EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Evaluation of ARC's INSPIRE Initiative

Presented by:

East Tennessee State University

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East Tennessee State University Center for Rural Health Research

Housed in the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) College of Public Health, the Center for Rural Health Research works to improve health and well-being at the community, state, regional, and national levels. Located in the heart of Appalachia, the Center fulfills its mission by engaging rural communities to advance health and improve quality of life through innovative solutions that contribute to the expanding evidence base of what works in rural America. The Center works to honor and preserve its rich Appalachian heritage and Tennessee ties through distinctive research, community engagement, training, and policy.

ETSU Center for Rural Health Research
College of Public Health
PO Box 70623 Johnson City, TN 37614
http://www.etsu.edu/cph/rural-health-research

East Tennessee State University Addiction Science Center

The East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Addiction Science Center partners with affected communities in Central Appalachia to advance the science of substance misuse prevention and treatment. The Center accomplishes this mission by conducting innovative research; disseminating and implementing evidence-based prevention and treatment solutions; educating and training health professionals; engaging with and learning from the community to create lasting solutions; and providing evidence-based, high quality clinical care.

ETSU Addiction Science Center
College of Public Health
PO Box 70584 Johnson City, TN 37614
https://www.etsu.edu/cph/addiction-science-center

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Background

The INvestments Supporting Partnerships in Recovery Ecosystems (INSPIRE) Initiative "addresses the substance use disorder (SUD) crisis across Appalachia by creating or expanding a recovery ecosystem that will lead to workforce entry or re-entry."[1] Since launching the initiative in April 2021, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has funded 84 grantee projects across the Appalachian Region.[1]

The East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Center for Rural Health Research, in collaboration with the ETSU Addiction Science Center, conducted an evaluation of the INSPIRE Initiative on behalf of ARC in 2022-2023. The evaluation was designed to advance understanding of the accessibility of the application process, implementation successes and challenges, and preliminary grant impacts. It focused on the first 2 cohorts of grantees (n=50). Evaluation findings informed recommendations aimed at strengthening the INSPIRE Initiative.

The evaluation combined multiple strategies to address evaluation questions identified by ARC. Key evaluation strategies included: 1) a review of application materials and processes; 2) analyses of grant portfolio data available through ARC and other publicly available data; 3) administration of a cross-sectional, web-based survey to grantees; and 4) convening of virtual focus groups with grantees. The final report presents key findings and recommendations for ARC resulting from the evaluation of the INSPIRE Initiative.

Key Findings

An overview of key findings is presented below. A full summary of key findings is available in the final report.

Application Process

- The overall reach of select marketing/outreach methods used by ARC varied by method. Newsletters appeared to have a wider reach than press releases, while social media announcements regarding funding had a wider reach than other social media posts.
- Multiple potential grantees prematurely exited the application process according to findings from an analysis of organizational participation. Of the 313 organizations potentially interested in the INSPIRE Initiative, 213 of those organizations did not apply for funding.
- Survey respondents reported learning about the funding opportunity through multiple outreach methods, including engagement with ARC and finding promotional content developed by ARC. Similarly, focus group participants emphasized the value of an established connection to or relationship with ARC when describing how they learned about the INSPIRE Initiative.

- Approximately half of survey respondents described the overall process of applying for the grant as "easy." They also generally reported that key elements of the funding announcement as well as the pre-application workshop offered by ARC were helpful. Similarly, some focus group participants described the ease of the application process.
- Focus group participants most commonly identified the requirement for cost sharing or matching as a barrier to the application process. Consistent with this theme, based on survey findings, the most commonly identified suggestion for improving the application process was for ARC to provide a tool to help calculate funding/matching funds.

Needs Assessment

- Survey respondents leveraged multiple approaches to identify community needs in the recovery-to-work ecosystem when preparing their grant applications. The approaches most commonly reported as influential included: interviews with community members, key informants, or other populations of interest; informal relationships with community leaders; and third-party data analysis.
- Survey respondents applied information on community needs in multiple ways when preparing their grant applications. The most commonly reported uses included: identifying challenges to workforce participation; identifying gaps in behavioral health services, training, employment, and provision of support services; and demonstrating impacts of substance use.
- Most survey respondents continued to assess community needs as part of their projects. The most commonly reported uses of this information included: identifying new organizational/business partners; modifying project activities; and modifying projected outputs and/or outcomes.

Grantee Organizations and Goals

- A total of 50 grants were awarded according to the grant portfolio data provided by ARC. This included 16 planning grants and 34 implementation grants. Grantees focused on 197 Appalachian counties, representing nearly 47% of counties in the Appalachian Region. Most counties with INSPIRE funding were classified as transitional, at-risk, or distressed using ARC's levels of economic distress.[2]
- Varying types of organizations received grants. The most common organization type for all grants was non-profit organizations with 501(c)(3) status, followed by local governments and institutions of higher education.
- Grantee projects aligned with goals and objectives articulated in ARC's Strategic Plans.[3,4] Thirty projects corresponded to goal 2[*] of the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan,[3] while 20 projects corresponded to goal 2[†] of the 2022-2026 Strategic Plan.[4]

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[*] Goal: "Increase the education, knowledge, skills, and health of residents to work and succeed in Appalachia."

[†] Goal: "Expand and strengthen community systems (education, healthcare, housing, childcare, and others) that help Appalachians obtain a job, stay on the job, and advance along a financially sustaining career pathway."

- Grantee project goals, as described by survey respondents, generally clustered into 3 categories: employment goals (e.g., increasing workforce participation among individuals in recovery); aspirational goals (e.g., cultural change around substance use); and partnership goals (e.g., new coordination among partners to expand services).
- Across grant types, survey respondents identified multiple project activities. Among implementation grantees, the most commonly identified activities included: deliver soft skills training to individuals in recovery; build or expand partnerships with employers; and provide employment or job placement services to individuals in recovery. Among planning grantees, the most commonly identified activities included: establish partnerships with other organizations or employers; facilitate communication among organizations and/or employers; foster commitments from employers to offer opportunities to individuals in recovery; and develop training or other education for employers.
- Survey respondents reported serving a variety of populations, and many identified more than 1 population. The most commonly identified populations of focus included: individuals with substance use disorders or addiction; general adult population; individuals who have been incarcerated; and individuals employed in organizations serving or engaging with people with substance use disorders.

Partnerships

- Survey respondents incorporated a diverse array of partners into their projects. The most commonly identified partners included: 501(c)(3) nonprofits (other than institutions of higher education); county governments; and small businesses. Approximately half of survey respondents reported that all or most partnerships were established before the launch of their project.
- Survey respondents reported multiple areas of collaboration with partners. The most commonly identified area was project implementation or service delivery. Focus group participants also highlighted differences in the functions of partnerships by grant type, such as a focus on plan development or needs assessments among planning grantees compared to service delivery or participant referral among implementation grantees.
- Most survey respondents had engaged business/employer partners. The most commonly identified mechanisms for engaging these partners included: delivered training or other education to employers; established a network of employers that hire individuals in recovery; and created partnerships with in-demand industry sectors. More than half of survey respondents further reported that they had partnered or planned to partner with businesses/employer partners to modify their policies to support individuals with substance use disorder in staying employed.
- Survey and focus group participants described challenges and successes when engaging partners. Areas of success included establishing and expanding partner networks, partner alignment with project goals, and partnerships with businesses or employers. The primary

challenge, or barrier to success, was stigma associated with substance use disorder and its impacts.

Grant Performance and Successes

- Grantee projects were designed to achieve multiple output and outcome performance measures defined by ARC.[5] Exhibit 1 presents the ARC performance measures designated for the INSPIRE Initiative, along with collective projected grantee outputs and outcomes.

Exhibit 1. ARC Performance Measures: Projected Outputs and Outcomes for Grantee Projects	
Measure	Projected Outputs/Outcomes
Plans/reports developed (output)	24
Businesses served (output)	3,261
Businesses improved (outcome)	726
Students served (output)	640
Students improved (outcome)	461
Workers/trainees served (output)	4,586
Workers/trainees improved (outcome)	2,786

Note that while all of these ARC performance measures are designated for the INSPIRE Initiative, all grantees are not required to address each of them.

- Grantee projects that were closed and open at the time of the survey (November-December 2022) had addressed multiple output and outcome performance measures defined by ARC.[5] Exhibit 2 presents the ARC performance measures designated

Exhibit 2. ARC Performance Measures: Achieved Outputs and Outcomes for Grantee Projects	
Measure	Achieved Outputs/Outcomes
Plans/reports developed (output)	21
Businesses served (output)	525
Businesses improved (outcome)	384
Students served (output)	261
Students improved (outcome)	112
Workers/trainees served (output)	1,542
Workers/trainees improved (outcome)	1,081

for the INSPIRE Initiative, along with collective achieved grantee outputs and outcomes.

- Grantees experienced early successes that expanded beyond performance measures. According to survey and focus group findings, major areas of success included: establishing and expanding partner networks; securing community and organizational support; and providing comprehensive services to individuals in recovery.

- During focus groups, implementation grantees described successful referral pathways for their programs that involved traditional and innovative partners, such as jails and drug court programs. They also frequently highlighted the involvement of Certified Recovery Specialists or Peer Recovery Specialists in these pathways.

Challenges and Costs

- Survey and focus group participants reported facing a range of challenges. Commonly identified challenges included stigma associated with substance use disorder and staffing difficulties.

- Survey respondents reported employing various strategies in an attempt to address challenges that they encountered. The most commonly reported strategies included: identified or engaged new organizational or business partners; expanded community outreach efforts; and expanded partner recruitment and/or retention efforts.

- Approximately half of survey respondents reported that they had not encountered any unanticipated costs. Among those reporting costs, the most commonly identified types included: staffing; participant recruitment or retention; and communications or marketing.

- Survey respondents identified multiple ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ability to serve their communities or beneficiaries. The most commonly identified impacts included: modification of in-person services/events/activities; greater focus on virtual services/events/activities; and difficulty recruiting, engaging, or retaining participants. Focus group participants also highlighted significant staffing impacts resulting from the pandemic.

Data Collection and Reporting

- Approximately half of survey respondents were collecting data on performance measures identified by ARC and data on additional measures identified by their organization.

- Survey respondents identified additional measures that they were using to assess the impact of their projects, ranging from services provided to job placement and retention. Focus group participants, however, focused on job placement and retention. They noted the importance of collecting data on short-term job placement and long-term job retention.

- Survey respondents were using multiple tools to collect data for their projects. The most commonly identified tools included: data collection/reporting tool for project staff; survey of businesses; and survey of participants. They identified similar tools that they would use to continue to collect data on outputs and outcomes for up to 3 years after grant closure.

- Nearly all survey respondents reported moderate or high capacity to collect and report outputs and outcomes to ARC until grant closure, whereas most survey respondents reported low or moderate capacity up to 3 years after grant closure.

Sustainability Plans

- Approximately half of survey respondents had plans to sustain the work of their projects after grant closure. Most of the remaining respondents reported intentions to create a plan before closure. Sustainability plans, as described by survey and focus group participants, focused on securing additional funding, building on successes in expanding the recovery ecosystem, and leveraging partnerships.

Recommendations

A summary of recommendations aimed at strengthening the INSPIRE Initiative is presented below. Full recommendations are available in the final report.

Improving the Accessibility of the Application Process for the INSPIRE Initiative

1. Consider opportunities to enhance training for reviewers of INSPIRE applications.
2. Increase technical assistance or resources available during the application process, particularly for sections that could be more challenging for applicants.
3. Consider opportunities to improve the overall usability of the INSPIRE Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for applicants, such as offering a fillable grant application form.
4. Expand technical assistance or resources to support fulfillment of the application requirement for cost sharing or matching.
5. Continue to provide and promote pre-application workshops for applicants.
6. Ensure that outreach efforts reach Appalachian counties without INSPIRE funding that have evidence of high need.
7. Consider opportunities to expand outreach and engagement efforts to organizations that participate in the pre-application workshop or submit a Letter of Intent (LOI).
8. Consider opportunities to expand outreach and engagement efforts to organizations without a well-established relationship with ARC.
9. Continue to leverage ARC's website and *In The Region* newsletter as platforms for communicating about the INSPIRE Initiative.
10. Consider opportunities to include organizations without INSPIRE funding in the examination of the accessibility of the INSPIRE application process.

Improving the Implementation of the INSPIRE Initiative

11. Consider the implications of the scale of cost sharing or matching required for INSPIRE projects.
12. Provide training or resources to assist grantees in reducing stigma associated with substance use disorder.
13. Explore opportunities to assist grantees in delivering effective training to participants and partners.
14. Explore the implications of increasing the maximum length of the performance period.
15. Create platforms to support communication and collaboration among grantees.

Improving the Ability to Document the Effectiveness of the INSPIRE Initiative

16. Provide supplemental training or technical assistance on reporting requirements to new and current grantees.
17. Consider opportunities to enhance guidance on performance and other measures for new and current grantees.

18. Consider opportunities to support grantees in designing or identifying high-quality tools and processes for data collection.

19. Gather feedback to enhance the usability of the reporting system from recent or current grantees.

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