

FINAL REPORT

APPALACHIAN REGIONAL COMMISSION
RECOVERY-TO-WORK
LISTENING SESSIONS

December 2018–April 2019

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This report summarizes the outcomes of six Recovery-to-Work Listening Sessions hosted by the Appalachian Regional Commission December 2018–April 2019. In each of the six sessions—held in Big Stone Gap, VA; Wilkesboro, NC; Muscle Shoals, AL; Pineville, KY; Portsmouth, OH; and Beckley, WV—ARC leadership discussed substance abuse related workforce issues with representatives from local and state government, treatment and recovery service providers, workforce development entities, employers, law enforcement, and individuals currently in recovery.

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was established by Congress in 1965 to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in the 13 states that make up the Appalachian Region. The Region has made considerable progress toward these goals, however, recently, feedback from the Region indicates that the prevalence of substance abuse is negatively impacting the Region’s economic potential, specifically posing challenges to workforce availability in the Region.

In a study commissioned in 2016 by ARC, the Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis at NORC at the University of Chicago found Appalachian Region opioid-related overdose mortality rates 49 percent higher than in the non-Appalachian parts of the country (24.6 deaths per 100,000 population ages 15-64 in Appalachia, compared to 16.5 per 100,000 in the non-Appalachian U.S.). Among Appalachians ages 25-44, the overdose mortality rate—which includes overdose deaths due to both opioid and non-opioid substances—is more than 70 percent higher than for those living outside the region. Typically, this group includes those in their prime working years, which creates a significant challenge to economic development in rural communities.

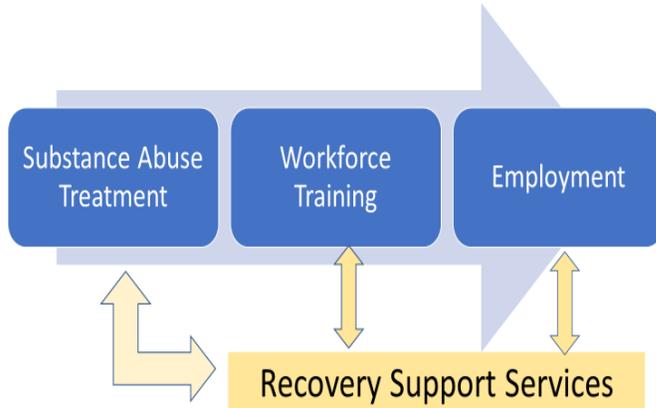
To better understand this challenge, ARC participated in listening sessions, focused on describing the workforce impacts of the substance abuse crisis on regional economic development. Held from December, 2018 through April, 2019, the sessions sought to define challenges and elements needed to develop an effective “Recovery Ecosystem” to mitigate the pervasive nature of this crisis in both lives lost and economic potential.

ARC participated in six meetings to gather recommendations for effective goals, strategies, and programs to address substance abuse issues in an economic development context. The sessions captured insights and generated ideas about how communities could strengthen the recovery ecosystem to create pathways that help individuals achieve long-term recovery while getting the training and skills they need to integrate into the workforce and ultimately gain meaningful employment. Participants included treatment and recovery service providers, workforce development entities, employers, law enforcement, and the recovery community, as well as representatives of local and state governments, among others.

The ARC alternate representing each state where a session was held worked with the Commission to organize their respective session, and identify and recruit participants and speakers. Sessions were held in the following states:

- Virginia – Big Stone Gap, December 14, 2018
- North Carolina – Wilkesboro, January 15, 2019
- Alabama – Muscle Shoals, March 20, 2019
- Kentucky – Pineville, March 28, 2019
- Ohio – Portsmouth, April 5, 2019
- West Virginia – Beckley, April 18, 2019

The ARC Recovery Ecosystem Model



Each meeting followed a set agenda. An introduction and background were given by the ARC Federal Co-Chair. Additional welcomes and comments were provided by a state official. A local individual in recovery then shared their story about the journey from treatment to recovery, and securing employment. Invited participants to the morning listening session then rotated to flip-chart sessions in small groups, providing insights on the three key elements in the ARC Recovery Ecosystem Model; recovery services, workforce training, and employment.

The afternoon public meeting included a panel of speakers from the area who provided comments about local, regional, and state issues for each of the three model elements. To capture additional perspectives, the audience then participated in a facilitated public discussion about the issues. An average of 75 individuals participated in each of the six public meetings.

A wealth of ideas was generated by participants through flip chart exercises, comment cards, and discussions. Similarities were found in input from across the six states. From this input, a number of key themes emerged.

Recovery Ecosystem – The recovery ecosystem in Appalachia is complex, spanning multiple sectors, to include; health, mental health, social work, criminal justice, housing, income support, transportation, education, and employment services. The availability of services to support the recovery ecosystem varies in each community, determined by a number of factors such as existing recovery infrastructure, prevalence of stigma, resources and funding, employment opportunities, and the length of time and experience communities have in working to address the crisis.

Recovery Needs – Among the recovery needs most frequently discussed were: sober housing; child care and elder care; transportation; on-going attendance with support groups; and assistance with medical, mental health, and dental care. Additionally, lack of adequate clothing and poor hygiene can serve as significant barriers to obtaining a job.

Building a recovery community providing support to address the many medical, behavioral, legal, and employment challenges faced by people in recovery, was emphasized. Peer support by those who have achieved successful, long-term recovery was seen as essential to promote recovery, identify and manage patients' needs, and encourage progress toward employment. Participants called for programs throughout the region to focus on use of peer support as helpers to link needs with resources. As such, there is a growing need for a certified peer recovery support workforce to support these efforts.

Coordination of Services – Rural communities in Appalachia often lack the resources to identify gaps in services, and to provide those services to individuals in recovery in a sustainable way. For individuals who have completed treatment, navigating these various services on their own can be discouraging, often leading to relapse. Further complicating an individual’s journey to recovery are existing organizational and legal mandates, absence of or backlogs in services, and the unstructured nature of relationships among service organizations. For instance, criminal justice involved individuals may experience difficulty finding employment as a result of their involvement with the justice system, or finding sustainable employment to address court-ordered costs and basic needs such as food and shelter.

Throughout the Region, there exists a general lack of coordination among the various components of a recovery ecosystem, to include communities with robust infrastructure. For example, in many of the sessions, participants discussed how this was the first time they had interacted with other stakeholders invited to the session to discuss this issue. As such, more must be done to reduce siloing of services and encourage greater collaboration among the various stakeholders in a geographic region that make up the recovery ecosystem.

To address these challenges, participants recommended the need for community-based assessments and planning to better organize local and regional efforts that promote linkages among recovery services, workforce development, and employers. Such linkages could be built and maintained by new and existing intervention programs that employ individuals, often recovery peers, responsible for helping people in recovery succeed, along with workforce training, education, and employment connections they need to secure employment. Individuals in need of these services could be referred to the needed services by “navigators” or services can be co-located within an existing program.

Employment – Individuals in recovery were identified as a potential untapped resource for regional workforces. As regional employers continue to worry about unfilled job openings, there is increasing recognition of the need to reengage a significant number of persons in recovery into the workforce. Most importantly, for people in recovery, securing work is considered a contributing factor to successful recovery outcomes as employment provides motivation and a sense of hope in addition to providing for the physical needs of individuals and their families.

Employment was identified as a long-term goal of the recovery ecosystem, however, participants described multiple barriers to employment for those in recovery, to include education and skills training; child care and elder care; transportation; court-ordered appointments; lack of jobs paying living wages and with potential for advancement; and stigma against hiring persons in recovery among employers and generally in communities. Some common challenges for economic growth can include recruiting drug-free workers; higher rates of worker turn-over; and companies and industries reluctant to do business, or expand current operations, in the region due to workforce availability.

More attention is needed to focus on client-centered linkages between willing employers, workforce training, and recovery services organizations. As stated earlier, one idea for linking these various components can include colocation of multiple services at single sites to improve communication and shared goal-setting with clients, and reduce transportation issues (identified

as a key shortfall). Participants unanimously indicated that GED obtainment, improving soft skills, and boosting self-confidence of those in recovery should be included in all workforce training and education curriculum.

Helping employers with incentives to reduce financial risk as well as assistance with human resources issues, employee assistance policies, and recovery friendly workplace culture were identified as areas that need to be strengthened. While employers identified many hiring issues, they also confirmed that those in recovery in general were productive and loyal employees.

Effective Practices – Appalachia communities need more information in the way of effective practices and programs to help them assess, plan, and develop local and regional efforts that promote the recovery ecosystem. Specific to employers, participants encouraged development of toolkits for human resources departments and employee assistance program managers to explain recovery and effective methods in hiring and retaining individuals struggling with substance abuse.

ARC'S SUBSTANCE ABUSE ADVISORY COUNCIL

In May 2019, ARC established the [Substance Abuse Advisory Council \(SAAC\)](#), a 24-member volunteer advisory group of leaders from law enforcement, recovery services, health, economic development, private industry, education, state government and other sectors representing each of the Region's 13 states. The Council's goal is to draw on the themes identified from the Listening Sessions to develop recommendations to anchor ARC's strategy to help address the workforce impacts of Appalachia's substance abuse epidemic. The Council's final recommendations will be formally presented to the Commission in early September.