Housing Curriculum for Rural Communities

Thanks to a grant from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCRD) and support from several of the region's land-grant universities, a group of extension representatives began meeting in April 2023 to develop a "Building Options: Flexible Housing Curriculum for Rural Communities." Members represented the following universities: Iowa State University, Michigan State University, Purdue University, University of Illinois, University of Wisconsin, University of Nebraska, Kansas State University, and the University of Missouri.



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Following is a description of what this framework is intended to be, considerations for any extension service looking to use this product, the group's recommendations, and the actual content of the framework.

Background

Over the last 18 months, this thematic, multi-state group has explored the available data from our states and the region and verified the assertion that the housing conditions in many of our rural communities need addressing. Much of the existing housing stock in this area of the country is particularly aged and in poor condition. Also, most rural communities in this region have not had sufficiently attractive economic conditions or incentivizing tools to convince housing developers to build new housing units at a large-enough scale.

This group of community and economic development extension professionals looked at the existing solutions, programs, and resources available to assist, both within and outside of the Cooperative Extension System. The group found that although there are organizations and programs outside of extension that work in housing, there is still a need and a role for extension. The group also found examples of quality extension programs across our region; however, most of these programs are not connected and almost always underutilized.

The group identified that this was the space where we could be most useful. Our mission has become to build a regional framework that compiles the various programs and tools into one organized yet flexible offering for extension services to quickly identify, understand, and, where appropriate, utilize.

About

This "Flexible Curriculum Framework for Improving Access to Housing in Rural Communities" is a comprehensive guide aimed at empowering university extension educators with the skills, knowledge, and tools to tackle housing deficiencies in rural areas. It emphasizes community engagement, research, and education, and the development and implementation of strategies to improve access to housing in rural communities.

Key Features

A. Modular Structure

This framework is divided into specific modules that educators can adapt to their local contexts, focusing on key areas like housing literacy, community engagement, facilitation skills, strategy development, and implementation. Modules can stand alone but work best when building upon each other.

B. Community Engagement

Core strategies involve broad participation from key stakeholders, ensuring representation of all local citizens, and fostering collective decision-making through tools like stakeholder mapping and public input sessions.

C. Local Place-based Community Needs

Throughout the curriculum, specific and place-based needs are central to ensuring the participation and representation of all in the community and their specific housing needs. Modules emphasize removing barriers to participation and fostering relevant local solutions.

D. Practical Tools & Resources

Each module provides practical resources such as templates for community engagement, stakeholder analysis, housing needs assessment, and guides for advocacy. These tools are designed to facilitate local data collection, analysis and interpretation, strategic action, and community engagement.

E. Evaluation Framework

The curriculum stresses the importance of ongoing evaluation and reflection. This includes setting measurable benchmarks (e.g., participant empowerment, media outreach, housing literacy improvement) and continuously adapting the curriculum based on community feedback and data analysis.

F. Customization & Adaptation

The curriculum is flexible, allowing educators to tailor it to state and community-specific needs. This ensures that local housing policies, regulations, and unique challenges are reflected in the educational approach.

Summary of Modules

Module 1

Understanding Rural Housing Dynamics

Provide a foundational understanding of local rural housing issues and the interplay of housing with demographics, employment, health, education, and transportation.

Module 2

Community Engagement and Stakeholder Representation

Focus on building participative and representative community engagement strategies to ensure local collaboration in housing discussions and decisions.

Module 3

Group Facilitation Skills

Equip educators with the tools and skills needed to guide group discussions, manage conflicts, and facilitate group decision-making.

Module 4

Education for Housing Literacy

Empower rural residents by providing educational resources on housing policies, responsibilities, options, and opportunities, while addressing differences in learning needs and literacy levels.

Module 5

Collaborative Strategy Development

Help communities analyze their housing landscape and develop shared goals and actionable strategies to address local housing needs.

Module 6

Implementation

Guide communities in implementing housing strategies, securing resources, and advocating for policy changes that improve housing access.

Module 7

Evaluation and Reflection

Encourage continuous assessment and iteration of the curriculum's impact through community feedback, data analysis, and ongoing adaptation.

Module 8

Curriculum Customization

Provide guidance on adapting the curriculum to specific local contexts, housing programs, and unique community needs to ensure contextual relevance and compliance with state laws.

Conclusion & Action Steps

Encouraging Collaboration: Educators are encouraged to collaborate with local leaders, developers, and stakeholders to ensure comprehensive housing solutions.

Ongoing Evaluation: Using evaluation tools is critical to reflect on progress and adjust strategies to ensure long-term success.

Adaptation for Local Relevance: Educators should continuously adapt the modules to reflect specific state and specific community housing contexts.

This curriculum is intended to serve as a flexible, adaptable tool for fostering every resident access to housing in rural communities, promoting comprehensive strategies, and building long-term, sustainable housing solutions.

Flexible Curriculum Framework for Improving Access to Housing in Rural Communities

Introduction

Purpose: Equip university extension educators with adaptable tools and strategies to promote housing access (availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, accommodation, and awareness) in rural communities.

Core Goals:

- Raise awareness of rural housing challenges and opportunities.
- Facilitate community-led housing discussions.
- Encourage locally relevant solutions.
- Enable ongoing evaluation and adaptation based on local needs.

Module 1: Understanding Rural Housing Dynamics

Objective: Provide a foundational understanding of local rural housing issues.

Key Topics

- Local housing market dynamics (affordability, availability, accessibility, acceptability); define the intended geographic area of focus before determining pertinent data for evaluation
- Historical context of rural housing deficiencies
- Intersections of housing with residents, employment, health, education, and transportation

Tools and Resources

- Local housing data (e.g. median income vs. home prices, housing supply vs. housing demand, housing location vs. amenity location, density, vacancy, etc.)
- Case studies of rural housing challenges and potential solutions for consideration
- Housing research and policy guides

Evaluation

- Conduct pre-assessment survey on local housing knowledge.

Module 2: Community Representation and Engagement

Objective: Build skills for best practices for community engagement. Knowledge gained in Module 1 will aid identifying stakeholders and defining community for Module 2.

Key Topics

- Identifying and engaging key stakeholders, including all are well represented
- Conducting stakeholder analysis
- Creating forums for informative community discussions

Key Engagement Practices

- Ask probing questions to understand housing challenges.
- Map stakeholders for identifying needed participation or representation.
- Gather and analyze local and participant demographic and economic data.
- Host public input sessions to ensure transparency and trust.
- Develop and distribute educational materials.
- Use local media and social networks for outreach.
- Involve developers early to explore partnerships.

Key Representation

- Prioritize hearing underrepresented perspectives in housing discussions.
- Remove barriers to participation (e.g., childcare, compensation, language, scheduling, transportation, internet access).
- Ensure local culture relevance in engagement.

Tools and Resources

- Stakeholder mapping templates
- Community engagement guides
- Resources on best practices for community engagement success

Evaluation

- Compare participants with community data.
- Obtain qualitative feedback to assess participant empowerment.
- Monitor media reach and community engagement over time.

Module 3: Group Facilitation Skills

Objective: Equip educators with skills to guide group discussions and decision-making. Knowledge gained in Module 2 will aid in selecting appropriate facilitation techniques in Module 3.

Key Topics

- Facilitation basics: goal setting, trust-building, conflict management, dispute resolution
- Techniques for successful discussions and group decision-making

Local Needs

- Utilize local data to identify place-based facilitation techniques.
- Address local barriers like language and power dynamics.

Tools and Resources

- Facilitation guides and specialists
- Conflict resolution strategies

Evaluation

- Utilize role-play assessments and peer feedback.

Module 4: Education for Housing Literacy

Objective: Empower rural residents with knowledge about local housing policies and resources. Knowledge gained in Module 1 will form a foundation for Module 4.

Key Topics

- Housing policies, responsibilities, options, and opportunities
- Financial literacy for homeownership and rental stability
- Local, state, and federal housing resources (e.g., USDA, HUD)

Local Needs

- Tailor education to the local needs of the community including different literacy and learning styles.
- Frame housing as fundamental for community health and well-being.
- Use local data and examples to foster understanding.

Tools and Resources

- Housing literacy workshops and templates
- Financial calculators for housing costs and guides for housing options
- Resource lists for housing assistance programs

Evaluation

- Conduct pre- and post-session surveys to assess knowledge gains.
- Conduct ongoing check-ins to identify additional educational needs.

Module 5: Collaborative Strategy Development

Objective: Guide communities in developing data-informed housing strategies. Knowledge gained in Module 1 will form a basis for Module 5.

Key Topics

- Analyzing local/community housing data and trends
- Identifying community-specific housing access needs/opportunities (availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, accommodation, and awareness)
- Developing shared goals and actionable strategies to address housing access

Local Needs

- Ensure best practices in community engagement, especially of those underrepresented residents.
- Use locally appropriate planning methods.
- Empower participants in group decision-making.

Tools and Resources

- Housing needs assessment templates
- Options for planning methods
- Case studies of successful housing strategies (could be paired to needs/opportunities, Illinois Extension model)

Evaluation

- Monitor alignment with community vision and values.
- Gather feedback on participant empowerment.

Module 6: Implementation

Objective: Assist communities in implementing housing strategies and advocating for needed policy changes. Choices made in Module 5 will determine what is implemented in Module 6.

Key Topics

- Securing human resources, funding and technical resources
- Navigating policy opportunities
- Building partnerships with developers/investors, nonprofits, and government agencies

Local Needs

- Ensure all residents in the community benefit from housing efforts.
- Include a wide range of perspectives development.

Tools and Resources

- Funding and grant writing guides
- Policy change toolkits

Evaluation

- Measure progress using defined benchmarks.
- Gather qualitative feedback on participant empowerment.

Module 7: Evaluation and Reflection

Objective: Build an iterative process for assessing the overall curriculum efficacy and impact to make improvements going forward. Evaluation should also occur within each individual module.

Key Topics

- Developing success indicators (e.g., metrics for community participation, housing outcomes)
- Conducting ongoing evaluations and implementing improvements with community feedback

Tools and Resources

- Evaluation checklists and templates
- Key Performance Indicator (KPI) dashboards for tracking progress
- Extension evaluation specialists

Evaluation

- Build consensus around shared goals, establish incremental benchmarks for progress, and track outcomes over time.
- Conduct regular qualitative reflection sessions with community leaders and stakeholders.

Module 8: Curriculum Customization

Objective: Enable educators to adapt the curriculum to specific state and community needs.

Key Topics

- Understanding local housing issues, policies, and programs
- Tailoring the curriculum to reflect unique local housing challenges and opportunities

Tools and Resources

- Customization guides for identifying state-specific laws
- Range of planning methods from which to choose
- Templates for incorporating local case studies

Evaluation

- Continuously review modified curriculum effectiveness.
- Continuously assess state-specific information and resources.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Effective community engagement, key participation, and continuous evaluation are needed for successful housing initiatives. By leveraging local resources, understanding challenges, and fostering collaboration, rural communities can develop long-term, housing solutions for all.

Key Takeaways

- The curriculum is flexible and adaptable to any scale or location.
- Best practices in community development ensure community representation and local needs are addressed in the development and implementation of housing initiatives.
- Ongoing evaluation is essential for maintaining relevance and impact.

Action Items

- Adapt modules based on state-specific contexts.
- Foster collaboration among educators, local leaders, and stakeholders.
- Use evaluation tools to adjust strategies for long-term success.

