

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Peer Learning Networks and the Tri-state community review network

AT A GLANCE

UI Extension brought community leaders together during the pandemic for discussions surrounding community responsiveness and problem solving throughout Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

The Situation

Leaders in sparsely populated rural communities often operate in a leadership vacuum, having few other leaders in their community with whom to discuss challenges and solution-focused ideas. During the pandemic, communities were challenged with information exchange as many of the professional association conferences were canceled. The lack of bridging social capital can lead to stagnation, limiting local and regional development efforts. Starting in late 2020, the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN) and University of Idaho Extension began engaging rural leaders virtually on community and economic development topics through Peer Learning Networks (PLN). Idaho, Montana and Wyoming leaders and organizations continue to be involved in the WeCAN initiative.

Our Response

The WeCAN Peer Learning Network, launched in December 2020, created a place for community leaders to ask for advice, share successes and learn with like-minded people who understand the challenges of rural community development work.

During the first meeting, all three states of the WeCAN network came together to identify goals and formulate



The Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN) brought stakeholders together to discuss important topics.

state specific PLN groups. The state PLN teams delineated how often to meet, topics of interest and what meeting formats to use.

What emerged from each state was a monthly Zoom meeting open to any rural leader, including local government, organizations and/or citizen volunteers. The watchwords seemed to be flexibility, experimentation, relevance, responsiveness and engagement. Participants would come together for an annual joint networking event.

The WeCAN project team members support state PLNs by providing facilitation, note-taking and summarized proceedings in quarterly newsletters that are posted on the WeCAN website.

Program Outcomes

UI Extension educators and organizational partners facilitated conversations on the following topics including buy local campaigns, childcare/early childhood education options, housing, broadband internet, community responses to COVID, volunteerism, community engagement and workforce development. Several topic discussions were continued for two or more months depending on the complexity of the challenge.

- Montana and Wyoming shared discussions on many of the same topics. In addition, these states explored placemaking, community branding and identity.
- A Ripple Effects Mapping evaluation was the focus of one PLN meeting in March 2022. The seven participants representing all three states shared stories about the value of networking, shared learning and the support and inspiration provided by network members.
 - The support and inspiration makes her *“feel like I can keep going after a meeting and tackle another topic.”*
 - *“There was something from almost every peer learning meeting that we did that I didn’t pull some nugget out of and share with somebody.”*
 - A community foundation in Montana was inspired to start a “space to place” program to transform *“those ugly little lots between two buildings that are vacant and that can become a place, instead of a space.”*
- As of 2021 (one year after launching the concept) a total of 13 PLN meetings were held in Idaho, 12 in Montana, seven in Wyoming and since January 2022, nine joint meetings have taken place. Participant numbers ranged from five to 15 per meeting and from 60-160 at the solution roundtables.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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As a result of the PLN facilitated discussions, stakeholders have identified topics for deeper learning at roundtable webinars. The PLN provided a format for the co-production of knowledge rather than for disseminating expert knowledge, building trust and fostering multidirectional information flows and networks. Moreover, the member-driven focus assists with delivering research-based information at the right time to the right people when they are most likely to attend to that information. The roundtable discussions have been this “right time” for deeper learning and research and have been highly attended.

The Future

Leaders from different rural communities are often focused on daily demands and it can be difficult to see new ideas and opportunities. The PLN efforts helped rural leaders feel less “locally lonely,” a term discussed in the PLN efforts. PLN participants generated and explored insights and came to alternate understandings about how they operate as leaders. After the implementation of the Tri-state Housing Solutions Roundtable, participants and WeCAN facilitators together concluded that because the focus of individual state network gatherings had been shared across the three states, the PLN conversations would go forward as a joint PLN group consisting of community leaders in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

All leaders, aspiring leaders, volunteers and community development practitioners are welcome to be added to the mailing list by contacting Marci Miller: marcimiller@uidaho.edu or go to [website](#) to learn more.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

Idaho Rural Partnership, Montana Economic Developers Association, University of Idaho Extension, University of Wyoming Extension, University of Montana Extension, Wyoming Business Council.