

**March 2003**

Dear Colleagues:

Greetings from the National Rural Funders Collaborative!

If you are attending the **Council on Foundations meeting in Dallas**, please join us for an **NRFC-hosted session entitled, "Sharing the Vision; Preserving your Mission," at 8:30 a.m. on April 29th**. This session will feature a two-hour fishbowl discussion on the nature and value of collaboration among practitioners and funders and between philanthropy and governmental agencies at the regional and national levels.

If you have not kept up with our work, I encourage you to go to our website at [www.nrfc.org](http://www.nrfc.org). Be sure to review our **portfolio of rural strategies** and collaborations that ground our work and serve as the place-based, multi-regional laboratory in which we ask and seek to answer these questions about the nature of and conditions for rural "success." Also, look at the presentations and insights coming out of our **January mid-term event**. These notes represent the themes, issues and learnings emerging from our work together.

NRFC is nearing completion of its first full year of activity in the threefold work of leveraging funds for greater impact in rural areas; learning from best practices for a more strategic approach to rural philanthropy and rural practice; and identification of policy issues affecting sustainability of these efforts.

Already, two important lessons are emerging from our work together:

- One has to do with the nature and dynamics of **funder-practitioner relationships**. We are working to break down traditional barriers between the two and break through to a new understanding of ourselves as common stakeholders with distinctive roles. This will require that those of us who are part of the NRFC initiative must begin to examine more profoundly the issues of **"power"** between and among us: the respective power we hold as funders and practitioners; power dynamics within rural communities and cultures; our exercise of power both within our philanthropic institutions and within community; and our own personal sense of power which informs all of our relationships. As one expression of our commitment to breaking through these traditional barriers between funders and practitioners, we have now included several of our practitioner partners on our steering committee.
- A second lesson has to do with the **relationship between building capacity and measuring performance**. We are beginning to see that these are two sides of the same coin. From the practitioners viewpoint, outcome achievement and measurement are tied to capacity: "What capacity must be built or developed within rural areas or regions to enable them effectively to take advantage of current and future strategic opportunities?" From the funders perspective, capacity building must be grounded in achievable, sustainable and measurable outcomes: "What are those strategic opportunities critical to community revitalization and improvement in quality of life for which rural communities, leaders and families must be ready and capable of realizing?" In a word, we are beginning to think in terms of **"strategic readiness"** as perhaps a new and more constructive way of understanding both sides of the same coin that the funder invests and the practitioner spends.

If there is a common theme to these insights, it is breaking down the barriers that separate us within communities and within funder-grantee relationships, and breaking through to a new, common understanding that reunites us as common stakeholders - each with our distinctive roles - in revitalizing and improving the quality of life in rural areas facing persistent poverty. In

essence, this is at the heart of NRFC's work of collaboration: recognizing what separates us, valuing our diversity and joining together to work toward a common purpose.

As we approach the ides of March 2003, the admonition of Caesar's soothsayer seems to follow us: "Beware" ... the economy...the threat of terrorism...the imminence of war. Yet, amid this growing concern over impending threats, the voices from rural leaders and families working to improve their communities is persistently optimistic: "We are preparing new pathways for ourselves: not in response to threats, but in response to opportunities."

Look for future updates as we continue to work to break down barriers and break through to new understandings of the value of community-based collaboration in strengthening and sustaining rural areas facing poverty.

Peace.

Jim Richardson  
Executive Director  
National Rural Funders Collaborative