BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: BUILDING CIVIC AGENCY AND WORKING-CLASS POWER IN APPALACHIA

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctorate in Educational Leadership.

By
Ben David Williamson

Director: Dr. Robert Crow
Associate Professor of Educational Research

Committee Members: Dr. Joy Howard, Education and Allied Professions
Dr. Lane Perry, Business
Mr. Todd Zimmer, Co-Director, Down Home North Carolina

December 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: BUILDING CIVIC AGENCY AND WORKING-CLASS POWER IN APPALACHIA

Ben David Williamson

December 2023

Director: Dr. Robert Crow

Research has shown many rural, working-class residents in North Carolina reported feeling disengaged from the political process. Many low-income residents in rural counties also hold perceptions of powerlessness to make changes in their communities. Participants in government are overwhelmingly wealthy and systems are designed to promote urban and ruling class interests. This paper analyzes the impacts of rural, relational community organizing by a non-profit, chapter-based group in two adjacent counties located in the Appalachian mountains of Western North Carolina. One 90-day improvement cycle was facilitated, and transformative, mixed-method data collection was used to measure the impact of education and experiences on working-class members. By reviewing current practices designed to increase civic agency and perceptions of power among rural, working-class members, this initiative highlights areas of success and analyzes the implications of strategies and actions. Results show members are reporting dramatic increases in feelings of empowerment and civic agency, and that current methods have proven to be effective. Recommendations for future research are suggested, as well as suggestions for policy and structure changes, such as increased member involvement in strategy, more intentionality and commitment to reaching diverse populations, and more standardization in educational offerings. Important considerations are discussed which may

contribute to the success of member growth and differentiate these findings from similar or future studies.

Keywords: community organizing, civic agency, rural studies, working-class empowerment, political engagement

Bridging the Divide: Building Civic Agency and Working-Class Power in Appalachia

"From the depth of need and despair, people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and strength." – Cesar Chavez (Cesar Chavez Foundation, n.d.)

How do you define "power?" What does it mean to have it? Or to be powerless? For many working-class residents in rural Appalachia, power can be found in family and community bonds, in individual and communal resilience, perseverance, and a fierce fighting spirit. Power, defined in this sense as civic participation in elections, meetings, leadership, problem assessment, and mobilization of resources (Laverack, 2001), has often evaded rural and working-class people. The perception of powerlessness has left many feeling left out or discarded by a democratic process that should be a strong resource in areas that are often lacking resources. As a result, rural, working-class residents in North Carolina have seen their freedoms threatened and participation in democracy has suffered.

Community organizing, a people-centric process focused on building capacity, independence, and power (Manilili, 1990), has proven to be an effective tool used in many socio-political struggles around the world, especially in the American South (Rachleff, 1995). A long history of class struggle exists in Appalachia, the 13-state, 200,000+ square mile region that runs southwest from southern New York state to northern Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). Chavez organized farm workers in the 1960s and 70's, fighting an economic and social system designed to oppress and exploit lower-income workers and minority racial groups (Chavez Foundation, n.d.). Chavez's work parallels the work of rural community organizers in Appalachia as both efforts seek to promote economic justice and worker power among marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Differences exist in language, race,

geographic regions, and types of work among both groups, but Chavez's quote above accurately reflects previous and current examples of marginalized populations coming together to support each other. Appalachian examples of these efforts are many, such as West Virginia's "Battle of Blair Mountain" labor organizing in the 1920s (National Park Service, n.d.), eastern Kentucky's Mud Creek Health Clinic (Hall, 1999), built to provide free health care to residents in 1973, or successful efforts in North Carolina and Virginia in the 1980's to protect the New River from dams (Woodard, 2006).

Today, rural community organizing continues across many fronts in Appalachia, including efforts against fracking, pipelines, and mutual aid coordination across communities to fill gaps in food security, clothing, healthcare, and basic needs. This paper details an improvement initiative that addresses the current problem of a lack of civic engagement among working-class residents of rural Western North Carolina. The initiative tests one model for promoting community organizing, education, and leadership development as a method to address issues. The impacts of poverty and the resulting lack of resources have a wide-ranging impact on the lives of residents in this region. Many rural poor in North Carolina's Appalachian areas have been left out of political decision-making in their counties, and often do not possess the skills, experience, and support to respond to the needs of working-class residents. The example below is one person's story of why community organizing efforts are needed and why organizing can be effective in promoting empowerment among members of disenfranchised populations.

Lily is a single mom who lives in Watauga County, North Carolina. Watauga is both rural and mountainous, containing numerous hamlets and hollers, as well as the growing college town of Boone. Lily's teenage son has special needs, and, due to her low income, they have lived in government-subsidized housing for 13 years. Recently, Lily secured a higher-paying job, pushing

her income over the amount the government will provide housing support. Losing this subsidy *decreased* Lily's net monthly income, as the removed subsidy was more than her increased income, causing her to fall behind the now market-rate rent. After 13 years of residing in the same apartment complex, including one year in which she battled her reluctant landlord to repair a plumbing issue that caused standing water to invade her home, Lily and her son were evicted for falling behind on rent payments; suddenly facing a daunting local housing market. Since Watauga County has a 99.9% rental occupancy rate (Bowen National Research, 2022), Lily struggled to find a new apartment. When she did, she was asked to provide the first and last month's rent, as well as a security deposit before moving in. Pulling together that amount of money at once was impossible for her, and she was forced to move in with her boyfriend and his parents at their home 30 miles from Boone and her son's school, in an adjacent county. This move separated her from her son, who moved in with his father, elsewhere in Watauga and closer to his school. Lily wondered what she would do next.

Navigating this frustrating financial and housing experience strengthened Lily's connection to a non-profit organization called Down Home NC (DHNC). Down Home's (2023) mission is to "build multi-racial working-class power." Never having been politically active, Lily met others with similar issues and concerns, spent time building relationships with staff and other members, and signed up for training and events. Eventually, she was asked to take on larger roles in chapter meetings and now Lily frequently volunteers to support working-class issues through the organization. In the last few months, she has researched, interviewed, and endorsed political candidates, canvassed door-to-door to increase voter turnout, and advocated for candidates.

Additionally, Lily has begun preparations to participate in a local issue campaign focused on affordable housing. She also has been invited to take part in a statewide group for advocates of public education. Lily is now a core member of Down Home Watauga's Organizing Committee, a working group of members tasked with leading the strategy and direction of the chapter. In this capacity, she has developed skills such as structuring and leading meetings, public speaking, writing agendas, leading presentations, canvassing, project management, and evaluating chapter activities for quality. Lily is a strong example of what Down Home's program and presence hope to achieve. By providing opportunities for leadership development, education, and engagement, Lily can be a more active participant in shaping the community in which she lives. By advocating for the needs of working-class residents in the county, there is more support for those often left out or not prioritized by government policies. Her story represents how an entity like Down Home can be successful in empowering people who have been removed from civic engagement.

Poverty Preventing Participation

Lily significantly increased her civic engagement and feelings of empowerment through her involvement with Down Home. However, Lily's story of taking action to improve her situation through education and political involvement to increase her civic agency is an exception. Down Home's research into rural North Carolinian communities shows a strong relationship between poverty, a lack of political participation, and a lack of hope for positive change. In a 2017 survey of nearly 1,400 rural NC residents, Down Home learned that residents who reported struggling to meet basic needs were not confident in finding political solutions to their issues. Results from the same survey showed low-wealth residents were least likely to

engage in voting, nor have confidence that electing working people could solve their problems. These findings focus on working-class residents, defined by Zweig (2004) as:

> People who, when they go to work or when they act as citizens, have comparatively little power or authority. They are the people who do their jobs under more or less close supervision, who have little control over the pace or the content of their work, who aren't the boss of anyone. (p. 4)

Down Home's results showed rural, working-class residents have little faith in government and little incentive to get involved in political processes at any level.

The realities of poverty often result in a focus on a family's survival. Daily economic pressures can hamper opportunities to be politically engaged, even though economic and environmental policies disproportionately negatively impact lower-income, rural, and working-class populations (EPA, 2021; McGranahan, 2003). Therefore, this problem of practice is that systemic factors of poverty and exclusion have deprived members of the Appalachian rural working-class access to political organization and power**.** The lack of a capacity to leverage civic engagement prevents obstacles to justice, and social and economic mobility, from being identified and confronted.

The gradual erosion of confidence in corporate, political, and social systems described above, among the population of a state as rural as North Carolina, has a massive impact on the political landscape. Simply stated, rural residents feel as if they are being left out (Down Home North Carolina, 2017) of political decision-making or that government does not work for them. Without perceptions of power and increased representation and engagement among the working class in the state, how would the government begin to effectively address the many problems facing rural communities and working families today?

Perceptions of Powerlessness in Rural Communities: The Root of the Problem

Systems of American political power have long been dominated by the wealthy upper class, who are often concentrated in urban areas. Most Americans have negligible influence on policy decisions, or none (Gilens, 2012). A lack of working-class representation and influence in government has hurt perceptions of power and influence among rural residents. Decisions made by, and prioritizing, wealthier urban residents have forged a sense that government and power are not the domain of the rural, working class. Brown et al. (2021) state, "Rural people perceive themselves to be relatively powerless," adding, "56% of those who identify as rural say, 'people in rural areas have too little influence compared to people in cities,' and 66% said that they received 'too little respect' compared to urbanites" (pp. 366-367). As we seek to involve more rural citizens in campaigns that directly affect their lives, it will be critical to reverse this perception.

It is often those in rural areas that are most affected by damaging political and corporate decisions. Recent examples of pipeline intrusion across indigenous lands in the Midwest, causing massive protests at Standing Rock, were large enough to garner national headlines. However, the Mountain Valley Pipeline project that threatened segments of Appalachia and indigenous lands and communities in rural North Carolina, is an additional example of corporations and segments of government targeting lower-income, marginalized, and less powerful areas and populations. Stephens (2016) labeled criminal corporate behavior as a cause, primarily impacting both humans and the environment. She wrote, "Rural areas are particularly affected by chemical contamination, fossil fuel exploitation, the absence of coverage of relevant local issues by the media, marginalization by governments, and the loss of cherished places and ways of life" (p.

721). While some may question why those in rural areas do not simply fight back against these patterns of transgression, obstacles preventing this type of organizing are many.

Economic, and sometimes physical, survival takes priority over political, environmental, or cultural activism for many in Appalachia, preventing people and communities from activating and fighting back against harmful projects or systems. Stephens (2016) comments that the hurdles to these efforts are significant, such as:

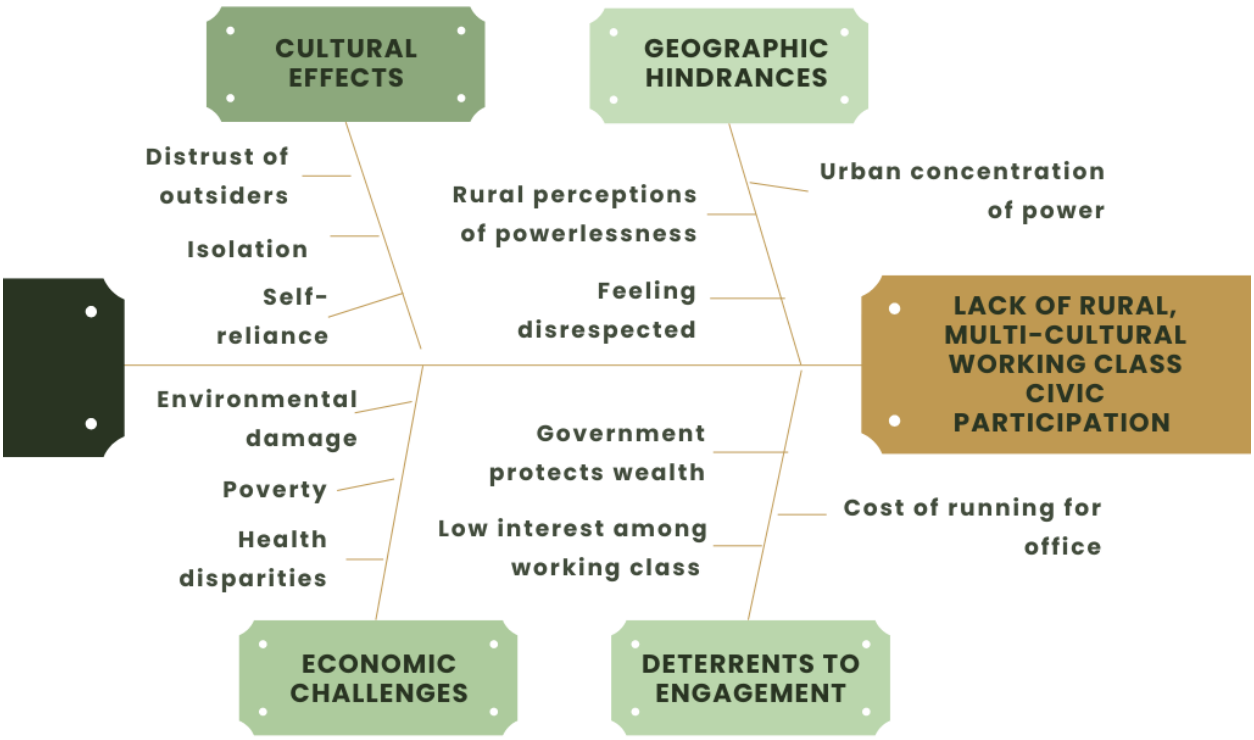
> growing poverty, dwindling, and aging populations, lack of transit, unreliable, spotty telecommunications, and other obstacles. These factors and others are used to illustrate why ramped-up activism is essential to protect the rights of rural residents, the natural environment, and the farmlands that feed much of the U.S. population. (p. 721)

Currently, it is more critical than ever for rural Appalachians to organize against forces making life harder for workers, their families, and the environment. Researchers have discussed the negative effects of globalization and the 2008 recession on rural populations, including lack of housing, rural poverty, wages, unemployment rates, and environmental impacts (Santiago et al., 2016). Access to technology and broadband, health disparities, and issues related to immigration and justice are made worse in rural areas due to "social and spatial isolation, the lack of resources and trained practitioners" (Santiago et al., 2016, p. 231). Geographic isolation has other implications, including "traditional attitudes that emphasize self-reliance and self-sufficiency; nurture distrust of outsiders and outside assistance; and foster concerns about government intervention and interference" (Santiago et al., 2016, p. 231). As a result, rural residents face obstacles of infrastructure and culture that often are not felt or seen in more urban environments.

The negative impacts of poverty on political engagement are not unique to Appalachia. In a sample of 24 democracies, Rosset et al. (2013) found economic inequality reduces political representation for low-income people. As income inequality increases, Rosset et al. (2013) showed that "governments represent the middle- and especially the high-income group best" (p. 825). Among low-income individuals, income inequality can be linked to lower levels of self-reported political interest, political discussion, and electoral participation (Solt, 2008). Poor, rural Appalachians have been pushed to the margins of political representation and engagement and lack access to political and social capital to direct change. Interventions to directly address these two factors among a sample of residents of two North Carolina counties in Appalachia are outlined in later paragraphs.

Figure 1

Causal systems analysis showing systemic impacts on rural, working-class power



Causal Analysis of Obstacles to Working-Class Civic Participation

A causal analysis, or fishbone diagram, can be an effective way to visualize and organize factors contributing to a problem. Langley et al. (2009) refer to the diagram as useful in "developing changes for discovering, organizing, and summarizing a group's knowledge about causes" (p. 429) of issues. The fishbone visual shows how various problems, or "bones," feed into and combine with other factors to form larger issues.

The diagram above illustrates some of the root causes, compiled from various researchers (Cramer, 2016; Hartley, 2020; Mills, 2001), as well as personal experience as a practitioner, that contribute to decreased levels of working-class civic engagement. As discussed above, economic, geographic, and political elements combine to present significant obstacles for rural citizens. Higher levels of civic engagement needed to attain political representation, and power

needed to improve their own lives, can be harder to obtain. This causal analysis, and the research above, demonstrate how generations of marginalization have strengthened negative perceptions of government and weakened the call among rural and low-income residents to be civically engaged. Each branch, or bone, of the diagram above, is discussed in more detail below.

Isolating Effects of Rural Life

The U.S. Census Bureau (2017) defines "rural" as "areas that are sparsely populated, have low housing density, and are far from urban centers." Nearly all, 97%, of the American land mass is rural, and it houses 19.3% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). North Carolina is nearly twice as rural as the national average; nearly 40% of the state's population is classified as rural (N.C. Division of Social Services, 2007). The Federal Office of Management and Budget (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019) defined counties as rural when they contain cities or towns of less than 50,000 people and are not geographically tied to metropolitan or urban areas. 80 of North Carolina's 100 counties are designated as rural (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.). If properly mobilized and organized, 40% of a state's population represents a formidable political and social force. However, the physical distance between residents makes achieving political power through grassroots organizing and collaboration difficult. The social, cultural, economic, and geographic separation from urban masses creates division and disorganization (Mills, 2001) that can serve as a barrier to political power-building for rural populations.

Traditional rural values of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, compounded with distrust of outsiders and assistance, can lead to skepticism about the efficacy and intent of government interventions (Santiago et al., 2016). The lack of resources and geographic isolation have led to a history of rural communities coming together, showing compassion, and supporting each other. This history can be attributed to values, but also to necessity in overcoming a lack of structures

needed to thrive, or even survive. Attitudes of community concern, paired with distrust toward outside entities, can lead rural communities to opt to take care of their own rather than seek external support (Carlton-Laney et al., 2013). While geographic obstacles are formidable, spatial isolation has also proven to be a catalyst for community-building. Working-class residents of rural areas can leverage this need for independence as a motivation for action and organization.

Urban Power Concentration

Beyond the isolating effects of rural living, Katherine Cramer (2016) showed many rural residents believe political, financial, and decision-making power is concentrated in urban areas. Cramer (2016) coined the term "rural consciousness" as a label for the sense among rural people that "rural areas do not get their fair share of power, respect, or resources and that rural folks prefer lifestyles that differ fundamentally from those of city people" (p. 86). The perception of disrespect and discounting Cramer references can sometimes deter those in rural areas from participating in their empowerment, fearing they may be powerless or that efforts may not be worthwhile.

While working class and poorer citizens far outnumber a wealthier ruling class, simply pooling together and changing systems through numerical voting advantages can be harder than it may seem. Not facing the daily obstacles to survival and social mobility linked to poverty allows a smaller ruling class many advantages. Cole (2018) wrote:

> It is presumably easier for a small elite to organize than for the poor masses to mobilize. Elites in a variety of domains – economic, political, and social – have become increasingly concentrated, centralized, and interlocked, enabling them to coordinate on behalf of their shared policy interests. (p. 360)

Having the time, energy, and resources just to commit to engaging the government is a large obstacle to working-class involvement and acquisition of power.

Prioritizing Cities and Development

Multiple researchers (Bates, 1981; Gaventa, 2021; Pierskalla, 2015) have identified a lack of emphasis on policies that improve the lives of rural communities and residents. For example, Pierskalla (2015) noted that governments commonly choose a preference for policies that favor urban residents and issues unless facing an organized, potentially violent, rural threat. Bates (1981) argued urban residents generally have more political clout and their desire to industrialize facilitates pro-urban, anti-rural policy. Raw numbers associated with voting are surely a factor as well. Politicians concerned with earning popular vote numbers often choose to focus on urban areas and be more efficient with their time and campaign funds, to reach the largest amount of people with each advertisement and event. Simply stated, it is hard work, inefficient, and expensive, to campaign and canvass in rural areas, especially in mountainous Appalachia. Gaventa (2021) observed contemporary political attention and policy directed toward rural America have decreased. Obama in 2012, and Clinton in 2016, chose not to prioritize Appalachian coalfields on their campaign trails, Gaventa wrote. Clinton went as far as making negative comments about the white working class, as well as the future of coal (Gaventa, 2021). These reasons align powerfully against the interests of rural, working-class, and Appalachian residents. Unless residents and organizations can come together to advance the interests of this area or become a powerful, united voting bloc impossible for candidates and elected leaders to ignore, we can expect continued disinterest toward rural Appalachia and continued focus on urban areas, issues, and voters.

Following the Money, Deserting the Masses

The financial burden is a formidable obstacle to democratic participation. Studies (Bartels, 2016; Gilens, 2012) have found that extreme income inequality disrupts democracy or, perhaps, makes it impossible. Gilens (2012) showed that governmental policies generally support the wishes of the wealthy, and most Americans have a negligible impact on policy decisions. When preferences of wealthier Americans differ from low and middle-income groups, Gilens showed policy outcomes do not favor the desires of the less advantaged groups. Additionally, he found the wishes of the wealthy have a strong positive relationship with eventual policy outcomes, regardless of whether they are shared by groups with lower incomes. Bartels (2016) warned readers about the impact of increasing economic inequality, stating it poses a fundamental challenge to American democracy.

The consequences for democracy because of income inequality are devastating, as increased rates of inequality have been linked with economic instability, higher rates of crime, greater consumer debt, inflation, and poorer health outcomes (Payne et al., 2017). Class-skewed voting contributes to rising inequality in other ways. Franko et al. (2013) found minimum wage increases were less likely to be implemented in states with higher levels of class bias, or the degree to which rich people or more likely to vote than poor. State governments in high-class bias states are less likely to take steps to reduce economic inequality (Franko et al., 2013).

The stakes are high. The future of rural, working-class engagement may be in danger unless more equitable and sustainable forms of political and economic societies are implemented (Gethin et al., 2022; Piketty, 2020). Finding ways to reach, organize, educate, and empower people outside of the wealthy class is critical to protect democracy and ensure it is attentive to the needs of all its citizens, not just the ruling “elite.” Governments are less likely to address inequities if poor and middle-class voters are not active participants in our democracy. This

project seeks to design and improve tools to incentivize working-class people to develop civic agency and increase engagement in the systems that have traditionally oppressed the lower classes. Rural, working-class access to political and civic vehicles will be vital to disrupting, changing, and improving existing systems toward more equity and justice.

Opting Out of the System

Various economic and systemic obstacles, such as concentration of power in urban areas, difficulties organizing in rural and poor communities, and policy biases that favor urban cities and wealthy residents, hinder a large segment of rural citizens from community-level civic engagement, or the political process entirely. Hollnsteiner (1979) argued that unorganized poor citizens choose not to participate in decisions affecting their lives because they are powerless. Hartley (2020) found that lower-income voters were 22% less likely than those with higher incomes to vote in national elections. However, Hartley (2020) also found that "regardless of income status, about one-quarter of eligible voters do not participate in elections because they are not interested in the candidates or campaign issues, or they feel their vote would not matter" (p. 9). A concerted effort is needed to engage rural, working-class voters toward the merits of civic engagement and voting. This is the work Down Home is focused on. Down Home's efforts center on connecting rural, working-class residents with issues in their communities, education around opportunities to impact systems, skills and leadership development to facilitate change, and community organizing support to bring ideas to reality.

Basic freedoms, such as voting and free speech, may not be perceived as valuable or powerful to disenfranchised Americans as to those with more privilege and resources. Cole (2018) stated, "Freedom of speech, for example, does not guarantee the ability to get one's speech heard. Money enables people to amplify their own speech in political arguments – as

epitomized, perhaps, by the US Supreme Court's *Citizens United* (2010) ruling" (p. 360). Cole (2018) also referenced the lack of economic resources being a major obstacle to acquiring property or accessing the legal system to defend rights. Berlin (1969) summarized this when he stated that political liberty, such as Americans are guaranteed by the Constitution, is ineffective without the economic resources to implement it. Our current levels of economic inequality are inhibiting the true potential of American democracy, as entire groups are choosing either not to participate or are not able to fully realize their rights and freedoms due to economic limitations. What is left, then, is a system designed for, and only fully realized by, a small, wealthy, ruling class.

Should a member of the rural working class decide to run as a candidate in elections, they are faced with numerous obstacles. Running as a candidate in American elections can be incredibly cost-prohibitive. This favors wealthier candidates. Data from the Federal Election Commission (n.d.) shows consistent increases in congressional, presidential, and senate campaign costs, even adjusted for inflation. In 2020, the average cost for each of Michigan's 14 congressional district candidates was $400,000 (Michigan Campaign Finance Network, 2021). Costs of local elections can vary wildly, but the cost of time needed to run an effective campaign must also be considered. Understandably, Gimpel et al. (2011) found there are significantly more candidates that hail from urban and more populous counties than rural ones. Areas that are more densely populated, Gimpel et al. (2011) argued, were more likely to generate the resources needed for an effective campaign and to generate ambition for political office. Candidates, Gimpel et al. (2011) said, "virtually never emerge out of rural areas or small towns" (p. 25).

If a poorer candidate overcame these obstacles and won their election, they would then be faced with supporting themselves, or their families, with a low-paying, time-intensive job.

Members of the North Carolina General Assembly earn $13,951/year for their work, one of the lowest salaries in the U.S. (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). A 2016 article by Gabelein showed Watauga County commissioners earned $7,212 in salary with a $2,426 mileage stipend, which was on par with other rural mountain counties. Nationwide candidate surveys of those running for state legislatures in 2012 and 2014 showed that only 4% came from jobs that would be considered working class. Low stipends make it harder for working-class candidates to participate in government and favor wealthier candidates who may not rely on stipends to survive economically.

Power Follows Money: Supportive Theories

This initiative, which relies on rural, relational community organizing to engage and empower working-class Appalachians, is built upon competing and co-existing theories. The relative power theory (Solt, 2008) holds that more money equals more political power and voice. The interests of the wealthier class have more financial resources at stake and engage in politics and policy at rates higher than those with fewer resources. Horowitz et al. (2020) found upper-class wealth has grown over the last decades, while middle and lower-class wealth has stagnated, regardless of the party in power. The wealth of lower and middle-class American families is unchanged from 20 years ago while upper-income families have a median 33% wealth increase from 2001 to 2016. Higher-wealth individuals are incentivized to engage with a profitable system and keep it that way, while most lower and middle-class Americans are not seeing economic improvement because of engagement in the federal electoral process. With greater resources, wealth repeatedly wins political battles over lower-income entities, and, over time, those with less simply choose to opt out of the game altogether, even if it is against their self-

interest to do so. Opting out of the process by the rural working class can be identified through a loss of interest in politics, and reduced participation in elections among poor citizens.

Simultaneously, conflict theory is in play. Originated by Karl Marx, conflict theory holds that conflict arises when resources and power are not evenly distributed in society. This inequality can breed resentment, and anger, and inspire action, eventually becoming an engine for social change (Marx et al., 1974). The first step in increasing rural Appalachian engagement and empowerment is the recognition among working-class residents that there are discrepancies and inequalities in the systems that surround them. A visual representation (Figure 2) below demonstrates how each theory contributes to the cause-and-effect process toward possible social change.

Figure 2

Process chart showing cause and effect relationship of relative power and conflict theories

This project incorporates both frameworks and seeks to promote relative power theory as a "cause," and conflict theory as an "effect" in this work. Decades of inequality and neglect of rural, working-class populations may have led to low rates of participation and perceptions of efficacy. Inequality that was a result of misused power has stirred emotions of bitterness, desperation, and rage. This result is the anger that Marx's conflict theory references, supplying the fuel for social unrest and activism. Recent examples of this include the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and Standing Rock movements. In these examples, participants recognized systemic injustices that oppressed lower economic classes, targeted, and profiled Black people, and chose corporate interests over indigenous rights, respectively. The resulting frustration and anger led to organized efforts to confront, dismantle, and change policies and systems toward structures that were more equitable and just. Specifically, this initiative seeks to leverage conflict theory in the agitation of participants around systemic failures to address rural and working-class issues. Combining agitation with education and leadership development, the goal is to build power and civic participation among previously disempowered populations, thus reducing, or hopefully eliminating, the effects of relative power theory in the High Country.

The "High Country" Context

The setting of the improvement initiative is in North Carolina's Ashe and Watauga counties, also commonly referred to as "The High Country." The setting was chosen as this is my base of operations in my work as a community organizer and manager. My daily work interactions and environment allow access to rural, working-class populations in these counties and the ability to install, facilitate, and examine the impact, or lack thereof, of this improvement initiative. Watauga and Ashe are adjacent, primarily rural, counties located in the extreme

northwest corner of North Carolina, bordering Virginia and Tennessee, fully enveloped by the Appalachian Mountains.

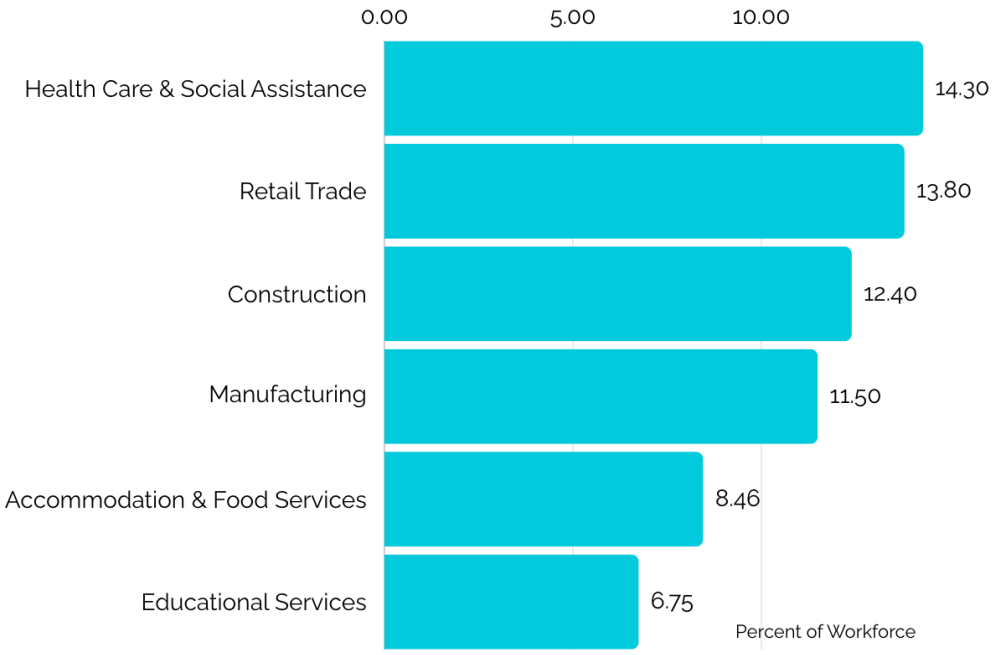
Demographics

Ashe County

Census data from 2021 shows Ashe's population estimated at 26,711. Ashe residents are overwhelmingly white, 96%, while 14.5% of the county is in poverty with a per capita income of $25,282. Ashe County covers 426 square miles, with 62.3 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Ashe voters cast 15,921 ballots in the 2020 election. Most federal offices saw at or around 70% of voters choose the Republican candidates. All Ashe County Board of Commissioners elected are currently white, male, Republicans (North Carolina State Board of Elections, n.d.). Figure 3 illustrates the workforce breakdown of Ashe County. Primary employers are almost equally shared across construction, manufacturing, health care, and retail industries.

Figure 3

2020 Ashe County, NC employment by occupations (Data USA, n.d.)



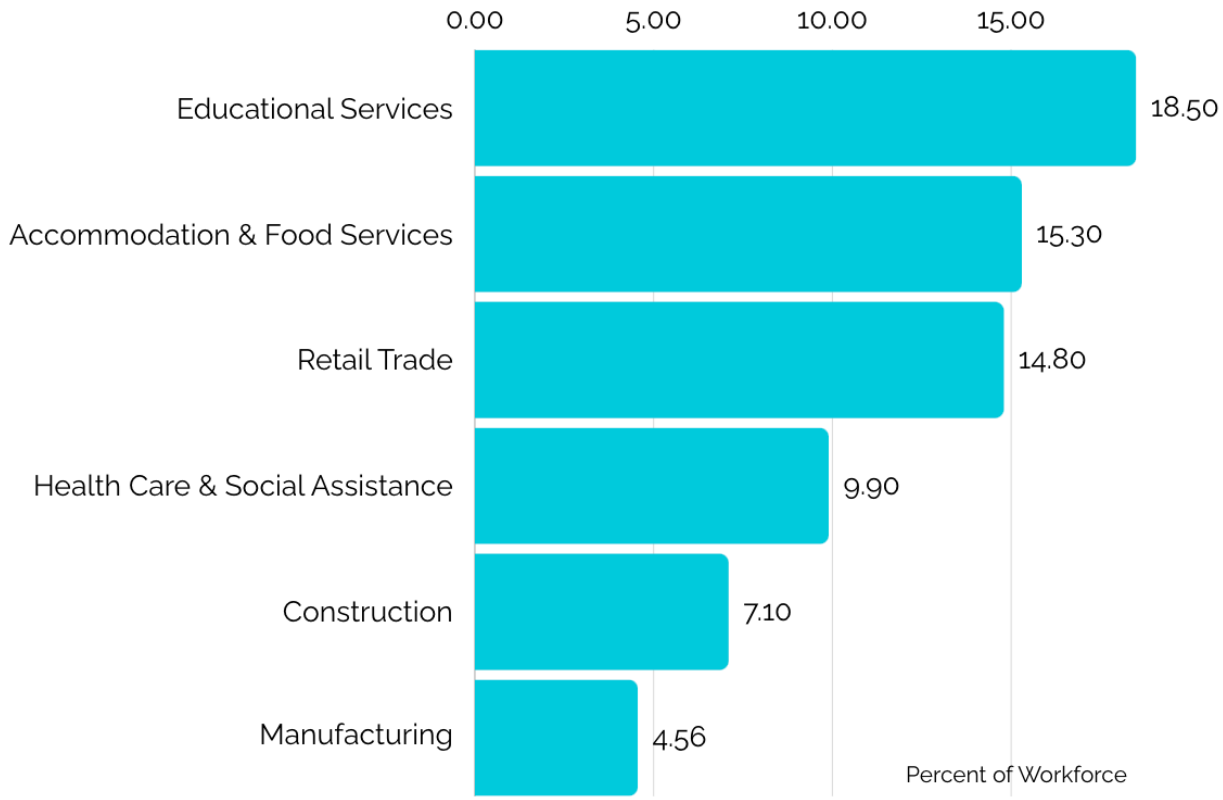
Watauga County

Watauga's population is nearly double that of neighboring Ashe, with just over 55,000 residents, according to 2021 Census data. Most of the county's residents, 91.6% are white, while about 4% of residents reported as Hispanic. Watauga's poverty rate is very high, coming in at 24.5% in 2020. Per capita income in 2021 was $27,962. Watauga covers 312 square miles and averages 173 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Watauga voters cast 32,346 votes in the 2020 election, which usually saw a 55-45 Democrat to Republican distribution across races (N.C. State Board of Elections, n.d.). Watauga's economic and political landscape is dominated by the presence of Appalachian State University (ASU), in Boone. In the fall of 2021, ASU had 18,555 undergraduate students which is a large reason the educational services sector is the county's largest employer (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Figure 4 illustrates Watauga County's workforce breakdown. The major impact and economic influence of Appalachian State University in Watauga can be seen in the graph, as evidenced by the nearly 20% of the county's

workforce engaged in the educational services field. Also of note, Watauga's tourism industry represents almost 20% of the workforce.

Figure 4

2020 Watauga County, NC employment by occupations (Data USA, n.d.)



Exploring Disengagement: The Problem in Appalachia and Rural North Carolina

Nationally, high-income individuals are more likely to vote (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In the 2020 Presidential election, 81% of voters that earned between $100,000-$149,000 voted, while the rate for those making $30,000-$39,000 was 63.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). While there are national-level data on this topic, we do not currently have local or state baseline data among low-income, working-class voters in Ashe and Watauga regarding voter participation and civic engagement.

Organizing to Increase Engagement

Down Home NC is a member-informed, grassroots, community organization working to change the narrative discussed above by building power for poor and working people in small towns and rural communities in North Carolina. Formed in 2017, DHNC employs strategies of leadership development, issue and strategic campaigns, and voter engagement to build a member base representative of the racial demographics of the counties and state, as well as a permanent structure to support ongoing organizing (Down Home North Carolina, 2017). DHNC's director team is based in Greensboro and Burlington, NC, but DHNC's eight chapters are spread across the state in predominantly rural counties. Ashe and Watauga, as of 2023, constitute the organization's Western Region.

Members are primarily volunteers who live in the eight counties that Down Home has established chapters in. Many are working-class residents of the counties and membership dues exist on a sliding scale that varies with income levels. Members ultimately decide what issues their respective chapters take on, and lead, or co-lead, day-to-day chapter operations with support from DHNC organizers. Counties with DHNC chapters often share certain criteria (Down Home North Carolina, 2017). These characteristics include:

- High unemployment and poverty rates. Low-wage work and decline in jobs in manufacturing.
- Documented incidents of recent white supremacist recruitment activity.
- Are in competitive state legislative districts.
- Near larger urban areas that can support rural areas with resources and relationships.

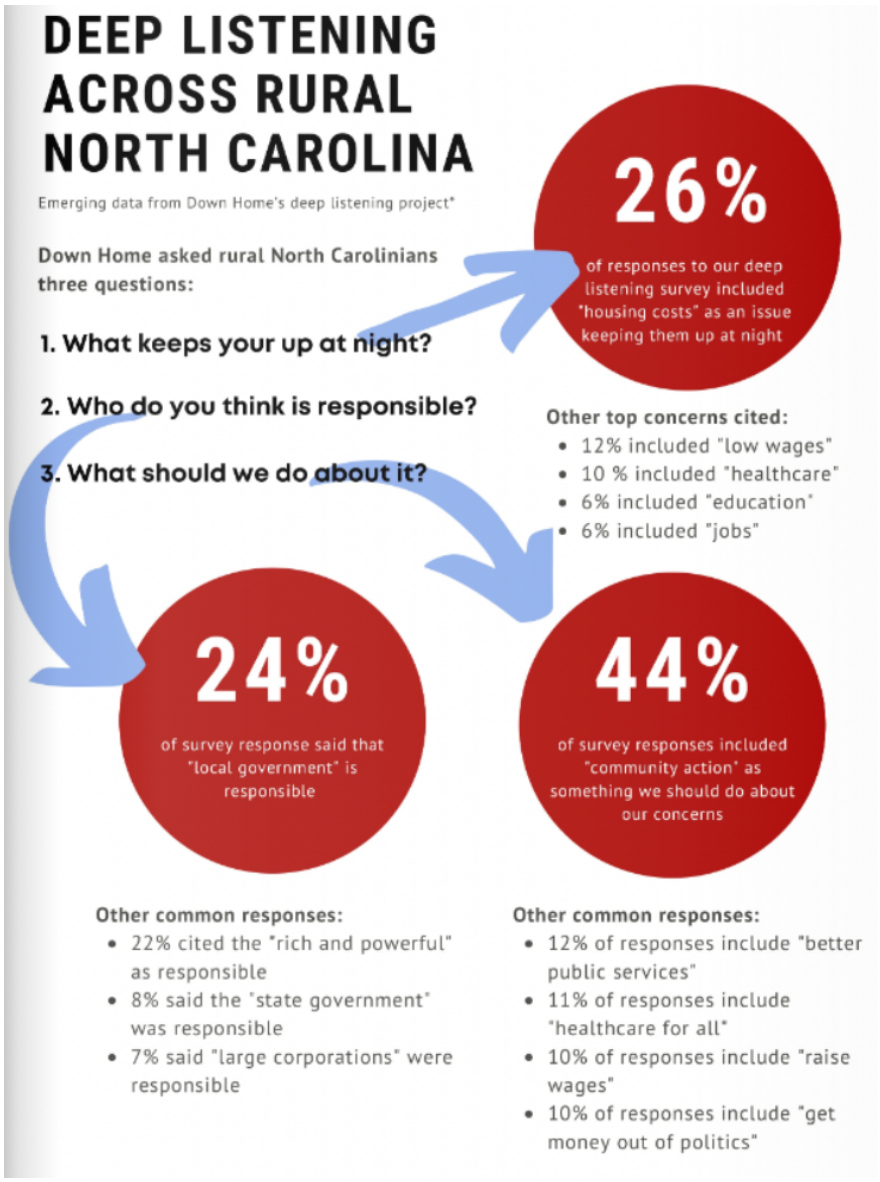
DHNC consistently engages in "listening sessions" across the state, a process that began when the organization was formed over five years ago, to learn about issues most concerning to

rural, working-class residents. DHNC has conducted extensive data gathering across rural working-class communities in North Carolina, including multiple sessions in Ashe and Watauga counties. Additionally, DHNC has gone "door-to-door," surveying thousands of rural residents, asking them what issues most concern them, who or what they feel is responsible for these problems, and what should be done about them. The results offer illuminating perspectives into the minds of rural citizens in the state.

In 2017, Down Home spent over four months administering 1,384 surveys in rural North Carolina, using "deep canvass" methods, or "candid, two-way conversations where people share their relevant, emotionally significant experiences and reflect on them aloud" (New Conversation Institute, n.d.). Deep canvassing is a scientifically proven (Broockman & Kalla, 2016) conversation methodology that is more effective in creating lasting change in political and cultural opinions compared to traditional transactional canvassing. Additionally, creating trust and connection, especially across disagreements or differences of opinion, is more effective using deep canvassing methods (New Conversation Institute, n.d.). Respondents who reported they were struggling to have their basic needs met were less likely to express confidence in political solutions to their problems. Those earning less than $20,000 a year reported low levels of concern around "having a voice and a vote that matters" or feeling confident that "electing working people" would help remedy their problems (Down Home, 2017). In short, they were opting out of the political process, as, to them, it did not matter who was in office. To them, their problems would exist and persist regardless of the political climate. "Having a voice and a vote that matters" was a larger concern for higher-income voters (Down Home, 2017). Where only one-third of those with lower incomes reported this as a problem, nearly half of those with larger incomes selected this as an issue.

Rates of voter participation, over the previous three general elections, rose as income rose in the Down Home survey (2017). Results showed nearly all, 94.7%, of the highest earners surveyed, had voted in at least two of the last three general elections, compared with only 64% of the survey's lowest-income respondents (Down Home, 2017). When asked if they would "Join Down Home NC," lower-income respondents were less likely to join, again expressing pessimism toward systems, political or non-profit, being able to positively change their situation. Again, as income rose, the chance of involvement in Down Home rose. Under 30% of the lowest income bracket expressed interest in joining, compared to over 44% in the highest bracket (Down Home, 2017). Finally, income was also a factor in the belief that "making it easier to vote" would help solve problems. In the lowest income bracket, 34.5% supported this claim versus 46.5% among those in the highest bracket (Down Home, 2017). Figure 5 shows some of the main takeaways from the 2017 deep canvassing work.

Figure 5



Note. Major takeaways from the 2017 DHNC deep canvassing project.

Reprinted from "No One's Ever Asked Me Before: Conversations with North Carolina's Rural Communities," by Down Home North Carolina, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

This project seeks to improve general civic engagement among rural, working-class members of Ashe and Watauga counties. Besides voting, engagement can be operationalized by attending council or commission meetings, volunteering with a charitable non-profit, running for office or assisting a campaign, and other similar tasks. As DHNC seeks to empower members by

tackling local issue campaigns, engagement at the local level is a key indicator to measure. Measuring participation is important, as engagement connects to increased levels of hope in government and the belief that the involvement of rural working-class people will be crucial to reducing problems facing rural working-class populations.

Data does not exist specific to Ashe and Watauga on working-class civic engagement, though there are national studies that exist. Van Holm (2018) found a significant correlation between income inequality and civic participation. Solt (2008) also found a strong negative correlation between measures of economic inequality and rates of voting and other forms of civic participation. In both examples, the greater the income inequality, the less civic participation among lower-income voters.

Providing a Need for the Rural Working Class

Down Home's approach of entering communities initially through listening allows communities to express needs that rural citizens self-identify. Listening sessions and deep canvassing efforts allow organizers to pull patterns and themes from responses, such as the theme of affordable housing, access to healthcare, justice system concerns, wages, or other issues. Allowing residents to share what most impacts them contrasts with an organization showing up in a community "talking at" those who would listen, promoting an agenda already selected by outsiders, funders, or other external entities. Deep canvass respondents, through their survey given by an organizer, canvasser, or DHNC member/volunteer, are also asked about interest in Down Home, attending an event, a one-on-one meeting with an organizer or volunteer, or other related Down Home commitment.

In DHNC's short history, the need for its existence has been validated by members of the working class and their allies showing up, as is evidenced by the organization's chapter, staff,

and membership growth. DHNC has grown from two to eight chapters in five years, and events and campaigns continue to draw interest, attendees, and action. If DHNC shrinks, experiences a drop in chapter or statewide membership, or begins to hold poorly attended events, it could be assumed the need has subsided. Currently, there is a demonstrated community need for this organization and its mission.

Defining Key Terms and Concepts

It may be important to define the scope of this entire project, and then focus on smaller, content-specific terminology. This project is a disquisition, which differs in important ways from traditional doctorate-level research and publications. The statement below was prepared by Alison Joseph, Ed. D., and the Western Carolina University Educational Leadership faculty, that defines a disquisition and differentiates it from the usual dissertation:

> The disquisition is a formal, problem-based discourse. The disquisition is closely aligned with the scholar-practitioner role of Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) students and thus takes on a practical focus rather than the theoretical focus of traditional Ph.D. dissertations. The purpose of the disquisition is "to document the scholarly development of leadership expertise in organizational improvement" (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). The Ed.D. program at WCU nurtures and matures students as both scholars and practitioners who are trained to understand systems and institutional challenges and opportunities through a lens of research and scholarship. Students apply their knowledge, using their institutional access and positionality, directly to the educational institutions where they lead. The Ed.D. is an applied degree, and the disquisition is similarly an applied capstone experience for doctoral work. The disquisition at WCU specifically utilizes an Improvement Science methodology, is shaped by critical theory and scholarly research,

> and engages the candidate in the application of the concepts in an applied manner through the development and implementation of an intervention within their local institution, focused on the improvement of equity within that system. Ultimately, the disquisition serves as documentation and assessment of an improvement initiative that "contributes to a concrete good to the larger community and the dissemination of new relevant knowledge (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5).

Returning to the focus of this project, it may be helpful to define the term "community organizing." DHNC employs rural, relational community organizing as a tool to effect change. However, the term is widely used, and perceptions may vary of what it means. In the context of this project, it is important to understand how DHNC views community organizing. Manalili (1990) defined the concept as "a process that revolves around the people's lives, experiences, and aspirations. It is a process that is people-centered and geared towards [the] continuing capability building, self-reliance, and empowerment" (p. 65). More than a process, Dela Costa-Ymson (1993) relates it as a resource for leadership development and empowerment. She defined community organizing as, "A process of unfolding the potentialities of persons to the level where they can exercise the faculties that will enable them to create, act, and manage resources to live a decent life" (p. 32). Manalili's emphasis on community and people is, in my experience, most valuable. The connection to lived experience and storytelling are the most powerful components of the concept, which unlock the potential for leadership development, empowerment, and gaining resources.

Important to the DHNC model is the idea that its members ultimately become educated, skilled, confident, and empowered to identify and resolve issues occurring in their communities, despite limited resources, without relying on external support to improve their situations.

Dacanay (1993) identifies the aspect of independence in problem-solving in their organizing definition. For Dacanay, community organizing is, “the process which builds/mobilizes people and other community resources towards identifying and solving their own problems, establishing people’s self-awareness and capacities to stage their own future...taking action collectively considering the bureaucratic structure and restrictive institutional arrangements” (p. 8). Dacanay’s definition connects to Manalili’s above, centering the collective and people-centric aspects of the concept. While small differences may exist between various definitions of community organizing, Manalili’s and Dacanay’s definitions most closely align with the work that happens in Down Home chapters frequently. Members and staff work together to build skills, gradually moving working-class residents of communities closer to a position of self-reliance in identifying and addressing issues. Bringing people together around issues, and building power through developing community, is the most important, complex, and powerful piece of the concept, that best moves people toward more autonomy and power.

Other researchers expand on the idea and definition of community organizing, including the potential impacts of effective organizing. Hollnsteiner (1979) added that when disempowered individuals come together, organize, and confront authorities, their collective group can offset power discrepancies among powerful groups and those lacking power. Also, Hollnsteiner (1979) found that just the experience alone of coming together, mobilizing, and participating in group action builds power. Increased power can be seen and felt in increased levels of self-reliance, self-pride, and dignity among participants. These cumulative actions and experiences aim to break through perceptions that realms of decision-making are exclusive to advantaged populations.

Like the terms “organizing” and “community organizing,” it is helpful to understand what is meant by “power” and “empowerment” in the framing of this project and work. The World Bank (2017) defined empowerment as the ability of people or groups to increase their skills and capabilities, so they make their own choices and turn choices into actions that they desire. The World Bank (2017) named access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability, and local organizational capacity, as four key elements of empowerment. Down Home’s work most directly targets and seeks to build the local capacity and inclusion pieces of the World Bank’s areas of emphasis.

Community organizing is based on the idea that lack of participation among the poor is due to perceptions of powerlessness, but this powerlessness can be overcome if people band together and are mobilized to take group actions. These actions, campaigns, and results can eventually develop a sense of power among them, gradually offsetting power imbalances and achieving more representation among disadvantaged populations in decision-making. Increasing representation leads to more empathy, justice, inclusion, and equity for all populations.

Defining the Goal: Measuring Power

For this project, it was important to quantify and measure community empowerment, as it related to the population of Down Home works within Ashe and Watauga. For this improvement initiative, Laverack (2001) specifies aspects of community empowerment which can include participation in meetings (these can be Down Home chapter or working group meetings, also city/county board and commission meetings, and neighborhood meetings), leadership (taking ownership of tasks or functions, recruiting support, delegating tasks, managing personnel), the presence of organizational structures, problem assessment, mobilizing resources, and program management.

Community or civic empowerment that can change systems is generated in groups and must extend beyond individual growth. Laverack (2001) stated, “Involvement of individual community members in small groups or in larger organizations must occur in order to attain empowerment” (p. 138). Additionally, he claimed leadership is key to the development of long-term, self-sustaining community empowerment. Forming and maintaining organizational structures, such as committees and working groups, regular chapter meetings, and communications, develop familiarity and a sense of belonging among participants. The social outlet is critical to provide a safe space and forum for members to voice concerns and problems, as well as to become educated on community, state, and national issues.

Problem assessment, or members identifying problems and solutions most concerning and relevant to them (versus having problems and solutions identified for them) is a part of Laverack’s definition, as well as a key component to Down Home’s “member-informed” structure and theory of change. Some organizations may be focused on environmental or economic causes, whereas Down Home’s county chapters may seek to address problems specific to their areas. For example, Watauga members may choose to focus on fair housing while Alamance County members organize around criminal justice issues.

A visual representation of how rural organizing can serve as the center hub of a comprehensive system of empowerment is shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Down Home’s use of local chapters as a hub of empowerment activity for members

DHNC does utilize resources on a small number of statewide issues, including Medicaid expansion and public education, but has historically given local chapters freedom to identify local issues most pressing to them. Naming actions to address problems is included in the organization's problem assessment as well. DHNC seeks to support the development of communities equipped to critically assess the contextual causes of issues that contribute to their disempowerment. Understanding these political, economic, and social factors is important for deconstructing systems of oppression. Developing the ability to identify and assess systemic characteristics is part of measuring power.

Finally, community members managing their programs, including being the main stakeholders concerning decisions on planning, facilitation, assessment, budgeting, executive reporting, and resolving conflict, are key components to developing and measuring power,

according to Laverack (2001). DHNC's member-informed model seeks to place members in positions of leadership and chapter management; indicators which can be included in measuring civic empowerment for this project.

Down Home's model for empowerment allows for what Boyte (2005) labels as a reimagining of democracy toward citizen co-governance, or higher citizen engagement and education, versus simply government, or citizens being governed. In this definition of "civic agency," emphasized in the title of this project, citizens move beyond simply voting and volunteering to solving problems and being collective creators (Boyte, 2005) of services and solutions. This allows for more comprehensive, informed, and effective problems to be addressed, linking the resources of government with local expertise, connection, and investment. Boyte (2005) stresses implementing this shift requires an emphasis on nonpartisanship and democratic practices that can deepen political productivity. This is what is meant by developing civic agency in the context of this project, moving beyond basic levels of engagement toward a more immersive, solution-focused, co-governance model at the local community level.

On the Same Team

Down Home's model may be unique and ground-breaking, though several groups are doing similar rural and/or working class-focused organizing in other states. Down Home does not actively or consistently collaborate with the organizations discussed here, but it is provided to allow context for aligned efforts occurring in other states. Pennsylvania Stands Up (PSU) (n.d.), like Down Home NC, was created in the aftermath of the 2016 election. While PSU targets multi-racial working class members in a local chapter model, as DHNC does, the organization blends constituents from both urban and rural places. Hometown Action (n.d.) focuses on rural, working-class progressives in Alabama. Among various efforts, Hometown

Action shares DHNC's strategy of identifying and developing leaders among rural, working-class populations and supporting them toward political office. Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (n.d.) is a 40-year-old organization born from rural grassroots organizing efforts. With origins in the environmental and anti-corporate movements, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth has expanded to address money in politics, voting rights, and other issues affecting working-class residents.

Positionality in Rural Organizing

The problem of systemic disempowerment of low-income and working-class populations in Appalachia is the focus of my professional work, but it also has roots in my childhood and previous career as an educator. I was born and raised in small rural towns and experienced the rampant socio-economic inequities that existed there. Working in schools, the impact of systemic unfairness showed itself daily through issues in academic performance, attendance, behavior, and impacts on home life. Over those same years, as I have become more politically active and aware, it is increasingly clear to me that government and power are concentrated among the wealthy "elite."

In considering my positionality, I recognize myself as a 48-year-old white male living in the United States. Race is a critical piece of community organizing work that seeks to address poverty and political disenfranchisement, though it is not the focus of this project. I am the son of educators and hold a Bachelor of Arts in English, and a Master's in School Administration. As a novice researcher, former educator, and now a community organizer, I bring my experience of serving various rural communities and marginalized populations to my work. Philosophically, though I was raised in, and primarily serve, rural areas that are generally conservative politically, my lens is much more liberal or "leftist," which impacts my work and this research.

Additionally, I hold personal experiences of systemic pressures facing many in the communities I serve, including substance abuse and addiction, criminal justice history, family trauma and volatility, and past feelings of political apathy and hopelessness. These lived experiences, paired with undergraduate readings and professors that encouraged me to question the narratives I had been raised on, were factors that contributed to my thoughts and opinions deviating from so many others that I was, and remain, close to. Realizations and witness to the abundance that exists in our society, while so many struggled from lack of resources, were impactful in shaping my positionality. Biases and hypocrisies that I realized, from government, organized religion, and media framed my worldview and actions toward one that pursued system disruption and increased social justice. This disquisition is a continuance of my work to be involved with efforts to increase power and justice to those who have not, historically, had it. I am aware of my privilege in being able to access resources, and I strive to remain conscious of my own biases and appreciate how they may shape my perspectives.

Issues most concerning and impactful to working people, such as housing, wages, education, access to quality and affordable childcare, and military intervention, are most often being decided by people with secure housing, stable income, excellent educational opportunities, and safety from the front lines of armed conflict. In short, those who best understand the difficulties and issues in today's economy and culture, low-to-middle income working class citizens and their families, are not being represented, and many have opted out of participation in a system that has forgotten or discarded them.

This improvement initiative seeks to find ways to engage those who have become more empowered and civically engaged. Down Home strives to provide opportunities for members to increase self-perceived feelings of power and civic engagement among working-class people in

Ashe and Watauga. Documenting and measuring this initiative provided information to other organizations and organizers in their attempts to reach and support similar populations, advancing the cause of greater rural, working-class representation and community management.

Theory for Improving Rural, Working-Class Civic Engagement

It may be idealistic to set a goal of empowering working-class rural residents who have endured systems set up to favor the wealthy and urbanized. However, building power one individual at a time, through education, development, and engagement is feasible. Increasing knowledge of, and participation around, community issues and improvement allows member-leaders to identify local problems and direct resources in their direction more clearly. Previous examples of this engagement include DHNC members in Alamance County, NC, who fought against elements of the local criminal justice system that oppressed marginalized communities, such as cash bail structures. In Haywood County, NC, members successfully campaigned to stop a new county jail facility from being built. The group also organized around raising wages for municipal employees. In Watauga County, chapter members have been active around self-identified issues, including successfully advocating for neighborhood protections for a Black community in Boone, and publicly addressing police regarding concerning practices. In Watauga and Ashe, members identified housing and environmental issues as most concerning and important to them.

Civic empowerment for members can translate to less reliance on external factors, such as state or national governments to solve problems, with members better equipped to control and work toward improving their communities in the ways they see best fit. Continual assessment of program effectiveness will ensure future community organizing remains responsive to evolving community and member needs. My theory of improvement holds that: *rural, relational*

organizing will increase civic agency and perceptions of empowerment among working-class residents.

The desired outcomes of the project are to increase leadership, education, and civically oriented skills among Down Home chapter members in Ashe and Watauga to effectively address issues specific to their communities. Figure 7 expands on the theory of improvement and shows a progression of organization, education, application, and support that can ultimately result in empowerment.

Figure 7

Initiative to Aim Progression

Coalitions

It is first necessary to simply bring groups of rural, working-class people together to build community, more effectively share resources, and remind those in geographically isolated environments that there are, in fact, others who share their frustrations and concerns.

Relevant Issues

Secondly, my theory suggests empowerment begins with political, issue, and campaign education, thereby increasing members' understanding of the systems they seek to engage, disrupt, and change.

Meaningful Action

Next is applying this education to real-world opportunities for engagement and action, which may include addressing bodies of government, creating, or supporting local issue campaigns, or endorsing and canvassing for political candidates. Supporting long-term structures and investments in rural communities, through year-round staffing, continuing education, and sustainable member relational and development structures, will be necessary for any hopes of systemic change.

The theory of improvement and progression discussed above will shape the focus of this disquisition. As depicted in Figure 7, three elements will be implemented and assessed:

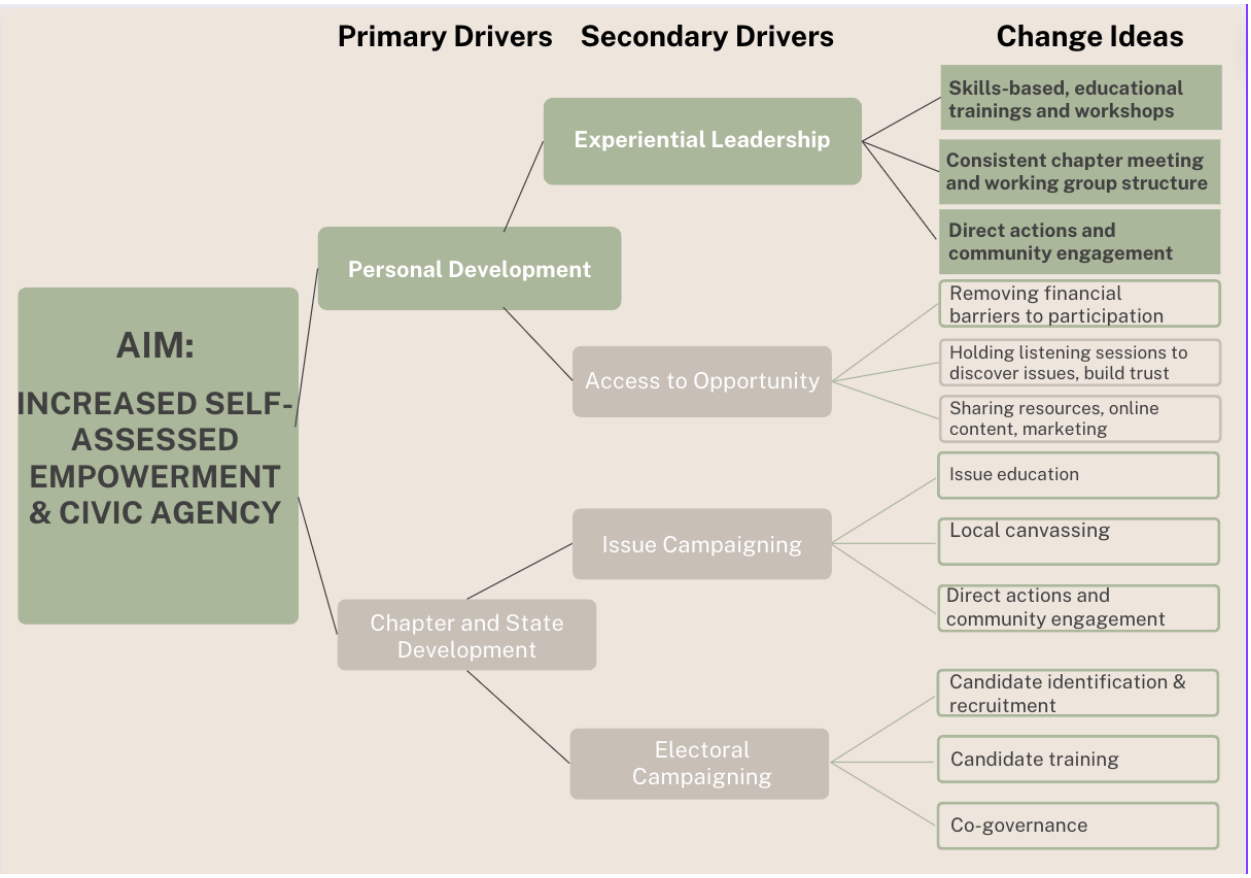
1. Identifying existing attitudes around political and civic engagement, as well as government and issues.
2. Facilitate structured leadership development, community organizing basics, and civic education curriculum to increase member knowledge.
3. Assess the number and effectiveness of actions informed by DHNC interventions, as measured by attendance at DHNC meetings, working groups, events, training, and actions.

Participant attitudes were re-assessed to check morale, energy, and optimism. While DHNC's member-led model is a new and developing resource, informing revisions to target member engagement and buy-in increased the quality of the training. Ultimately, Down Home continually seeks to build and refine an effective onboarding and continued development program.

Facilitating effective training, meetings, and events to increase member empowerment for working-class residents of Ashe and Watauga counties using the Down Home model as a tool requires systemic training and support for members and DHNC staff. If these educational and support components are formalized and maintained, based on leading research in community organizing tactics and strategy, engagement and empowerment indicators will improve. The driver diagram below in Figure 8 shows strategies that allow for improved chapter and individual member outcomes. While many of the drivers and ideas on this figure will be included and considered, this initiative will focus primarily on the concepts and ideas shaded in green at the top of the diagram.

Figure 8

Driver Diagram for Increasing Capacity Among Working-Class, Rural Populations



Supporting the Theory of Improvement: Reviewing the Research

While there are challenges to political engagement that exist due to rural isolation and lack of resources, there are numerous opportunities. Interestingly, a stronger sense of community and reliance on others can exist in rural communities, supporting the prospect that isolated people can, and often do, come together to form powerful and influential groups. Verba and Nie (1972) showed people in small and isolated places are more likely to take part in community activities and organizations than their urban counterparts. This statistic speaks favorably to the prospect of developing rural group-based knowledge and skill development which can lead to increased political motivation and participation. Rural residents are more likely to depend on their neighbors and are more interactive (Gimpel et al. 2020), which can be a political recruitment tool.

Beyond rural, the impact community organizing can have on marginalized or disenfranchised groups has been studied. Hollnsteiner (1979) showed that when powerless individuals come together to take on issues and challenge authorities, their collective number remedies the power imbalance between the weak and the strong. Interactions then occur on a more equal standing. Hollnsteiner (1979) added that the establishment of powerful, member-led, people's organizations allows the traditionally disenfranchised into the realms of decision-making. Finally, simple participation in actions by groups of disempowered, or usually dependent people, develops a sense of power among members. This power can evolve into increased perceptions of self-reliance, dignity, and individual pride (Cahill & Oheda, 2021).

Bringing people together and organizing for the benefit of the collective is not new to rural communities. It is often necessary for survival and growth. Santiago et al. (2016) argued:

> the vitality, resilience, and long-term sustainability of rural communities rest on their ability to acquire and maintain adequate infrastructure; and secure access to needed services; enhance economic opportunities; and create policies and programs that address local needs – activities that all require collective action. (p. 231)

Political success has sometimes found its way to lower-income citizens. Multiple researchers (Bradley et al., 2003; Brady, 2009; Hicks, 1999; Huber and Stephens, 2001; Korpi, 1983) have shown when poor populations gain access to political power and authority, income distribution has more equity. Cole (2018) found:

> Simply put, the more organized and politically influential a society's poor people, the more equitably income will be distributed. Factors such as union density, voter turnout, and the strength of leftist political parties increase welfare generosity and promote redistributive policies, which in turn reduce income inequality. (p. 361)

This statement is the foundation of Down Home's work, which aims to address income inequality, and other areas of social injustice as well. Higher levels of poor people's organization and power have impacts that reach far beyond economics, including education, health, and other sociocultural implications.

The goal of empowering rural, working-class residents, especially those historically disengaged from civic participation, is centered around supporting independence among those that may have been marginalized, as opposed to delivering outcomes to, or for, underserved populations (Evans & Boyte, 1992). This concept of civic agency includes not just engagement in government, but the confidence and skills to navigate those often intricate systems. Ultimately, higher levels of empowerment are gained for working-class citizens when they control their involvement. By not doing for groups or individuals what they can do for themselves, more space for power creation is allowed.

This increased space for working-class power, Evans & Boyte (1992) advocated, allows marginalized groups that have been left out of the political process to "reclaim politics as the free, deprofessionalized activity of ordinary citizens" (p. 541). Ordinary citizens develop power and agency, according to Evans and Boyte, when professional organizers become "coaches," and "citizen leaders take center stage," (p. 541) and groups decide which issues to take on after thorough discussion and consideration. By directing attention and training toward "normal and commonsensical people…not activists, for the most part, not ideologues," (Evans & Boyte, 1992), and the development of the "full range of public arts and skills. They learn to how to argue, act, negotiate, and compromise" (p. 541).

Improvement Methodology to Measure Rural Community Organizing Efficacy

Design Team

The project used a design team model to implement continuous feedback throughout the initiative. Design teams are groups of stakeholders engaged with the project at various levels, that come together at regular intervals to increase the capacity and efficacy of a project (Binkhorst et al., 2015). By periodically reviewing how the project is progressing and what changes need to be made, the initiative was made stronger through multiple improvement cycles.

A team of Down Home NC community organizers, member leaders, and our state program Co-Director and state Organizing Director constituted the design team for this improvement initiative. The team advised and assisted the researcher in executing the improvement initiative and adjusted and revised the initiative when necessary. The team also provided feedback to ensure the effort met the needs of members. Through scheduled monthly meetings and impromptu individual and smaller group feedback, this design team oversaw the implementation of the initiative for each chapter, advising on revisions to content and suggesting changes. Monthly meetings were selected as design team meeting frequency as that timeframe allowed coordination with monthly chapter meetings so that programming changes could coincide with scheduled gatherings of members in Watauga and Ashe counties.

Utilizing the Design Team to Drive Improvement

DHNC community organizers are paid staff, tasked with supporting member leadership development and base-building. In this design team, members' roles were to support the facilitation of the improvement initiative(s) and report back to the team on the effectiveness of our efforts, as well as to suggest changes and revisions. Member-leaders are DHNC volunteers, are working-class, and are members of the community upon which the project focuses. As they are the focus and recipients of this effort, their perspective was like that of the organizers, but

with the added perspective of how initiatives impacted the local, working-class population that we targeted.

Our organizers and member-leaders served as our “on-the-ground” elements. Our state co-director and organizing director have many years of grassroots organizing experience across multiple issues and campaigns. They are experts in community and rural organizing and know Ashe, Watauga, and North Carolina well. Each also manages and supervises the six other DHNC rural chapters across the state, and provides access to data, strategies, and initiatives in those areas seeking to impact similar populations. These two team members provided a wider, comprehensive view of the project, and advised the regional organizing manager (ROM) and design team on project strategy and direction.

My title at DHNC is Western Regional Organizing Manager. In this role, my duties include managing and supervising two community organizers focused on day-to-day base-building and member development in Ashe and Watauga. While I may also participate in “on the ground” organizing in those counties, I also participate in larger state-wide meetings and strategy, serving as a bridge between state administrators and our organizers and members. If or when DHNC expands to an additional county(ies) in Western North Carolina, I would add that chapter(s) to my region, supporting those communities as I have done in Ashe and Watauga.

The beginning stages of implementation of building working-class power in our chapters started upon approval of this proposal and with permission from Western Carolina University's Instructional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent forms were distributed and collected from staff members before participation in both the training, coaching, and ongoing survey collection data.

Rural Community Organizing Initiative

The focus of this project is to increase perceptions of power and civic engagement among working-class, rural residents in Appalachia. Down Home (2017) stated:

> Progressive movements must recognize and learn to navigate the feelings of betrayal, distrust, and outright dislike of a government that has failed in its obligation to improve people's lives for so long. Distinguishing between how government works now and how government could and should work will be key to advancing public solutions to the crises our communities face. (p. 24)

This idea is a large part of the work in the Watauga and Ashe chapters, as education around issues and systems often occurs before staff and members can design actions and campaigns to attempt to change them.

This initiative was centered on educating and training staff and members about community organizing, government, and leadership. Learning the basics of community organizing, as well as building on the lessons and experiences of organizers and campaigns that have gone before, is key to increasing the long-term success of our chapter members and movement. Leading failed or ineffective campaigns can potentially increase feelings of disempowerment or distrust among members, which is the opposite goal of the initiative. Secondly, the initiative facilitated the application of skills and knowledge in real-world, issue-based scenarios at the local level. Gradual accumulation of knowledge, skills, members, campaign "wins," and relationships in local communities provide a path to increased civic agency and working-class power in Appalachia.

Rural Community Organizing Initiative Design

The improvement initiative is the creation and standardization of education, engagement, and empowerment cycles for DHNC members and staff in DHNC's Ashe and Watauga chapters.

The initiative was comprised of two segments. The initial member onboarding portion included training and coaching that targeted orientation and buy-in around Down Home's model and theory of change. The second segment of the improvement initiative included more in-depth training and support that developed member leadership and sought to educate and prepare members for local issues and political campaigns.

This initiative was designed to build on elements of existing DHNC programming occurring in chapters, such as aspects of member leadership development, and chapter-based political and issue education. The improvement initiative sought to standardize a system and test combinations of elements that produce the highest levels of engagement, action, and self-assessed perceptions of empowerment. Standardization of organization terminology, structures, and member and chapter development goals is key to ensuring organizers, managers, and members have a clear understanding of steps, metrics, and measurables. Standardization also allows chapters to have a system that can be replicated and continued after staff or members enter or exit the organization. Building systems to manage and grow chapter operations and development allows the entire chapter to be less reliant on a dominant leader personality to drive growth.

A pre-initiative member survey (see Appendix A), created by me, was administered before the launch of the initiative to measure the current perception levels of members around self and community perceptions of power. Data collected from initial studies helped determine topic-specific training and suggest appropriate adjustments, if any, to upcoming sessions. New members experienced a "one-on-one" meeting with an organizer, attended chapter meetings, and/or initial Down Home training, such as "Down Home 101" or the Theory of Change training.

The secondary set of data collection throughout the improvement initiative was the ongoing review by the researcher and design team of member attendance, engagement data, and member and organizer qualitative responses. As process measures, data was reviewed monthly. Pre-initiative baseline data was collected in June and July 2023. While adjustments to training and feedback were ongoing throughout the project's timeline, a final review of data took place in October 2023, allowing for a discussion of the initiative and applications to future efforts.

Evaluation of Improvement Methodology of Rural Community Organizing

Well-intentioned initiatives may not be enough to address the issues facing rural working-class families and communities. Efforts have been numerous, though long-term success has been elusive. Korten (1980) stated, "The record of earlier community development and cooperative efforts is largely a history of failure, resulting more often in strengthening the position of traditional elites than in integrating poorer elements into the national development process" (p. 480). This claim emphasizes the need for sustainability and ongoing presence and support in community organizing. As resources allow, organizations that can commit to long-term investments in rural areas will allow longer-term power-building to occur, and allow the time needed to attack long-standing systems that have proven resistant to change.

Additionally, external factors may alter the socio-economic dynamics of communities, causing needs among residents and families to shift. Organizations must be adaptive and flexible to effectively respond to a community's shifting needs, as well as to continually seek improvement from existing programs. Langley et al. (2009) based the model for improvement on three questions:

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know that a change is an improvement?

3. What changes can we make that will result in growth?

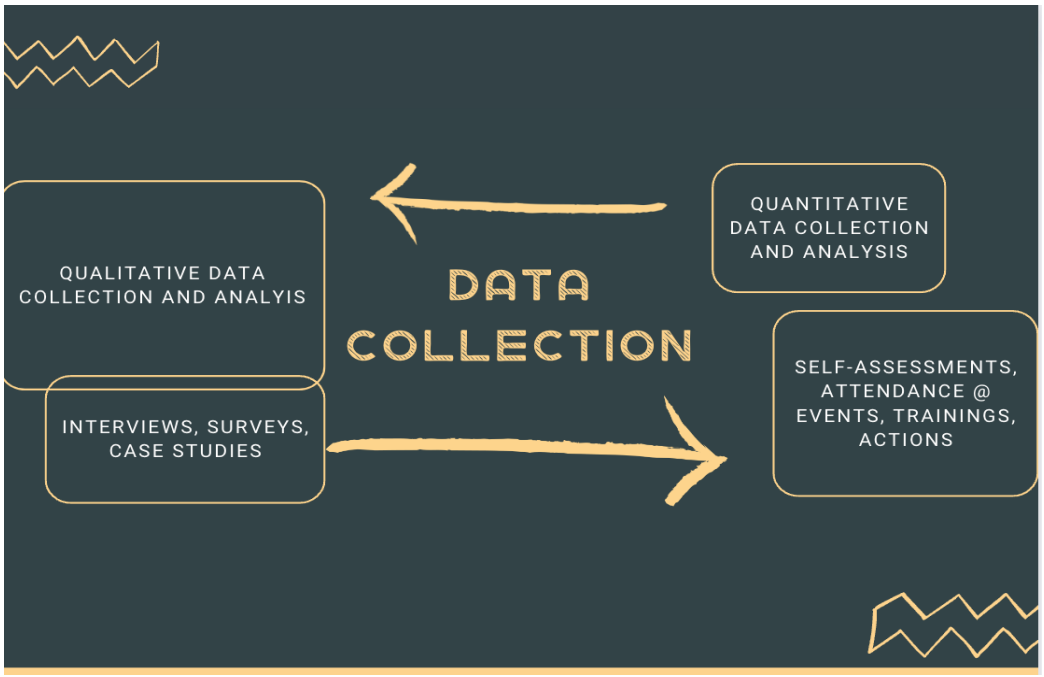
This improvement initiative was designed to empower rural working-class residents through education, action, and leadership development, thereby increasing engagement, improving self-confidence and efficacy, and decreasing apathy or hopelessness. For the design team, we would know this change is an improvement by collecting and monitoring member self-assessments, as well as meeting and event attendance, and related data throughout the implementation of the improvement initiative as part of both formative and summative evaluation measures.

Various research-based strategies exist to analyze and improve programs. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle (Langley et al., 2009) was one improvement tool that was used throughout the implementation of the initiative. Beginning with the planning phase, the PDSA cycle allowed the design team to finalize the plan for both segments of training and coaching. The first training segment was designed to increase the leadership of members working with DHNC and the second targeted education for members in effective issue campaigning and local issue-related contexts. The “Do” phase followed, training and coaching were implemented, and data and observations were collected. During the “Study” phase, the data collected was reviewed and compared with predictions of what the design team thought would happen. Finally, the “Act” phase allowed the design team to implement changes when necessary and determine where to start for the next PDSA cycle. The PDSA cycle is iterative, which means that the cycle is repeated throughout the timeline of the improvement initiative. Evaluation components, such as the outcome, driver, and process measures, determined what was working, what was not, and what to keep or change to improve the program (Langley et al., 2009).

A transformative design of the mixed methodology was utilized in this improvement initiative. Mertens (2012) described transformative design as a method conducive to issues surrounding social justice when researchers combine multiple forms of qualitative data with descriptive statistics. As shown in Figure 9, quantitative data on DHNC involvement, such as self-assessments and attendance at meetings, events, and training, was complemented by qualitative data collection and analysis of interviews and surveys. Attendance and perceptions of self and community power were tracked for DHNC members. Blending qualitative data along with quantitative figures allowed us to form a more complete picture of successes and struggles within the system and the responses it informs. The transformative design model, shown in Figure 9, displays both methods and examples of data collected in this improvement initiative.

Figure 9

Transformative Design Model



Formative Evaluation of Improvement Methodology

Formative evaluation of the power-building program was used throughout the implementation of the improvement cycles to determine the levels of success within each of the components. Process measures, or specific steps that lead to a particular outcome, outcome measures, or data that focus on our targeted areas of improvement, and balancing measures, or steps to ensure implementation in one area does not negatively impact outcomes in other areas (Langley et al., 2009), assessed the fidelity of the implementation. Table 1 below outlines the practical measures and includes examples relevant to the improvement initiative.

Table 1

Practical Measures

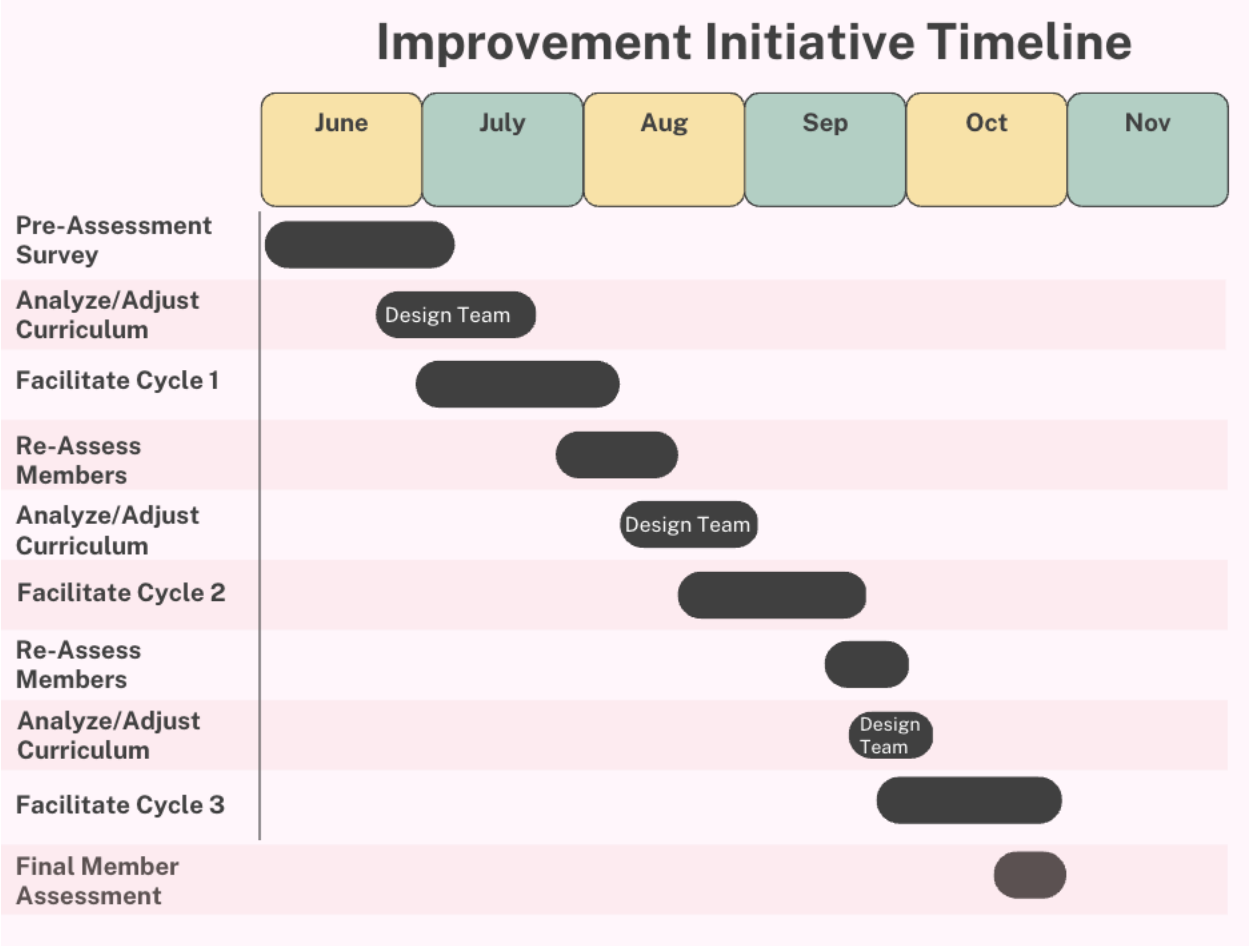
Type of Measure	Definition	Examples
Driver	Feedback on a particular approach to reaching outcomes	Surveys Proof of Concept Interviews
Process	Specific steps that lead to a particular outcome, validates proposed theory	Trainings Chapter Meetings Campaigns
Outcome	Targets for improvement	Member self-assessment data Attendance at trainings, meetings, events
Balancing	Ensures implementation does not negatively impact outcomes in other areas	Member employment, income Family availability Community perceptions

Before the initial training began, each member was given a survey (see Appendix A) to measure their perception(s) of their civic power and influence, as well as that of working-class residents in their community. Our outcome measure focused on improving this target, as well as increasing the attendance and frequency of members accessing examples of our process measures, which evaluate training, meetings, working groups, events, actions, and other base-building interventions. Following the pre-intervention survey, the design team analyzed and adjusted the member training and curriculum to better focus on the areas that members felt they needed or perceived themselves as requiring additional training and support.

At this point, we began the implementation of the first cycle of the initiative. Attendance rosters were collected through our online member management system, Mobilize, to measure the reach and frequency of the program. Additionally, each participant in the training was asked to evaluate the effectiveness and delivery of the training (see Appendix B) after each session. Figure 10 below displays the timeline for the initiative.

Figure 10

Improvement Initiative Timeline



Balancing measures, or elements that ensure our improvement initiative is not negatively impacting other outcomes throughout the improvement cycle, were addressed in member (see Appendix E) and community partner (see Appendix G) focus groups and interviews. Increasing member education and civic engagement were designed to be balanced with access to employment, family, and other responsibilities and obligations. In addition, maintaining a positive and respectful relationship with those in power was important. Often, disrupting and changing systems can upset those in power and strain relationships. While these interruptions of systems and relationships may be unavoidable at times, they can make achieving goals more difficult and potentially endanger outcomes for members. Actions and campaigns must be balanced against potential consequences before moving forward.

As mentioned, the first cycle of the initiative introduced the concept behind Down Home's existence and began the process of building a relationship and trust through a "one-on-one" meeting with an organizer and each member. The "Down Home 101" training is designed to give a broad overview of the organization and its theory of change. As members began to assimilate into their respective Down Home chapters and engage in initial chapter meetings, working groups, actions, and training, perception levels around class and power dynamics were measured. Through Down Home's theory of change, the design team expected to see gradual increases in member confidence, civic education, and feelings of empowerment, which is what occurred.

The second cycle of the proposed initiative was designed to mirror the current implementation programming while keeping a focus on perceptions around collective working class power in the community as a priority. The second cycle measured whether the current theory and method were the right ones and the effectiveness in connecting working-class members of the community to action and feelings of increased empowerment. The assessment of the second stage of the effort (see Appendix C) asks members about their perceptions of the model and its ability to facilitate long-term change in their respective communities. The design team suggested revisions, focusing on the needs of members expressed in the survey, including possible topics such as community organizing best practices, running effective issue campaigns, successfully influencing local government, and strategies for base building. Again, attendance rosters were used to measure engagement with the program. Training assessments were given (see Appendix B) to evaluate each training after a session was completed.

Next, members were connected to support sessions and trainings from the Regional Organizer at their respective chapters. Requests for training (see Appendix D) were utilized to

document member needs for resources and skills that were not being offered. As the initiative was working with and serving working-class populations, obstacles such as time, transportation, housing, childcare, language, and financial costs were often significant obstacles and were factored into the project. Down Home is committed to addressing these barriers as they arise. DHNC supports members who need help with transportation to events and helps with childcare for events. Financial costs, when applicable, are generally waived for lowest-income members as DHNC works hard to not let income be a barrier to access. Translation services were offered by DHNC, though none were requested. While DHNC has sought to support members with housing issues, shelter is a much larger accommodation to resolve. As the initiative progressed, the design team was not tasked with providing translation or accommodating unhoused participants. As our chapters grow, however, arrangements for these and other situations will need to be solidified.

If civic capacity is effectively being built among members through their involvement with Down Home, then an increase in engagement and self-perceptions around education and empowerment should emerge, as well as connections between community-based organizations, and political issues, both local and national. Reviewing the assessments and noting the feedback of members that indicated increased levels of self-efficacy and empowerment after participating in training or events was key. Analyzing member attendance allowed us to measure whether our offerings were accessing needed areas of the membership roster. If attendance was high and empowerment and efficacy rates improved, the design team knew this would be one indicator that increased feelings of civic self-empowerment were being achieved. The formative evaluation tools, and evaluation of those tools by design team members, allowed the design team

to review data regularly and adjust the program depending on the needs or desires of the members, ultimately leading to the needs of more stakeholders being acknowledged.

Summative Evaluation of Improvement Methodology

While formative evaluations provided crucial data during the cycle and allowed the design team to make necessary adjustments as we gradually learned and refined our processes, we also conducted a summative evaluation of the initiative. This outcome measure provided a clear picture of the improvement initiative's effectiveness, or lack thereof, by allowing us to compare pre-intervention data to those data collected post-intervention. Re-administering the pre-assessment survey (see Appendix A) at the end of the initiative's timetable, discussed in the Formative Assessment section above, provided a valuable summative data point. Comparing "before and after" member beliefs about individual education, action, and empowerment proved to be a reliable indicator as to whether DHNC's model is a useful tool to support increased civic agency and working-class civic engagement.

Members' self-perceptions were essential to provide a comprehensive view of the initiative's effectiveness. Staff focus group questions (see Appendix F) were also administered asking opinions on DH's model, member engagement, and attitudes toward learning and leadership. Those responses added another valuable perspective to potential growth among key chapter personalities.

Focus groups were used as a tool for measuring effectiveness from a qualitative standpoint. By observing and recording group interaction, focus groups gave room for critical feedback that may have escaped the confines of the quantitative surveys (Morgan, 1996). The groups allowed for detailed explanation and context, as well as for follow-up questions to explore certain concepts that may surface as more important or more effective among the group.

Multiple groups were used, including a member group, staff group, and community partner group.

Focus group questions for members are in Appendix E. The member group provided an opportunity for discussion on perceptions regarding Down Home and the impact of the chapter, and a theory of change toward self and community civic empowerment. Analyzing how organizing practices have evolved and what has been most, and least, effective for the group was discussed and considered. Additionally, feedback from organizers and DHNC staff toward member and chapter development was discussed. Exploring if members have changed, in what ways, and how to continue or improve outcomes, was undertaken. Member responses to interventions, as well as attitudes toward politics, systems, and opportunities to affect change, were shared among the group. Discussing other ways members' lives have changed allowed the design team to learn about aspects not covered in the questionnaire and served as data for measuring initiative effectiveness. As with our other groups, member participants were allowed the opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement.

Recordings of the member focus group, as well as staff and community partner interviews, were gathered with prior approval. Following each session, recordings were transcribed, and responses were coded to allow common themes and trends to surface. Evaluation coding (Saldana, 2013) was used to measure program effectiveness, successes, and challenges involving the program, and was a natural fit for our purposes. Initial coding allows large amounts of text to be deconstructed and broken down into smaller parts to allow for comparison. Viewing information across groups, through coding, allowed for themes and patterns to surface, as well as aspects of our topic to be compared through various lenses and perspectives.

Additionally, discovering initial trends among data that surfaced through initial coding allowed for further exploration and adjustments to extensive studies (Saldana, 2013). Comparing these data, in addition to our quantitative feedback, allowed us to construct a wide-ranging view of our initiative and the impact it facilitated among various segments of members, staff, and community partners. An exciting aspect of collecting these data and increasing civic empowerment among working class members is the chance to share results with other chapters and organizations, to hopefully provide a roadmap to other entities considering moving to a rural empowerment and engagement model. Improving perceptions of influence and power, while working toward increased political representation among working class citizens, has been a stubborn crisis that has negatively impacted equity and social justice.

Summary

It is understandable why many working-class residents of Ashe and Watauga may have elected not to participate in the political process or felt disempowered to engage in a system that has, for generations, prioritized wealthier, educated, and urban residents. However, with the appropriate resources and community around them, members of the working class who may have felt isolated or disempowered can effectively engage the system and potentially improve the counties many have lived in with their families for generations.

The integration of education and training with a community of developing leaders, tasked with improving local issues and participating in political campaigns, made a positive impact on working-class indicators. Down Home can serve as an important piece in a community by informing and connecting marginalized members of a rural county with experienced members and staff, most from similar backgrounds and lived experiences, to collectively push for improved outcomes. A summary of the research discussed above reported that organized lower-

income groups that acquire power achieve more equitable income distribution. Generative leadership (Surie & Hazy, 2006) within community organizing systems should consistently strive to equip their members and communities with the best tools to identify risks, connect organizers and members with resources, and evaluate interventions and actions to continually refine strategies and plans as progress is made or circumstances evolve.

Down Home's organizational theory of change posits that building working-class power will win immediate improvements in rural communities and move the state toward a future that reflects member values. By taking the steps of designing training, action, and coaching cycles around leadership and community-building, and maintaining increased perception levels during interventions and support, I expected perceptions of power and civic agency to increase. There are many strategies and initiatives designed to fight oppressive systems. I believe rural, relational organizing can be most effective in coordinating the energies and talents of staff, community partners, and working-class members of the High Country, in achieving increased perceptions of power and civic agency.

Results

One 90-day PDSA cycle was facilitated, and data was collected and analyzed, in the fall of 2023. It was a busy three-month period in the organization for members and staff, with the administration of multiple education and development opportunities to collect data from and review. An examination of each of the four practical measures mentioned above follows, as well as a narrative description of each 30-day section of the cycle. A discussion of implications, recommendations, and a conclusion follows.

In general, the pre-and post-initiative survey results, combined with quantitative data from other tools and qualitative feedback from interviews, focus groups, and comments, support

the theory of improvement stated above. As participants engaged in training, actions, and experiences, they reported increases in perceptions of empowerment, leadership abilities, and civic agency. These results are discussed in more detail below, and there are significant factors for others looking to replicate this impact elsewhere to consider. Some adjustments were made to account for feedback during the PDSA cycles, but there is evidence that Down Home's current model can be effective in developing working-class power in Appalachia.

The Improvement Process

PDSA Cycle 1: July

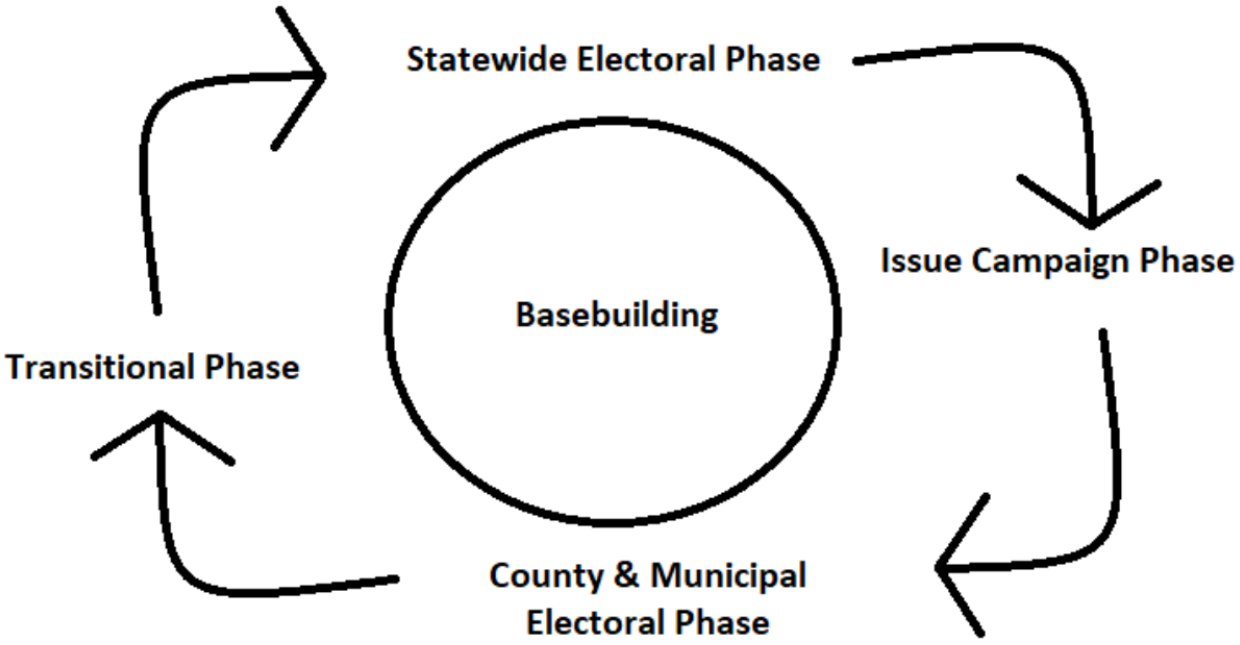
The collection of the baseline data coincided with a Down Home staff retreat. At the retreat, members of the design team discussed the implementation of Down Home's revised Integrated Base-Building Model, shown in Figure 11, which seeks to increase working-class power by increasing the size of our base. The model complemented the change ideas and primary and secondary drivers in the driver diagram, shown in Figure 8 above, and guided the work our chapters completed during the 90-day cycle of this project.

Scan: Integrated Base Building Model. The model unveiled at the retreat, and discussed by members of the design team, addresses the aim of this project, but also reaches beyond its focus. The four areas of implementation shown below illustrate the three months of programming our members engaged in during the 90-day improvement cycle. These areas are centered around Down Home's operational phases, which are based on election cycles. Down Home promotes local issue campaign work, where members identify issues that are problematic to working-class people in their communities, and then design and implement a campaign to address them. The other primary path of Down Home's work is based on elections, both local and statewide. Generally, local and municipal elections take place in "off" years for statewide

elections, with local issue campaigns able to take place during non-election times. Throughout, absorption work, or developing relationships with contacts met through our various phases of work, occurs. Absorption, and development of contacts into membership and leadership, is a primary way that gradual base building occurs. This process is shown in Figure 11 below.

Figure 11

Integrated Base-Building Model



For this project, our timeline most closely coincided with the absorption and transition phases. Both Ashe and Watauga chapters were in the final weeks of a local issue campaign targeting the addition of minimum standards to support renters in substandard housing. Through various events and actions, each chapter acquired a list of new contacts to onboard and acclimate to the chapter. At this point, Down Home staff offered, recruited for, and facilitated several trainings designed to move members toward leadership and civic agency, then measured their impact.

Cycle 1 training, actions, and experiences included

- Theory of Change training;
- 1:1 (one-on-one) training;
- Ready to Lead training;
- People's Action convention (workshops, direct actions);
- Chapter meetings and working groups.

These included a theory of change training, which takes a deeper look into how Down Home believes sustainable working class change can occur, and our 1:1 training. One-to-ones (or 1:1) are meetings between staff or member leaders and, usually, new or prospective members. 1:1's can also be used as vehicles to maintain or strengthen relationships or promote leadership among current members, or as ways to communicate with community leaders and stakeholders. A "Ready to Lead" training was also offered for those members considering running for political office or working on campaigns.

These trainings were paired with regular actions that occur each month, such as chapter meetings, which are planned and facilitated by members, and community canvassing efforts. "Canvassing" is door-to-door work commonly used by members and staff to gain community feedback or interest in campaigns or to share information on candidates or community events. In July, chapters were canvassing to finalize support for the housing campaign and share information about the chapter and its work.

Two uncommon events also took place in July. Many of our member leaders attended the National People's Action Conference in Washington, D.C. This conference was attended by members and staff from various national grassroots base-building groups and consisted of training workshops, networking, and demonstrations across the capital city. Additionally, Watauga members organized and facilitated environmental service actions in July. Community

service has not traditionally been used by Down Home members, but Watauga members expressed an interest in this work as a reprieve from meetings and policy advocacy. Data collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups allowed for the following observations and assertions to be made while reviewing the first cycle, using the questions suggested earlier by Langley et al. (2009):

1. What is the improvement initiative trying to accomplish? The initiative hoped to determine if Down Home's current offerings were viewed as worthwhile and educational by participants, and advancing perceptions of leadership, civic agency, and empowerment.
2. How will the design team know that a change is an improvement? The theory of improvement predicted that members would respond positively to the pieces of training and experiences. Indicators would be positive feedback on evaluations, continued attendance at Down Home events and offerings, and increased leadership capacity.
3. What changes can be made that will result in an improvement? Members reacted positively to the national convention, and lessons here were valuable in considering preparations for our first Down Home state convention, later in the cycle. Data showed members responded well to empowering aspects of the direct action components and benefited from meeting other organizers and members from across the country. Additionally, members reported a desire for more practical skills from the convention and less "hype-building" in the sessions.

Plan. Training and opportunities moved forward as scheduled. Design team members remained in near-daily contact to share data and guide our offerings.

Do. Theory of Change and 1:1 training offerings were all delivered via Zoom by state-based Down Home facilitators. Ready to Lead was held in person in Greensboro. Chapter organizers and members recruited for the national convention and arranged rides and logistics. Regularly scheduled all-chapter meetings continued with chapter organizers preparing agendas with members and supporting members through facilitation. Working groups continued as scheduled, focusing on ongoing housing campaign efforts, canvassing, and, in Watauga, environmental service planning.

Study. As mentioned, member feedback from the convention was overwhelmingly positive, but limited to only a portion of the chapter membership. Those who attended commented they were highly motivated to return to the chapters and apply what they had learned. Ready to Lead and Theory of Change training evaluations were positive around content but offered constructive feedback around technical issues, presentation styles and speed of delivery from facilitators, and the attention difficulties around multi-hour online training. Members expressed excitement about gaining skills during the 1:1 training, as they had entered Down Home through their own 1:1 experience and looked forward to using the tools as vehicles to bring more people into the movement.

Act. The first 30-day cycle verified the relevance and efficacy of the offerings presented. Evaluation feedback offered suggestions for improvement in the facilitation of online training, but the programming schedule would stay intact and as planned.

Summarize. As staff and organizers who serve our chapters and members daily, we are admittedly biased toward our people and counties. However, the first 30-day cycle reinforced that we are fortunate to have a strong group of member leaders who are enthusiastic about developing working-class power in the High Country. Their excitement shown through the

convention and acceptance of leadership asks from organizers toward leading and planning meetings, and participating in trainings, were strong. We learned the frequency of opportunities offered to members was appropriate, though many members were unable to sign up for various offerings due to schedules and conflicts. There were no suggestions for a change to our schedule.

PDSA Cycle 2: August

Cycle 2 training, offerings, and experiences included:

- member and Staff focus groups;
- co-governance summit;
- County Commission meeting actions;
- chapter meeting evaluations.

Scan. Moving into the second 30-day cycle, design team feedback from members and staff differed somewhat. Some design team members considered feedback from the baseline survey and sought to move chapter members closer to confidence and skill-building related to making changes in their communities, such as accessing town and county boards and commissions. Others preferred a return of focus and resources toward canvassing and listening to county residents as the best way to build working-class power in their communities.

"The people we need to be working with are the ones that have never seen the inside of a boardroom. People like me don't sit on boards," stated one design team and Down Home member. "If we were doing more of what we said we were going to do," she continued, referencing Down Home's history of listening to residents and deep canvassing efforts, "we would be winning people over." This conversation, a debate between bringing more residents into the system via more governmental access, compared to reaching out to those that have existed outside of the system and allowing members to design their solutions, remained an

unresolved tension. Additionally, as the chapters prepared in August to attend Down Home's first-ever statewide convention, a complementary tension surfaced in the design team around state-originated "top-down" initiatives and requests that sometimes contrasted with chapter or member-led "bottom-up" efforts.

We can use the same three questions, suggested by Langley et al. (2009), to analyze the second 30-day cycle, as we did above with Cycle 1:

1. What is the improvement initiative trying to accomplish? August also saw the Ashe and Watauga chapters engage in various actions designed to continue the development of leadership and increase the engagement and education of members. Members from both chapters attended a co-governance summit, which targeted political education and prepared members for upcoming municipal election work in fall '23, as well as state and local races in '24. Ashe and Watauga members canvassed their community and publicly challenged their local county commission around low-income housing issues. Watauga members continued environmental service opportunities to complement their housing campaign, while chapter "working groups," or smaller chapter-based subcommittees designed to focus on one aspect of the chapter's work, met in both counties throughout the month.

2. How will the design team know that a change is an improvement? If members prepared for, attended, and participated in appearances at county commission meetings to support their housing campaigns, we would know they are committed to acting in their communities and demonstrated increased confidence in skills, as well as empowerment to combat existing systems. Both chapters exhibited high turnout for their respective

appearances at commission meetings and evaluation feedback from the experiences was overwhelmingly positive.

3. What changes can be made that will result in an improvement? We learned moving members, many with traumatic life experiences as victims of poverty, abuse, or other systemic factors, can be emotionally exhausting or otherwise difficult. Adding emotional and trauma-informed support for members and staff for future work was an important takeaway, as was emphasizing the importance of careful issue campaign selection and targets. Members who may become emotionally invested in a campaign's success could respond negatively to a campaign defeat and, potentially, experience a lack of confidence, disempowerment, and less civic agency.

Plan. Training and opportunities moved forward as scheduled. Design team members remained in near-daily contact to share data and guide our offerings.

Do. County Commission appearances were the highlight of this cycle and required many hours of member preparation and application of skills and confidence earned by this time. Watauga had over 30 members show up for their meeting, and 12 members directly addressed the Board of Commissioners. Member and staff focus groups were rich in information and feedback about Down Home's work and lessons learned.

Common themes emerged from the 8-member focus group. When themes were addressed by multiple participants, the frequency is shown in parentheses below, and displayed in Table 2 below. Thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) was used to note statements and reoccurrences allowing for participant patterns and shared experiences to emerge.

Table 2

Member Focus Group Thematic Tally

General Theme	Specific Issue/Outcome Identified	# of Times Issue/Outcome Identified
Involvement in Down Home has been positive	Positive community/group of people	4
	Ended apathy/encouraged civic participation	7
	Increased confidence	1
	Give people hope	3
Effective practices/outcomes	Forced county government to talk about housing/working class issues	3
	Canvasses/Personal interaction	5
	Organization support/structure	1
	Endorsements/cogovernance	3
Ineffective practices/outcomes and/or negative consequences	Financial/loss of income	1
	Emotional stress/impact	3
	Phone banking/text banking	1
	No local DH social media access	2
	Endorsements	2

Members identified an increase in activity and community awareness as a common theme. What follows are excerpts of responses on this topic:

- “Ended my apathy. Activated the hell out of me.”
- “Made me more active, and aware in my community. I have more context to look around at issues we’re facing and draw attention to the needs of neighbors.”
- “Makes me want to make sure people don’t live with the same apathy I had.”
- “National politics is important, but if you’re looking to feel empowered and realize you actually have a voice, local is going to make you feel less helpless.”

Patterns also emerged around the topics of Down Home chapters providing a welcoming community, as well as the value and importance of canvassing and direct actions:

- "Gave me a family, support system, and purpose."
- "Community where I've felt welcome."
- "It's personal. You put a face with a name and a human with a story. I am at your door telling you I give a shit about you."
- "Showing up to commission and elected meetings has made an impact. Elected officials see us."

Staff focus group data allowed multiple observations to surface, including support of Down Home's model, chapter structures, and the importance of year-round organizing. The following excerpts are from discussions on those topics:

- "Tons of individual growth and skill-building. Folks with no knowledge of organizations or policies, through a couple of months have created a core group of people, created policies, asked questions (of government), and advocated for them."
- "Definitely been an opportunity for people that have wanted to get involved and didn't know how to do so, how to create change, skill-building. The educational components have been impactful."
- "The space Down Home is creating has not been available or present. It is community-building and fellowship, similar to a church model. Working-class folks are being given resources they have not been given before. Paid staff can communicate and workshop ideas with members, so they never feel like they are alone. Nobody would do this on their own."

- "Paid staff in each county is one of the things folks said that makes Down Home different. Other organizations try to do this without paid staff. We need financial resources to make this really happen."
- "We are not just here when there are issue campaigns or elections. There is constant community and outreach. We are always working to talk to people."

Study. Members shared elevated feelings of empowerment around facing the commissions and advocating for change in their communities. In many ways, this served as validation for Down Home's presence in these counties and was an impactful experience for some who participated. The chapter meeting evaluations allowed feedback on these vital, regular gatherings of members. Some constructive feedback was given as to structure and agenda, though repeated comments toward the meetings as effective vehicles for community-building, inclusion, and member leadership development were mentioned.

Act. There were no changes or additions to previously scheduled offerings due to design team feedback. Discussions around adding boards and commission training, as well as voter registration were had. These were built to respond to baseline assessment feedback that members were seeking ways to be more educated about how to apply local knowledge to affect change in their respective communities. Both trainings were designed by a chapter organizer, but both were tabled to be administered later by a state-based director. More focus on member preparation around chapter meeting agendas and facilitation was implemented in one chapter via pre-meeting planning sessions to strengthen the impact of those opportunities.

PDSA Cycle 3: September

Highlights of the third cycle training, offerings, and experiences included:

- "Roots of Power" state convention;

- community partner interview;
- post-initiative assessment;
- chapter meetings and working groups.

Scan. The final 30 days of the 90-day cycle saw the design team seek to maximize the opportunity of the state convention. Recruitment, preparation, and facilitation for the event dominated most of the cycle, though canvassing, meetings, training, and working groups continued as in previous months. Design team members used the opportunity to express preferences on how to reset expectations among members and set a cultural tone for the upcoming year's work at the convention.

Langley et al.'s (2009) improvement questions can be used again as a structure for review, as in the cycles discussed above:

1. What is the improvement initiative trying to accomplish? Staff and member leaders were trying to maintain chapter-based development and engagement offerings while preparing for the opportunity presented at the state convention. Additionally, community partner feedback was sought to gather more feedback on the theory of change and balancing measures. Lastly, re-administration of the pre-initiative survey was necessary to measure member growth.
2. How will the design team know that it is an improvement? Members will report increased levels of education, empowerment, and civic agency because of attendance at the convention and chapter-based events. Attendance for chapter meetings will remain steady or increase. Members will continue to lead aspects of chapter planning, agenda-setting, and facilitation.

3. What changes can be made that will result in improvement? Community partner and staff feedback can inform a discussion on the timing of candidate endorsements for future expansion chapters. That is outside the scope of this 90-day cycle, but important feedback for improvement. Messaging around issues and values should be considered in ways to increase inclusion, focus on common ground, and reduce community division.

Plan. Specifically, members of the design team suggested using the opportunity of having members and the organization's directors together to solidify relationships and learn more about each other to reduce the perceived "state" and "local" gap. Members having the opportunity to meet one-on-one with directors or participate in a member/director "town hall" type session may allow for higher levels of member investment and organizational transparency. Similarly, the idea was voiced to hold a member panel session, where select member leaders from chapters across the state would share successes and lessons learned while fielding questions from Down Home volunteer members in the audience. This panel, the design team suggested, could form the foundation of an ongoing statewide member advisory panel, with representatives from each of Down Home's eight chapters, to meet with directors and provide a member voice in strategy and planning meetings and discussions. Members being involved in organizational priority-setting and strategy at its origin, instead of after it has been decided, may lead to increased levels of engagement, investment, and empowerment. As one chapter member on the design team voiced, "Do we actually believe that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution? Are we member-led or not?"

Do. While much of the member-based design team feedback was not integrated into convention planning, the general member feedback from the convention was that it was well-

executed and powerful. Member evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, including this comment:

> This event built more trust in me for the organization and the people on staff. It felt like an effort was being made to hear us and listen, as well as to have more transparency and clarity around plans and goals.

The convention was the centerpiece of the final 30-day cycle, which resulted in a natural culmination of these 90 days. As we all returned home from the convention and resumed more familiar local, chapter-based work, the pre-initiative assessment was administered again to measure what impact, if any, the previous three months of involvement in Down Home had on our participating members.

Study. Members offered agenda and facilitation suggestions in their evaluations of the state convention. Positive themes surfaced around spending time with other members from across the state and general event logistics. Critiques included “dense” scheduling, wanting more preparation for “heavy” discussions, more staff and member inclusion, and more challenging workshops. Evaluating the post-initiative data gathered from re-administering the baseline assessment was informative and validating and is discussed in more detail below.

Community partner interviews, though asked the same questions, varied on common ground and direction. More feedback from the community partners is shared in the practical measures’ discussion below, but only one common theme, giving working-class residents a voice, emerged between both sessions. Excerpts included these examples:

- “The kinds of folks you have prioritized are working-class people. You’re in trailer parks. You went around and talked to low-income folks.”
- “You’ve brought a voice to people that feel like they have not had a voice.”

Act. While this was the end of the cycle, action can be applied for future years when considering the value of a statewide gathering of members and staff. Surely an expensive undertaking for the state organization, most members reflected that it was a worthwhile, educational, power, and skill-building experience.

Practical Measures

While a chronological narrative of the cycle is helpful, reviewing the data and the cycle through the four practical measures discussed in the pages above allows for a more comprehensive perspective on the improvement initiative and its impacts on participants. The transformative design model (see Figure 8) is integrated among each of these steps and exists for the duration of the cycle. Data from pre-initiative quantitative measures were used to inform design team discussions and proposed changes. Interview and focus group questions reflected input from quantitative assessments, leading to program adjustments that helped improve post-initiative assessment results. This ongoing cycle will be critical for future improvement work in the organization.

Outcome Measure

Outcome measures can be useful in evaluating shorter and longer-term results of an improvement cycle. They can determine if participants are improving as they are involved in a program or due to external factors (John Jay College, n.d.). This project chose to measure progress toward self-assessed perceptions of empowerment, leadership, and civic agency among members over the three months of the project.

Data Collection. The outcome measures used for the project included the pre- and post-assessment (see Appendix A). Data were collected with the pre-assessment given to start the project in July 2023, followed by a re-administration given in September after the 90-day cycle.

Participants. As discussed above, the participants were residents of Watauga and Ashe counties, in rural North Carolina. Participants are members of Down Home North Carolina chapters. 18 Down Home chapter members completed the pre- and post-assessment. Twelve are from Ashe County and 12 are from Watauga. Seven identify as male and 17 identify as female. All are white. Participants were not asked for ages, education level, or socio-economic status. Generally, respondents were full-time employees, between 30 and 50 years old, and educated with some college experience or a degree. Outliers included current college students and retirees with doctorate degrees. Some members work multiple hourly jobs, and two have been recently evicted from rental units. Professions range from writers, veterinarian techs, professors, social workers, landscapers, kitchen staff, and non-profit staff.

Re-administering the baseline assessment at the end of the cycle showed high levels of member development in leadership, civic agency, and self-assessed abilities to impact their communities. Eighteen of the 24 original respondents to the baseline assessment completed the same assessment at the end of the 90-day cycle. The data below only shows pre- and post-cycle feedback from those 18, to show an authentic picture of their experiences and growth over this three-month window. Selected visual representations below compare pre- and post-initiative data. While data from five of the questions in the assessment (see Appendix A) are graphed below, each of the eleven questions showed increases and growth from members. Most showed dramatic increases.

Data Analysis. Like the practical measures discussed above, quantitative analysis consisted of simple frequency plots (Langley et al., 2009), including bar charts. This easily allowed for the comparison of pre- and post-assessment data and clearly showed improvement across the survey questions. This analysis was appropriate due to the smaller sample size

involved and the project's goal to learn what aspects of Down Home's member experience during this 90-day cycle were most impactful toward feelings of empowerment and civic agency.

Analysis Results.

Baseline/ Pre-Initiative Assessment. It was necessary to begin by assessing the self-perceived levels of civic agency, leadership, and empowerment present in our participants as they first became involved with Down Home. This baseline information provided an idea of where we were starting from and helped identify initial gaps and needs among the group. This feedback would better inform the training and offerings we might provide in the early stages of the project.

In terms of positive assets that these participants were reporting as bringing into their Down Home experience, significant percentages of the group said they possessed leadership skills, were already regular voters, were educated about local issues and candidates, believed their vote matters, and that if more working-class people were elected, that things would get better for working people. In short, this could be interpreted as a general faith in democracy and an optimism that civic participation is valuable and has the potential to improve lives for working-class Appalachians.

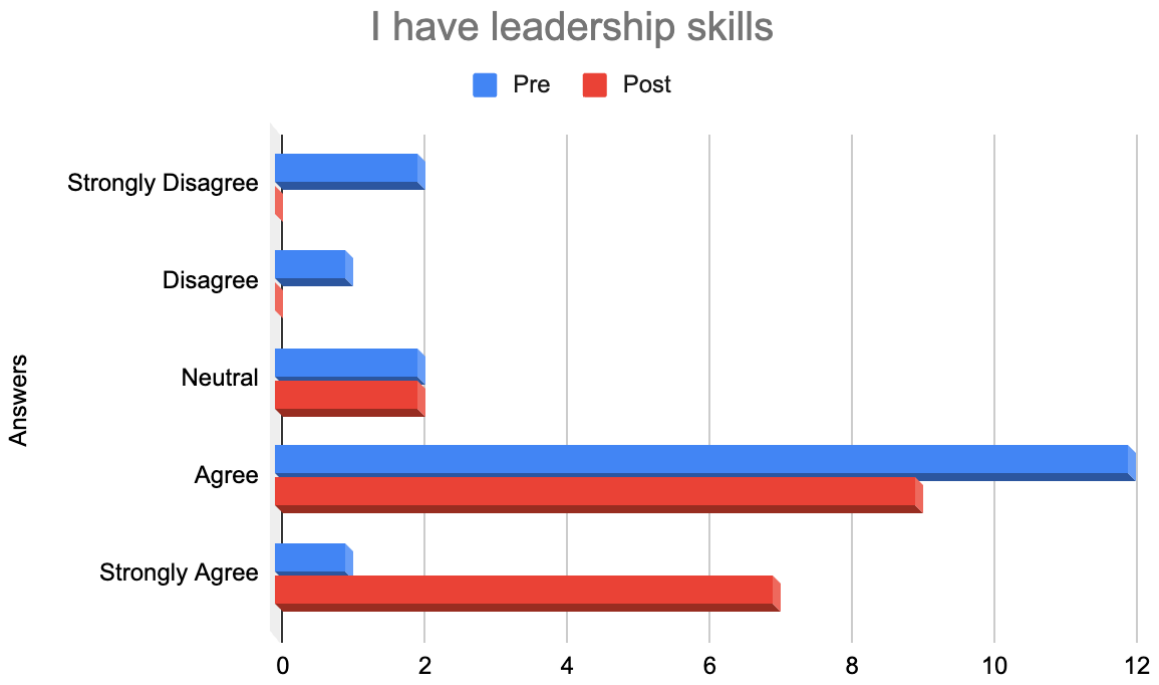
In terms of deficiencies or potential areas for growth, most respondents stated working-class members do not hold influence in local government, and participants stated they did not know how to "identify community problems and organize efforts to address them." Additionally, the baseline showed members are not "confident in their abilities to make things happen in my community" and, though most are voting, the majority are not "active in my community politically or with other community organizations/groups."

Synthesizing the data from the baseline showed that members were informed and engaged about local issues but did not yet know how to impact change. One participant adequately summarized this pattern when they commented, “When I joined Down Home, I was already passionate about the issues but had no platform or agency to share those passions.” The question for our design team before the 90-day PDSA cycle became, “How do we connect the existing levels of local awareness and electoral participation with the confidence, knowledge, and skills to affect positive change and results for working people in Ashe and Watauga?”

Post-Initiative Assessment. Members reported increases in leadership, civic agency, and empowerment in response to each question asked. Corresponding questions, results, and graphs for each of those targeted outcomes are shown below.

Figure 12

Histogram Showing Comparative Perceptions of Leadership



Perceptions of leadership showed strong movement from members, as shown in Figure 12. Pre-initiative results contained five responses of “neutral,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree,” when asked about self-assessed levels of leadership. Post-initiative, there were zero “disagree” or “strongly disagree” responses, and “strongly agree” responses moved from one pre-initiative to seven post-initiative. These 18 respondents showed dramatic increases in self-perceived levels of leadership throughout the 90-day cycle. Improvement in leadership complements process and driver data, discussed below, that ranks experiences and training highly.

Growth in self-perceived levels of leadership can be attributed to multiple examples in the cycle of applying leadership skills and practicing leadership. Preparing for and leading chapter meetings, speaking publicly at local government meetings, being quoted in media, mentoring newer members as they enter the community, or representing your chapter at a state or national retreat are all examples in the cycle many of these participants took advantage of and participated in.

Figure 13

Histogram Showing Comparative Perceptions of Civic Engagement

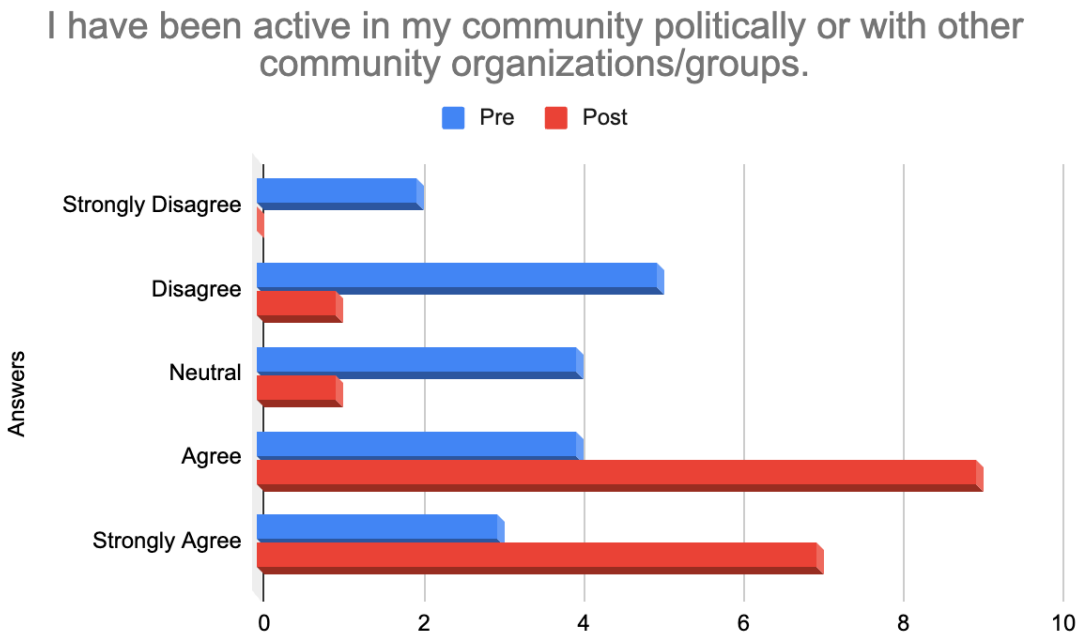
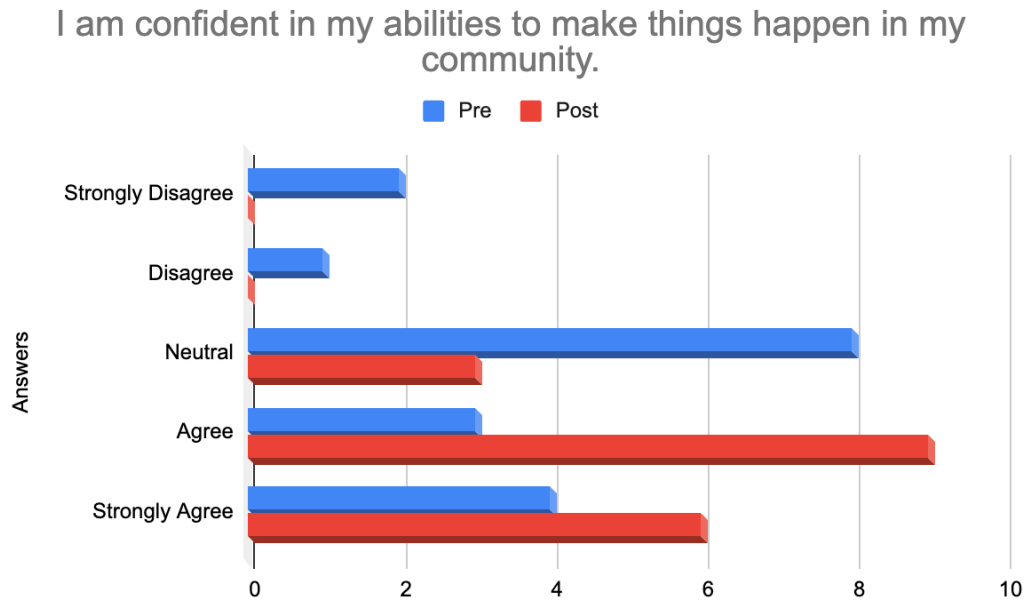


Figure 13 shows participants demonstrated growth in community engagement. Before the initiative, 11 of the 18 respondents answered “neutral,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree,” when asked if they had been active in the community politically or with other non-Down Home groups. After the initiative, 16 of the 18 answered “agree” or “strongly agree” to the same question. It can be interpreted that gaining skills and confidence through experiences and education at Down Home has translated to more activity and interest in engaging with other groups. Perhaps being interested in, or motivated to support, community change is often not enough. However, providing a venue, community, training, and support for people who want to get involved has made a difference among this group of participants. I think this is especially relevant in Ashe County, where chapter members are generally largely outnumbered by conservatives and Republicans. Finding strength in numbers, and in a community of fellow like-minded, community-minded Ashe residents have shown to be a positive agent for engagement.

Figure 14

Histogram Showing Comparative Perceptions of Empowerment

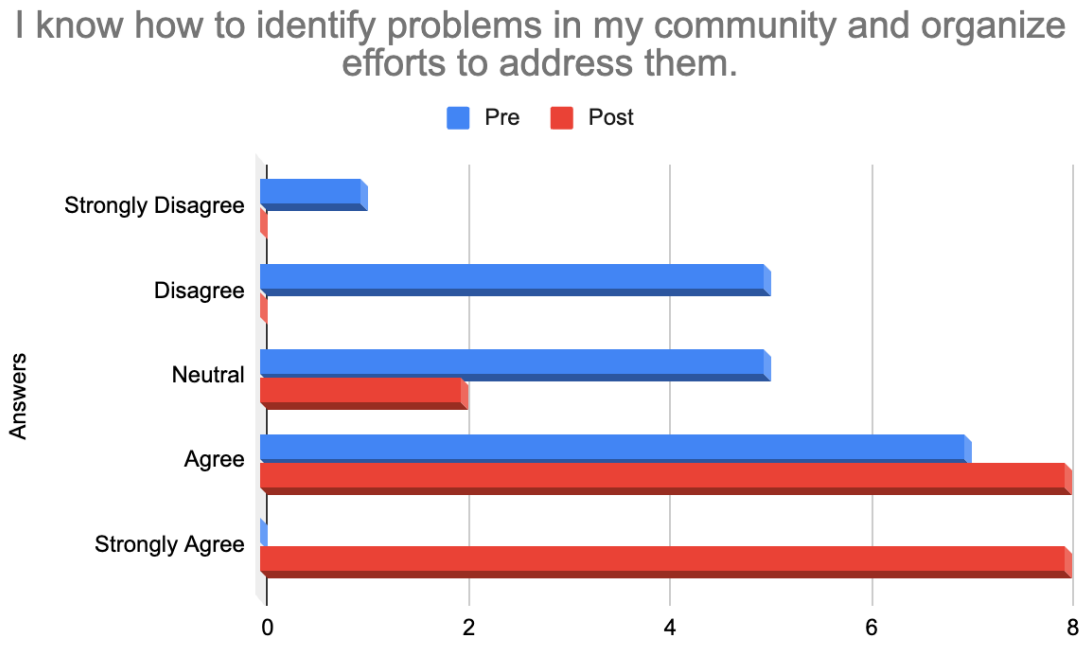


Baseline data from members showed a lack of confidence in their ability to affect change in their communities. Results from the 90-day cycle shown in Figure 14 demonstrate that this cycle was effective in improving perceptions in this area. Post-improvement initiative, 15 of 18 members agreed, or strongly agreed, that they could make an impact. Zero respondents disagreed after the initiative, compared to three that did not think they could affect change, and eight that answered "neutral" pre-initiative. As seen in the leadership results, participants who responded to this survey would have already participated in initiatives and actions that brought about change in their community. Whether fighting for protections for a historically Black neighborhood, lobbying the government to change county ordinances to increase access to commission meetings for working people, or having a meaningful conversation on a front porch with a rural resident who has never been asked how they feel about community issues, members have experienced a community that is slightly different because of their impact and presence. During the cycle, members learned how to identify issues through community canvassing, researched

and proposed solutions to elected leaders, lobbied effectively through presentations and media, won changes, and developed skills.

Figure 15

Histogram Showing Comparative Perceptions of Individual Organizational Capacity

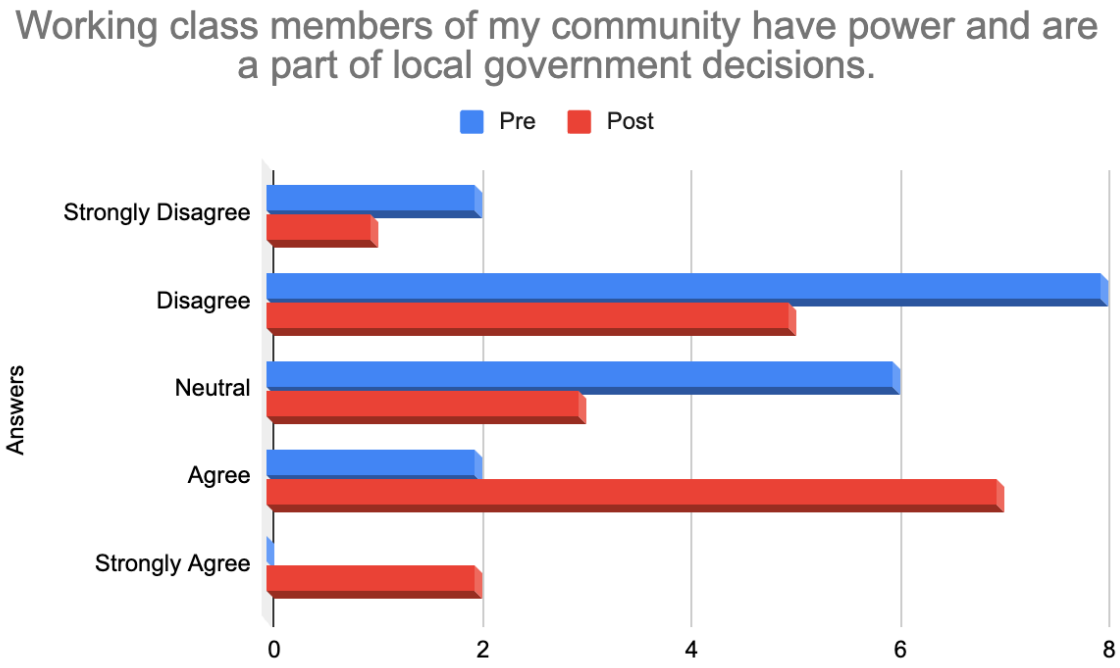


Like the empowerment-related results shown in Figure 14, Figure 15 shows increased levels of members' perceptions of their abilities to identify and address problems in their communities. Recognizing a problem does not require much skill, but knowledge of the steps required to address problems, and the confidence required to bring people together to remedy a community-based problem, is a complex set of abilities. Only seven of 18 participants agreed they had the knowledge and skill pre-initiative, compared to 16 of 18 that agreed, or strongly agreed, they had that capacity post-initiative. Results shown in Figure 14 speak to the skills gained from community canvassing and garnering community opinion before addressing issues or launching campaigns. Issues that an individual, or even a chapter, may want to address may not have the support of the community, or perhaps be realistic, winnable campaigns. Members

learned the criteria for effective local issue campaigns during the cycle and those skills and experiences are reflected in these results. Secondly, simply knowing what the community needs is not the same as having the knowledge and support to know what next steps are involved in beginning to fight and build support around an issue. The participants now have some experience in this area and the increased confidence can be seen in their responses.

Figure 16

Histogram Showing Comparative Perceptions of Working-Class Community Empowerment



Related to individual perceptions of empowerment, it is also important to measure perceptions of community-based levels of power among working-class communities. As indicated in Figure 16 above, members in both chapters canvassed and integrated feedback from residents in county policy campaigns, as well as met with county elected officials, government staff, community stakeholders, media, and other residents. As a result, perceptions of collective power increased among participants. Pre-initiative, 16 of 18 respondents answered “neutral,”

"disagree," or "strongly disagree" when asked if working-class members of their community were involved in local government decisions. Post-initiative, half of the 18 still felt working-class residents were neutral or left out of decisions, while the remaining half agreed, or strongly agreed, that working-class residents were involved.

As mentioned above, members in each chapter directly engaged county government leaders and staff in conversations around various issues and, in some instances, impacted change. Members became familiar with local boards and commissions and, during the cycle, at least three members moved into roles on the Human Resources Commission and the Juvenile Justice Commission in their respective counties. Across both counties, six members committed to run for county-level elected office in 2024, which may be the strongest indicator of civic agency and leadership development. These examples show involvement in government by working-class residents at increased levels from participants than before the cycle and are reflected in Figure 16.

PDSA Implications. Observations from baseline data forced a conversation among members of the design team, described above in the 90-day cycle narrative, about how best to shift the curriculum to promote skills and capacity for community change. At the same time, members reported higher-than-expected levels of local knowledge and confidence in democracy, and staff designed and built training to promote education and engagement in municipal-level boards and commissions and voter registration. Neither boards and commissions nor voter education training were inserted into the cycle due to scheduling constraints, though post-initiative data collected showed large increases in member perceptions of empowerment and perceptions of their ability to affect community change. This means their presence was, in essence, unnecessary, as members still reported increased civic agency, empowerment, and

leadership levels with the existing curriculum offerings. No PDSA changes were made based on this feedback. However, including the boards and commissions training for future member development is listed below in the recommendations.

Driver Measure

A driver measure allows feedback on a theorized approach to reaching outcomes (New York City Department of Education, n.d.). The measure for this project is designed to provide feedback on the concept of blending Down Home's selected educational and experiential opportunities to increase member self-perceptions of leadership, empowerment, and civic agency. The driver measure chosen for this project was a survey on Down Home's theory of change (see Appendix C) from members that we serve. The survey was administered near the end of the second 30-day cycle. It was given at this time to allow participants enough time to have been exposed to Down Home training, experiences, and actions to share, then, an educated opinion. Thirteen of the 24 participants who completed the baseline assessment completed the theory of change assessment. This was a one-time administration, given near the end of the second 30-day PDSA cycle.

Feedback from staff interviews (see Appendix F) that address driver measure data is included below as well. These staff are the two chapter organizers who are assigned to the Ashe and Watauga County chapters and are also on this project's design team. Both staff are white, college-educated, and in the 25-35 age demographic. One identifies as male and one as female.

Data Analysis. Analysis from quantitative feedback tools consisted of simple frequency plots (Langley et al., 2009), including pie charts. Thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) was used on the qualitative side to discern patterns and shared experiences from participants. This mixed method approach sought to provide as complete a picture as possible of the project,

allowing participants to offer feedback through various types of assessments. The driver measure allowed for open-ended comments on the theory of change.

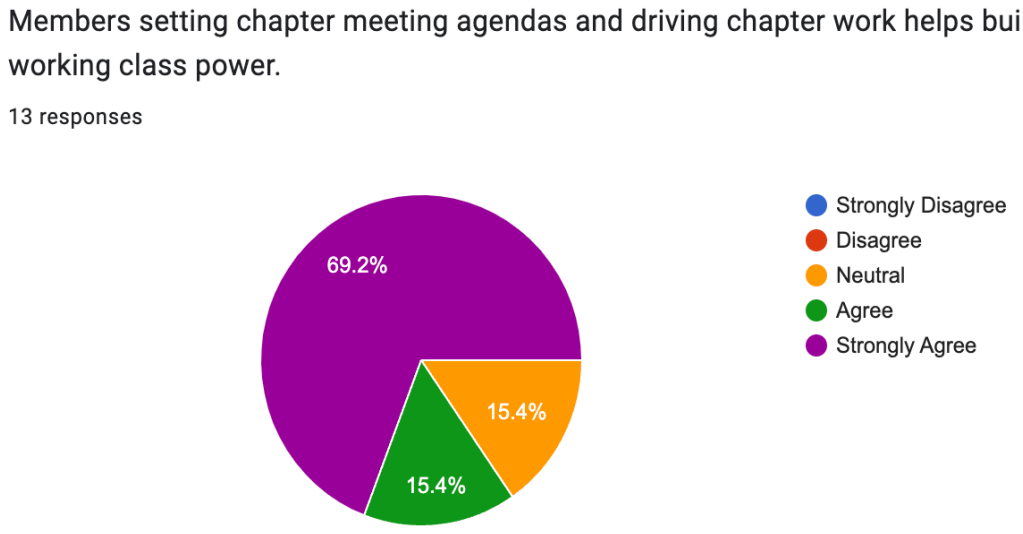
Results. Down Home's theory of change, which has seen numerous small revisions over the last 18 months, currently focuses on building rural, multiracial, and working-class power to win short-term improvements and move towards a future reflective of progressive values. While this project opted not to focus on the race component mentioned in Down Home's theory, some questions saw complete, or near-complete, agreement and support among members. Down Home's stated theory is somewhat vague, while, in practice, operations consist of two specific primary paths: local chapter-based, non-electoral issue campaigning, and participation in electoral work that includes recruiting and running candidates, endorsements, and canvassing to win elections for both local and statewide offices.

Each of the members stated in the theory of change assessment they "agree" (15%) or "strongly agree" (85%) that overall involvement in Down Home increased their skills, education on local issues, and levels of civic engagement. Similarly, all respondents stated Down Home workshops and training can lead to "increased power," with 61% answering with "strongly agree" to 39% with "agree." Again, every participant, 70% responded "strongly agree" and 30% with "agree," agreed that running local issue campaigns is an empowering tool. Participation in statewide campaigns was also viewed very positively, as 92% of respondents agreed, 38%, or strongly agreed, 54%, that this is a positive way to build working-class power. One respondent, however, questioned whether involvement skews Down Home's official non-partisan status. They wrote, "I do think some of the statewide campaigns make us seem less non-partisan to people that might be considering joining our movement."

This feedback is valid, as a quick review of Down Home's statewide campaigns or statewide social media will show highly partisan content and efforts. A clear question then arises in the most effective approach to developing working-class power. Is power developed more comprehensively through member autonomy, unattached to a particular political framework or philosophy? Or, as Down Home has evolved, is working-class power, civic agency, and leadership more effectively developed by giving members a pre-built progressive organizing vehicle, political framework and agenda, and support structure to work within? Future research could more closely analyze and test this question, and a recommendation for that work is offered below. Currently, Down Home unapologetically projects its progressive platform and will directly challenge elected officials and systems that oppose them. While this naturally restricts the number of potential working-class members or participants, the organization prioritizes agenda and policy change over accessing more prospective working-class members.

Figure 17

Pie Chart Showing Member Opinions on Power-Building Through Chapter Meeting Experiences

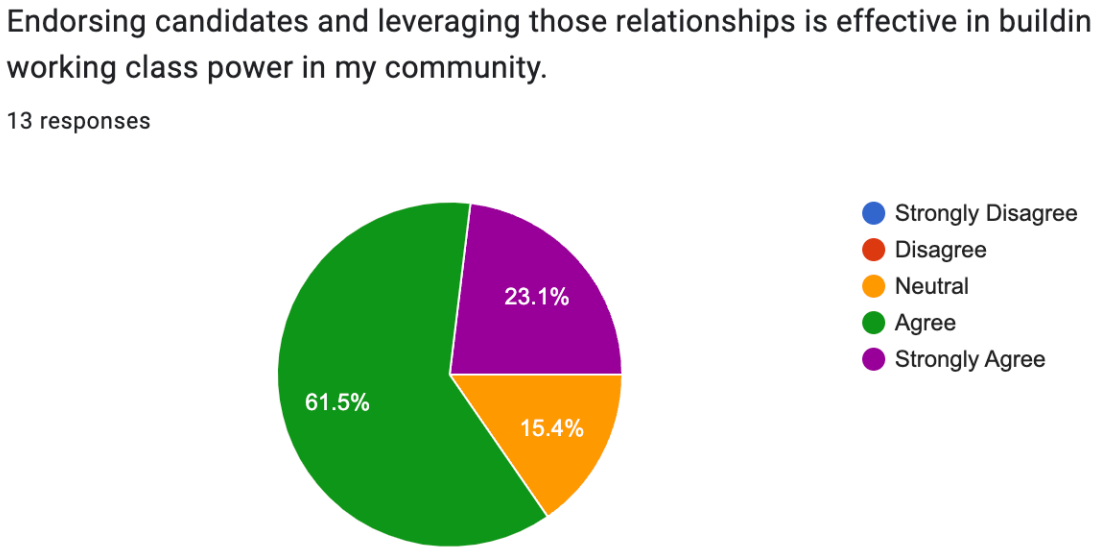


Other tools, actions, and methods generated varying perspectives, though they were still perceived as positive. As shown in Figure 17, nearly 70% stated members leading work in their

county-based chapters was empowering, while 15% were “neutral.” Chapter meetings, often held monthly in each of the counties Down Home works in, are the primary events each month where most members come together, learn about the work happening in committees, become educated about local and statewide issues, build relationships and community, and can sign-up for future actions. Initially, paid organizers planned and facilitated these meetings. Over time, experienced members were asked to absorb these efforts and, with organizer support, now plan the agendas, share facilitation, and spend time recruiting for attendance at meetings, confirming RSVPs, and debriefing afterward to learn about successes and areas of improvement. Member-led chapter meetings are important displays of chapter work being member-led and these results show the monthly meetings as important tools for individual empowerment.

Figure 18

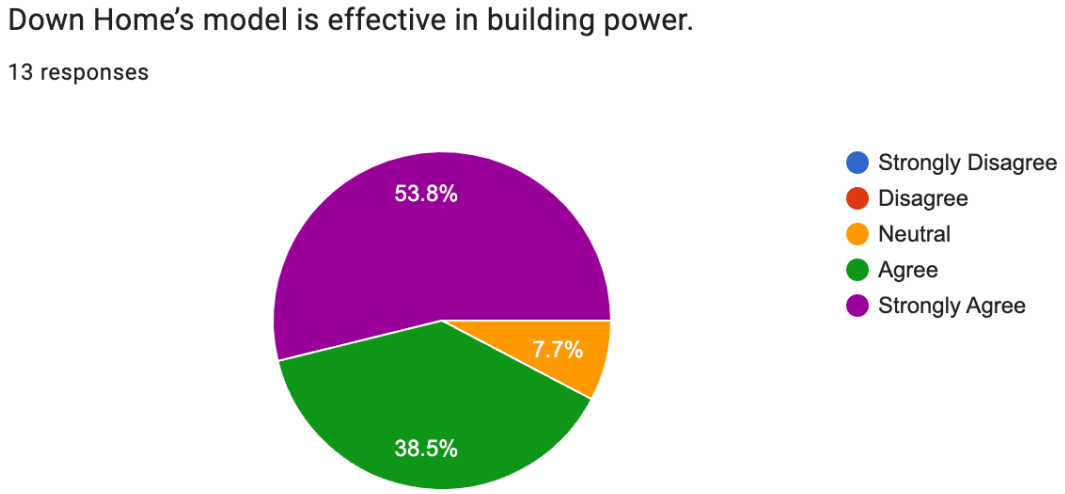
Pie Chart Showing Member Opinions on Power-Building Through Endorsements and Co-Governance.



Generally, members felt endorsing candidates in elections was empowering for the working class, as seen in Figure 18, but less enthusiastically. Most, 62% responded “agree” and 23% “strongly agree,” supported these efforts, while 15% were “neutral.” These results conflict slightly with actions taken by both chapters during the ’23 municipal election campaigns, which occurred during the 90-day cycle. Both chapters opted not to endorse candidates, choosing instead to conduct general candidate and voter education work. Some feedback from staff and community partner interviews highlights concerns about chapter endorsements as they relate to building power, at least for chapters in their early stages. However, in this survey, participating members show general support for Down Home’s theory of change in this area.

Figure 19

Pie Chart Showing Member Opinions on Power-Building Through Down Home’s Model



The theory of change assessment data is a small sample size, only about half of the original respondent size. However, it supports the pre- and post-assessment findings that members feel Down Home’s theory and work are positive vehicles for working-class

empowerment in Ashe and Watauga. Questions in the survey show support for both of Down Home's primary paths for base-building and change, county-based chapter and issue campaign work, and electoral campaign efforts. It can be interpreted that what Down Home is doing, and how they are doing it, is viewed positively by these members. Significant changes to the model may not be required or needed at this time.

These findings are supported by staff feedback on member growth and empowerment. Organizers, when asked about Down Home's model promoting member empowerment, said:

> Folks with no knowledge of organizing or policies, in a couple months, created a core group of people, created policies, asked questions, and advocated for them. If we were no longer here, people are now prepared in a way they would not have been previously.

Another organizer followed, stating:

> It's definitely been an opportunity for people that have wanted to get involved and didn't know how to do so. It has shown them how to create change, and the skill-building and educational components have been impactful. Folks get to learn the roles of local government. They have developed the confidence to send an email to the school board. They now know what they are supposed to be doing, what job titles are for elected officials, and how to hold them accountable. Leadership development has been incredible in our chapter alone. Creating public comments or writing a letter to the editor is new to lots of these folks. They have been empowered by it significantly.

PDSA Implications. The data collected from this assessment strengthened the improvement initiative and justified the existing offerings and schedule. The relatively late administration of the theory of change assessment, given near the end of the second 30-day

cycle, and the dominance of the state convention during the last 30-day cycle, may have made any programming changes difficult, should the need arise.

Process Measure

Process measures monitor the implementation of programs and track the quality of programming (Lilford et al., 2007). Driver measures may be effective in displaying bottom-line results, whereas process measures follow the efficacy of the steps taken to achieve those results. An important part of this project focused on training evaluation assessments to measure the quality and impact of actions as members experienced them. Tools used for process measures included training evaluations (see Appendix B), theory of change evaluation (see Appendix C), member focus group questions (see Appendix E), staff focus group questions (see Appendix F), and community partner interview questions (see Appendix G). Data was collected throughout the 90-day PDSA cycle, as members moved through various aspects of the program and completed actions or events. These tools were selected to analyze multiple process points across the member's educational experience, to better learn what aspects are most effective.

Participants. Nineteen of the 24 member participants took part in the process measurement assessments. Additionally, two staff completed a focus group session that discussed the processes of chapter development and member empowerment. These staff are the two chapter organizers who are assigned to the Ashe and Watauga County chapters and are also on this project's design team. Two community partners participated in interviews as well to comment on the process and its impact on the community. Both community partners identify as male and are in their 30s. One is a non-profit worker that serves low-income residents of both Ashe and Watauga counties. The other is an elected official who had frequent interactions with Down Home staff and members throughout this 90-day cycle. An eight-member focus group was

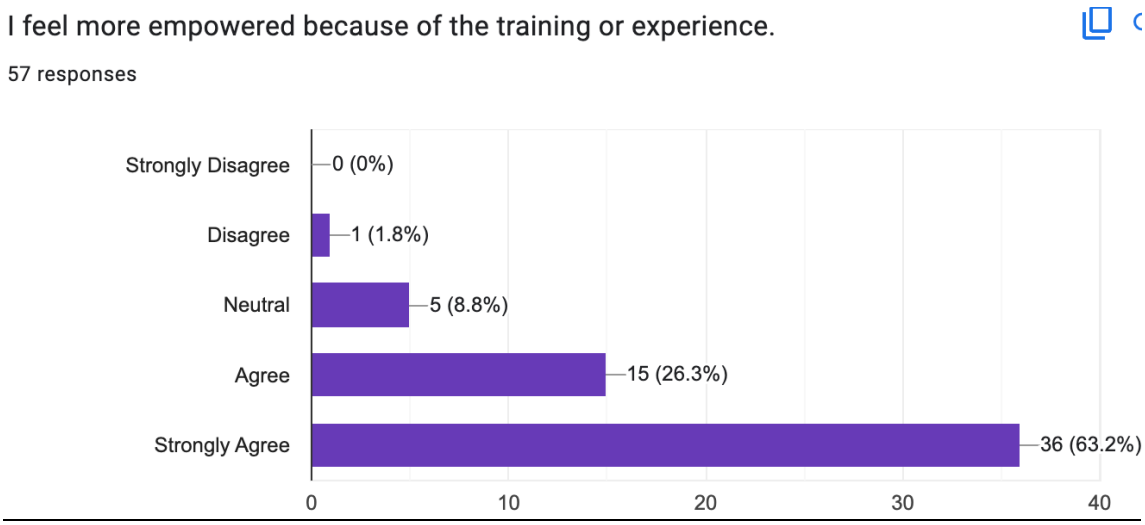
also held to explore procedures and the impact of programming. This group was pulled from the larger 24-person member group and included two males and six females.

Data Analysis. As used with outcome measures above, quantitative analysis consisted of simple frequency plots (Langley et al., 2009), such as histograms. Thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) was used again on the qualitative side to discover themes and major takeaways from participants. In total, 57 training evaluation responses were submitted from members, covering many different training offerings and chapter actions.

Results. Evaluations were extremely positive across the board. Pieces of training and actions, considered as a whole, earned feedback that what is being offered is high quality, relevant, and applicable. Overwhelmingly (93%), members agreed or strongly agreed that they would be able to apply the knowledge they learned from various experiences, while 92% expressed that they had developed skills they would be able to use in Down Home's work. A strong majority, 90%, agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more empowered due to the training or experience they had completed, and 91% felt more confident and educated on the topic. This data is represented in Figure 20 below.

Figure 20

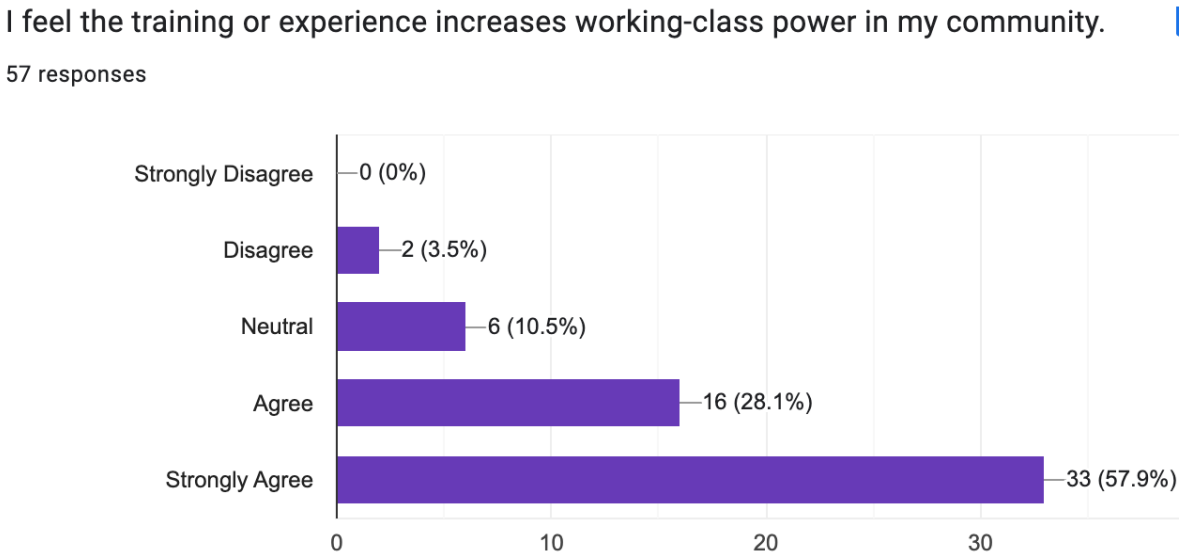
Histogram Showing Member Perceptions of Individual Empowerment from Down Home Training, Experiences, and Actions



A small decrease was seen when asked if the training or experience increased working-class power in their community, as shown in Figure 21. Most, 86%, agreed or strongly agreed that the action or offering had accomplished that goal. While a very high result, this data point stands out as an area of growth for future training for Down Home and mirrors the feedback seen in the pre-initiative assessment around possessing local knowledge but lacking confidence or the skills to build power in the community. Post-cycle assessments showed significant growth in member confidence in community application of knowledge and perceptions of power, but this process evaluation data shows a small dip in scores when members were asked to project impact outside of themselves and to the community. It is easier to effect change on one person than an entire town or county, but designing more offerings, or reevaluating current offerings, that examine and teach community-level change may be worth considering for Down Home. Overall, 95% of the 57 evaluations labeled their respective training or action as “good” or “excellent.”

Figure 21

Histogram Showing Member Perceptions of Community Empowerment from Down Home Training, Experiences, and Actions



Process measure results can infer a few important points. Members shared in the evaluations that training offerings and experiences are well-planned and engaging. Members appreciate what is being offered and are finding value in the various opportunities to learn or take action. Skill and care are being implemented by various Down Home staff that led these trainings, as well as members of the team that organized travel experiences, and county-level organizers support chapter meetings and local actions.

It can be assumed for many participants this is the first exposure to focused education and organized action around building individual and collective working class power. The realization of resources and excitement of involvement in an organization that is focused on rural communities, and the presence of a community of like-minded people taking action in a county could, potentially, be skewing these scores upward. This could be “the honeymoon period” effect, as these participants are new to the organization. While other factors, such as time in the organization and removal of financial or other barriers to access experiences, may be in play, the extremely positive scores earned by Down Home’s process most likely speak to positive facilitation and content offerings.

PDSA Implications. Illustrated in Figures 20 and 21 above, member feedback on the evaluations reinforced the improvement initiative. Members approved of the quality of the training and experiences provided and verified that members feel these are effective tools in their development and toward the goal of developing working-class power in their communities. While there will always be room to improve, the data shows members support the current level of offerings as being positive power-building entities. There were no changes to the planned curriculum or schedule of offerings based on this data.

Balance Measure

Balancing measures allow us to observe whether improvements in one area of the program are causing problems in other areas. They allow systems to be viewed from multiple perspectives, ensuring that any harm or negative consequences are considered in the improvement work (Institute for Healthcare Improvement, n.d.). The tools we have used to measure are qualitative and consist of the member (see Appendix E), staff (see Appendix F), and community partner (see Appendix G) interview questions. These were collected near the end of the second 30-day cycle, as it allowed our participants enough time and perspective to take stock of any potential harmful impacts or considerations they may have observed.

Participants. These participants are the same community partner and member focus group participants discussed above.

Data Analysis. Qualitative data from member focus groups and community partner interviews were assessed using thematic analysis, as outlined above.

Analysis Results. Results varied among the member focus group, and staff and community partner interviews, as shown in Table 3 below. In the member group, volunteers

shared areas where involvement in Down Home may be negatively impacting their lives. Concerns were limited, but some were voiced, and a few patterns and themes surfaced.

Table 3

Balance Measure Thematic Analysis Tally

General Theme	Specific Issue/Outcome Identified	# of Times Issue/Outcome Identified
Personal Impacts	Financial/loss of income	1
	Emotional stress/impact	3
	Running political candidates that may not be ready	1
	Loss of time engaging in ineffective practices ("election canvassing," "phone-banking & text-banking")	2
	Staff overwhelm/being stretched thin/needing support	4
Community Impacts	Endorsements	2
	Messaging/Access to local DH social media	3
	Credibility/Non-Partisan	4
	Staying local/grassroots/member-led	2

Member Impacts. When asked, "Have there been any negative consequences of your involvement with Down Home?" the significant time commitments for heavily involved volunteers were mentioned, which can reduce access to work shifts and income. "It reduces the amount of money I can make," voiced one member. Another stated, "I can't work a second shift and the amount I have been involved has hurt my wallet."

Winning local issue campaigns and creating positive change for working-class residents can be empowering, but members voiced that being closer to politicians and political systems can cause previous levels of distrust and resentment of the government to increase. "Everything that was disheartening about politics is magnified," said one member. "You see it with the local

politicians the same as national. They don't see you as human," they continued. Another member added:

> You make yourself more vulnerable in this work and open yourself up to get hurt. What if we put in all of this work and it doesn't go anywhere? But you have to put yourself out there. I guess it's a natural consequence.

Engaging with systems of oppression can stir many emotions, according to members, as can developing relationships with peers in the community during sometimes difficult and intense campaigns. "You have to deal with your emotions and trauma," voiced one member from Watauga, "at a level and frequency that you may not have had to in the past."

Conversations with community partners yielded different perspectives. When considering building working-class power from an external view, outside of a member and staff paradigm, it is important to consider how those with power, specifically elected officials, and those doing similar anti-poverty work with other organizations, feel about Down Home's efforts. If members are reporting increased levels of empowerment, but external opinions are negative, overall progress for working-class people in the community may be negated, or even reduced.

Timing of Endorsements. When Down Home launched chapters in Ashe and Watauga in the summer of '22, they immediately moved to endorse candidates in that year's municipal and statewide elections. The elected official that has been involved with Down Home since its inception in the High Country felt this was a mistake, and that the chapter had turned its back on many residents in the community that they could have helped. He commented:

> Endorsements are a bad idea. They'll probably be better in coming years, but you can't come right into a county and say I'm going to endorse x, y, and z. When you endorse,

> you alienate a certain base. When I look at an endorsement, and everyone is a Democrat…we already have that. It's the democratic party and the republican party.

Rethinking the endorsement process to mitigate negative consequences toward the chapter's work was a theme that surfaced during the staff focus group as well. "Endorsements are a way to build power," said one of the Down Home organizers. They stated:

> The timing is super important, however. I don't think we need to do it when there are only 10 to 15 of us (members). The importance of power-building and growing our capacity and skills is to have that foundation to stand on, and then endorse so it means more. The base needs to come first.

Impact of Messaging. Down Home's local work is also supported statewide by a communications team that promotes the organization's messaging and efforts through social and print media. Some of that media, however, does not help bring more working people together, according to the elected official. "If they go see (Down Home's) social media, they can get so in your face about things, and it alienates people. It's telling people how they should think, instead of allowing people to form their own opinions," he said.

Finally, he felt some of the member interactions in their campaign to influence the county government to implement policies to support low-income renters were negative and, perhaps, focused on promoting a progressive agenda rather than accomplishing change for working people. "It would be better to get more non-partisan. It's coming off as partisan in a very hard way. It's alienating people that want to get involved. The approach sometimes has ruffled some feathers," he said. "We're not sitting down and fixing things. We are too worried about fighting each other and accomplishing agendas to reach any middle ground," he said.

The other community partner interview was with a local non-profit staffer who has been active in similar working-class and poverty-centered organizing for years in the High Country. His comments were much more complimentary and supportive of the work the members and chapters had engaged in, with no real carryover of themes or patterns from the elected official's comments. His only criticism referenced an episode where other housing advocates took issue with Down Home's "taking credit" for work other organizations had accomplished, prompting a "leeriness" to work together on future projects.

Based on a limited sample size of community partners, some outside of Down Home views their presence as positive in various ways, specifically in its demonstrated ability to empower and engage many who had previously opted out of civic engagement and community action. Additionally, an entity that can publicly speak out in defense of working-class issues and hold the government accountable was voiced as a positive development. Moving forward, this feedback shows the chapters may want to reconsider how communications and messaging may be interpreted as overly partisan and alienating to many while making sure not to claim wins or launch campaigns without checking with allied organizations doing similar work. Careful messaging can protect relationships and support coalition-building among those fighting for systemic change.

Interestingly, association with Down Home may prevent rural, working-class power in some cases. In Watauga, our organizer seeks to promote the candidacy of a 2024 unaffiliated county commissioner candidate by *not* including Down Home branding or association with the candidate's literature or canvassing interactions, even though the candidate is an active and involved member leader. He and I both believe the association with Down Home among rural unaffiliated voters in the county will hurt his campaign, as so many closely associate Down

Home with Democrats, which is not an attractive brand in that district. In this district, with a Republican incumbent, unaffiliated voters outnumber Republicans and Democrats. A pure, independent, working-class canvassing campaign will be effective, but Down Home has so overwhelmingly endorsed Democrats, and our statewide communications and messaging are so often negative and attack-oriented toward Republicans, that we fear a backlash from this large block of unaffiliateds if they sense a connection to Democrats.

PDSA Implications. Balance measure results allowed for a deeper understanding of what may be needed in future improvement initiatives. The member focus group touched on many emotional aspects related to the initiative. Down Home's current training offerings are educational and skills-focused but do not target emotional aspects that can sometimes arise when engaged in community organizing work. The short duration of the cycle prevented us from integrating staff and member emotional support, but trauma-informed resources will be included in future recommendations on future cycles. Including emotional awareness in our "Down Home 101" training for those new to Down Home will be a natural addition to future work.

Education and awareness around the careful selection of issue campaigns for chapters exist but could be expanded and deepened. As chapters canvass their community to learn about which issues may be most pressing to address, thorough preparation should include winnable campaigns, can lead to measurable community change, can develop participant skills, and can build an organization's base, even if it is a relatively small campaign. Winning a stop sign or speed bump campaign to protect children in the neighborhood may not be as newsworthy or have the broad impact that a county-wide living wage campaign may have, but groups must start with achieving what they can, build power, skills, and numbers, then scale up to larger targets and campaigns. Ushering inexperienced, unskilled members into large, unrealistic campaigns may

lead to harsh defeats and even more disengagement from work to change systems that may be aligned against them. This addresses the concern voiced about becoming emotionally attached to campaign work that may not achieve victory. Motivated members may choose to opt out of future work if defeated, perhaps repeatedly, in ill-advised campaigns. Revised campaign selection training did not fit into the calendar of this 90-day cycle but will be a recommendation for future work with the Down Home chapters.

Feedback detailed above, and from staff interviews, expressed concern about endorsing candidates as a young chapter. The decision for members to decide if they want to endorse candidates, and/or which ones, only occurs once a year. In Ashe and Watauga, both chapters endorsed candidates soon after their formation in the summer of ’22. Interestingly, during the data collection process for this project, both chapters opted out of candidate endorsements for the fall ’23 municipal elections. Instead, members adopted a non-partisan approach, canvassing and educating voters about all candidates in local elections and changes in voting access. That action was not a result of the feedback gathered during this research, but it will be interesting to follow the impact, if any, of the chapters choosing not to take sides. No changes in this area were implemented during this 90-day PDSA cycle, but thoughts for endorsements are included below in recommendations for practitioners.

Implications

In analyzing the findings of the four practical measures together, a few patterns and themes emerge. First, members are responding positively to the training and experiences being offered as being effective vehicles for their development as leaders and agents of change in their communities. These results were seen across evaluation survey data and qualitative discussions. Down Home’s arrival in these counties seemed to provide an opportunity for those waiting and

wanting to become more involved with their communities with the structure, venue, and community to develop that desire. The data implies that Down Home continues to offer its portfolio of experiences and training, while continually seeking ways to improve and refine those structures.

Secondly, future PDSA cycles will need to adjust to account for increased levels of member capacity, experience, and skill. Moving experienced members into increasingly higher levels of leadership will need to meet the organization's goals of gradually transferring ownership of chapters over to members and ensuring movement sustainability. During this project, some members reported frustration having completed training but having to wait to practice implementation, while others stumbled after being asked to take on leadership aspects, such as designing agendas and facilitating meetings, without having effective training on those skills. A draft of a "membership to leadership" curriculum or set of training has been designed and is being considered for implementation in our Ashe chapter in spring 2024 to support this work. As members complete initial, introductory training and become with Down Home's theory of change, consistently attend meetings and actions, organizers and member leaders will consider gradually moving those members into leadership roles. Currently, a clear pathway and recommended progression of additional training or steps to leadership have not been defined. Mapping a ladder of engagement that carefully moves established members from participants to positions of leadership would support future chapter work and sustainability.

Thirdly, member focus group data support more member involvement in strategy and planning decisions currently being made by the state organization's director team. This suggestion is directly connected to member focus group feedback, where members voiced frustrations in feeling that Down Home initiatives and strategies were handed down or

announced with little, or no, member input during the formation stages. Installing a member advisory committee, as discussed above, will continue to be an implication needed to increase and sustain member buy-in and engagement in future work. Engaging members earlier, and regularly, in strategy and planning discussions should increase member investment in statewide work, develop member leadership skills, ensure members feel represented and have a voice at each level of the organization, and help directors stay connected to the realities of chapter capacity and the socioeconomics of the rural counties where Down Home exists. Installing a statewide member advisory committee, with at least one representative from each chapter, would be a tangible step toward reducing the "top-down" delivery of Down Home initiatives and campaigns that members have voiced as being problematic. Discussions and decisions, using the member advisory committee model, can be viewed as more collaborative. In my short time working for Down Home, our organizational language has transitioned from "member-led" to "member-informed," as we realized decisions were being made by staff and not our member base. While I appreciate the honesty and realities that inform that change, I believe the organization and movement will only be stronger, and encourage more member participation and investment, with higher levels of member engagement and inclusion.

Fourth, equity issues are addressed in these findings across several areas. Access to opportunities and training are well-addressed in that Down Home is intentional about removing barriers to access such as transportation, childcare, and financial considerations. Meetings and trainings begin, by practice, by voicing norms and expectations around inclusion and respect. Setting community norms at each gathering informs or reminds all attendees that Down Home allows space for all beliefs, sexual and gender orientation, political orientation, racial and socio-economic status, and other considerations. Chapter membership dues are on a sliding scale and

members self-report income. Many members pay $1 per month. These are positive steps and practices that, as a baseline, exist in our program to provide a starting place for equitable and inclusive participation.

However, our chapters can do more to be more equitable for non-English speakers. We do not yet provide accessible environments for the many Spanish speakers in the counties we serve, even though we have organized and been present in some of these communities. While we have begun relationships with Spanish speakers and organized in communities already, especially in Watauga, without a fluent Spanish speaker to maintain relationships and develop actions and leadership, sustained engagement is difficult. Re-inserting my positionality as a white man with elementary-level Spanish-speaking abilities, I have felt frustrated and limited in my organizing in these communities, which are rich with opportunities to create positive change.

Concrete suggestions are to further develop bilingual abilities among current staff, prioritize or mandate Spanish among new hires, or recruit bilingual community members to be a liaison and/or translators. Organizing groups specific to a particular community, and not fully engaged with the larger county chapter, is another option. For example, we could support a separate Spanish-speaking group that meets and acts in a community center in their neighborhood, led by a Spanish-speaking facilitator and that uses translators, instead of asking them to drive and assimilate into our normal chapter groups. We have built relationships with non-profits that directly serve those communities and sat in their meetings and actions as well, which is another strategy.

We also have not yet succeeded in achieving racial diversity among our membership in either county. The racial demographics in both counties are overwhelmingly white, and chapters have benefitted from multi-racial membership and community participation, but more needs to

be done to increase equity and inclusion on this front. Outside of outreach to Spanish-speaking communities, suggestions to reach more racial minorities are to target Appalachian State students and the few neighborhoods in our counties that have higher concentrations of racial diversity. The chapters have generally steered away from college students and toward year-round, long-term county residents, though the benefits of racial diversity and perspective in the chapters' work outweigh the drawbacks of students that may not be from working-class backgrounds or in the area consistently. Like the strategies listed in the paragraph above, collaborating with groups and associations that focus on racial diversity and seeking opportunities to canvass, attend events, and advocate for issues supporting diverse residents and communities are natural strategies we have discussed.

Building sustainability into leadership development and increased civic agency efforts among working-class Appalachians is critical. These efforts are designed to be cyclical, repeating, and witness a gradual transfer of staff-to-member support and mentorship to member-to-member. As members develop higher levels of confidence, experience, education, and skill, they become more empowered to act in the role the professional organizer played when they first came to Down Home. In short, the goal of organizers is to "work themselves out of a job," so that working-class empowerment happens even if Down Home were to unexpectedly leave or shift their focus to beginning work in another county or area.

Fifth, there are significant structural, staff, and financial supports that are a unique strength and asset to Down Home's work, which must be recognized. Luckily, Down Home's current financial resources seem to ensure long-term sustainability and the ability to continue scaling up empowerment efforts. However, it can be assumed much of Down Home's funding is tied to political outcomes and landscape, so it is important not to take Down Home's present

resources for granted and plan for member ownership of day-to-day chapter work in the event of an unforeseen change in support. It is important to consider the opportunities members and staff enjoyed during the months of this project were made financially possible by the organization. Many of the gains in member leadership and civic agency were supported by Down Home's generous financial support. For example, members who were available to attend the People's Action Conference in Washington, D.C., over three days and nights, or Down Home's State Convention in Raleigh, which spanned three days and two nights, had all hotel and registration expenses covered by the organization. There were meal per diems and food provided at the events, and childcare, and transportation support was included.

This is a significant consideration and factor, as many grassroots organizations may not have the opportunities we have enjoyed supporting our educational and leadership development initiatives. Each chapter has a field office, and full-time staff organizer, and meals and childcare are provided for chapter meetings and most chapter events, such as canvassing or other outreach efforts. Much of the opportunity for growth and development for Down Home members is made easier by the financial standing of the organization. Neither county-level or regional staff, nor members, spend time fundraising, grant writing, or soliciting entities for funding.

Often, funding and support come with expectations or suggestions toward how work is structured or designed, or perhaps what outcomes should be achieved. As much as able, practitioners in community organizing should prioritize member opinion and listen to member and community needs to shape programming and response efforts. Training staff to adopt, and effectively implement, trauma-informed interactions and perspectives is highly recommended to balance the courage and strength required to challenge and change systems with the anxiety and emotional fatigue that these efforts can produce.

Finally, data from this project encourages organizations to think carefully about how and when to endorse political candidates or encourage those new to political systems to enter races. Moving toward one or both areas too quickly could isolate and deter potential members and make the development of working-class power in targeted communities more difficult to achieve. For example, encouraging a passionate member to run for office without exposure to local government through experience on a board or commission or participation in an issue campaign that engaged government and community stakeholders, may lead to an unsuccessful campaign or unsuccessful term, if elected. Down Home works hard to achieve working-class representation in government, though intention and care are recommended to protect the potential candidates and the work of the movement. Foundationally, practitioners should hold the belief that those closest to the problem are also the ones closest to the solution.

Balancing measure feedback from members discussed above is important to consider for staff and practitioners engaged in this work. For example, revisions to existing policies with a trauma-informed lens may be appropriate to ensure staff and member leaders are trained and intentional in chapter and member management. Requiring trauma-informed care training for all staff and member leaders may go far in preventing staff-to-member or member-to-member issues and deepen the understanding of the impacts of systemic poverty and marginalization in our work.

Directions for Future Research

First, research targeting how smaller-scale organizations develop comparable levels of member growth and self-reported levels of empowerment, but without Down Home's resources, would be valuable to many in community organizing. It can be assumed many organizations are doing this work on small, or non-existent, budgets and toolboxes of resources. Finding and

studying how members become involved, and how they develop as leaders and in aspects of civic agency, would provide a valuable set of data to compare to this initiative.

Second, Down Home's work is centered on a progressive agenda designed to advance progressive values and policies. While technically non-partisan, the work closely aligns with the work of the state's Democratic party. The organization does not apologize for that work, and it shapes its education, actions, and efforts. While Down Home uses the terms "member-led" and, more commonly, "member-informed," a constant collaboration between state director leadership, based primarily in progressive, urban North Carolina cities, and chapters and members, based primarily in rural, often more conservative, counties exist. Using a comparable project design as this to follow a fully member-led, authentically non-partisan rural group, responsive only to each other and absent of a pre-determined political perspective or state leadership group that operates elsewhere, would be valuable.

Third, four of Ashe's members have stated they plan to run for county commissioner in 2024. Two of Watauga's members have stated they plan to run for office, one for county commissioner and one for soil and water commissioner. All six of the members have never run for public office before. That level of civic agency, skill development, and leadership development is a strong endorsement of Down Home's impact on their lives, but the research that followed these candidates throughout their campaigns and tracking Down Home's support mechanisms and structures for the candidates would provide valuable data for other organizations seeking to identify, run, and support similar campaigns. It may also provide information on how, if at all, failed candidacies potentially decrease levels of empowerment, civic agency, or working-class power in these communities.

Lastly, analyzing the empowerment capabilities of one or more of the many rural mutual aid entities that have surfaced in Appalachia to combat poverty could provide valuable data toward this end. Groups of volunteers currently come together to fill service gaps across Appalachia and provide free stores, free health clinics, firewood, food donations, brake light clinics, and other gaps in services that mountain residents may face. These are often not directly political and lack funding. Studying aspects of empowerment and civic agency in those organizations and environments may force applications of power and community engagement, as they are not directly tied to working-class political representation or policy change. These groups choose instead to operate outside of current systems and design their supports.

Limitations of the Improvement Initiative

This improvement initiative was limited by sample size in that it focused on the work of only two counties in rural North Carolina. The number of participants was fairly limited as well, so generalizations toward other groups and populations should be measured. In some ways, Down Home's well-resourced model, structure, and staff support could also be viewed as a limitation when one seeks to apply lessons learned here to other organizations and rural community organizing efforts. It can be assumed that many grassroots rural organizing organizations do not possess the financial, staffing, and other resources that Down Home currently does. Practitioners and administrators from less-resourced groups may experience different outcomes doing similar work without the supportive foundation of similar resources.

However, there is data here to support which initiatives can develop self-assessed levels of leadership, civic agency, and empowerment among rural residents, should an organization have access to similar programming, structures, and opportunities that have been implemented in this cycle. We have learned members appreciate the skills gained and the camaraderie of the state

and national conventions. We learned mobilizing around a local issue and addressing local elected officials and systems was empowering for members, and planning and facilitating chapter meetings are an effective vehicle for promoting leadership.

Conclusion

During this 90-day cycle, Ashe and Watauga's Down Home members earned significant accomplishments toward increasing working-class access and influence in government and directing resources to economic and housing justice. For example, members canvassed their communities and lobbied their county governments to add support for low-income renters dealing with unsafe housing due to unresponsive landlords. This community organizing work eventually led to a large budget addendum in one of the counties to support emergency repairs in low-income rentals, keeping working families from potentially being displaced from housing. Another example of successful rural organizing is when members successfully lobbied to move the public comment portion of one county's commission meetings from the end of meetings, where members of the public would only be heard after long agendas had been completed and important votes were taken, to the beginning. This change allows working-class residents of the county to make comments before votes are taken, and to leave the meetings if needed or more convenient.

Additionally, many members developed leadership and feelings of empowerment engaging their communities through canvassing, participating in, or leading chapter or working group meetings, or attending educational trainings or workshops. Finally, some members traveled to Washington, D.C., and/or Raleigh to attend multi-day conferences, full of workshops, actions, and other member participants representing rural counties doing similar work. While impressive that the members have accomplished so much, much is left to be done. The data

collected during this project verified that the organization is on the right track with what it offers members, though opportunities for improvement in member inclusion, achieving more equity across language and race, and further developing standardization of a membership onboarding and leadership curriculum remain.

The work is daunting. The quote below is from a community partner interview facilitated for this project. It is from a non-profit staff member who serves the same impoverished, under-resourced community that our members do. A long-time rural, Appalachian community organizer, they celebrated the work that is happening through the Down Home chapters:

> Organizing in rural communities is hard as hell. They want it to be. They want us to be discouraged and defeated and tired. When people quit, they'll say 'See…told you we could outlast them.' The people are exhausted. The wool is often pulled over their eyes. The wool is the crisis of their daily lives. People want to see short-term change, and typically their response to their oppression is to either be apathetic and self-medicate or grind it out and be the best capitalist and worker they can be. It takes a long time for a tree to root and bear fruit. The more time it spends rooting, the more fruitful it can be later on. I just want to encourage you all. Keep at it. You guys got this. It's hard. You have our support. People who understand what you're doing appreciate it.

This project sought to verify that change is occurring, and empowerment is happening. While the national landscape and statistics around income inequality and political disengagement can be daunting and overwhelming, it can only be changed one relationship, one training, one meeting, one canvass conversation at a time. While there is much room to improve, some people who previously felt disconnected and disempowered from ownership of change in their communities feel more empowered to do so.

The quote below is from a member, sent following an action where members publicly addressed their county commissioners to advocate for housing support for their low-income neighbors:

> Hey. Just wanted to say thank you for coming out for support tonight. That was incredible. And, personally, that was the first time I've stood on that street corner and felt something other than alone and powerless. I spent so many hours and days of my life in those courtrooms or probation offices on either side of that administration building. But I went into that admin building for the first time tonight and came out to that same street corner but surrounded by my Down Home family and feeling powerful for the first time. Thanks for being a part of that.

References

Appalachian Regional Commission. (n.d.). *About the Appalachian region*. https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/

Bartels, L. (2016). Elections in America. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *667*(1), 36–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216662035

Bates, R. (1981). *Markets and states in tropical Africa: The political basis of agricultural policies.* University of California Press.

Berlin, I. (1969). *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford University Press.

Binkhorst, F., Handelzalts, A., Poortman, C., & van Joolingen, W. (2015). Understanding teacher design teams: A mixed methods approach to developing a descriptive framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *51*, 213-224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.07.006

Bowen National Research. (2022, January 18). *High country housing needs assessment*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pq-sZJoMxJbbSZflBUUa2ujfB0I64JbB/view

Brady, D. (2009). *Rich democracies, poor people: How politics explain poverty*. Oxford University Press.

Bradley, D., Huber, E., Moller, S., Nielsen, F., & Stephens, J. (2003). Distribution and redistribution in postindustrial democracies. *World Politics, 55*(2), 193–228. https://doi.org/10/1353/wp.2003.0009

Broockman, D., & Kalla, J. (2016). Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing. *Science. 352*(6282), 220-224. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad9713

Brown, T., Mettler, S., & Puzzi, S. (2021). When rural and urban become “Us” versus “Them”:

How a growing divide is reshaping American politics. *The Forum*. *19*(3), 365-393. https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2021-2029

Boyte, H. (2005). Reframing Democracy: Governance, civic agency, and politics. *Public Administration Review. 65*(5), 536-546. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2005.00481.x

Cahill, K., & Oheda, C. (2021). Health and voting in rural America. *Frontiers in Political Science*. *3*(590324). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.590324

Carlton-Laney, I., Burwell, N. Y., & White, C. (2013). Rural community practice: Organizing, planning and development. In Weil, M., Reisch, M., & Ohmer, M., Eds., *The handbook of community practice* (pp. 461–478). Sage.

Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*. *10*(6), 807-815. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019

Cesar Chavez Foundation. (n.d.). *About Cesar Chavez.* https://chavezfoundation.org/about-cesar-chavez/#1517518248378-09bcffea-0084

Cesar Chavez Foundation. (n.d.). *History*. https://chavezfoundation.org/history/

Citizens United *v.* Federal Electoral Commission. 558 U.S. 310 (2010). https://www.oyez.org/cases/2008/08-205

Cramer, K. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.

Cole, W. (2018). Poor and powerless: Economic and political inequality in cross-national perspective, 1981-2011. *International Sociology*. *33*(3), 357-385. https://doi-org.proxy195.nclive.org/10.1177/0268580918760430

Dacanay, E. (1993). Community organizing: A conceptual design to resources management capability building. In F.P. Fellizar, Jr., (Ed.), *Policy issues related to the organizational aspects of community-based resource management in the Philippines*. Environment and Resource Management Project.

Data USA. (n.d.). *Ashe County, NC*. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/ashe-county-nc#economy

Data USA. (n.d.). *Watauga County, NC*. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/watauga-county-nc#economy

Dela Costa-Ymson, G. (1993). Organizing for community-based resource management: Action research group for the Social Development Foundation. In F.P. Fellizar, Jr., (Ed.), *Policy issues related to the organizational aspects of community-based resource management in the Philippines*. Environment & Resource Management Project.

Down Home North Carolina. (2017). *No one's ever asked me before: Conversations with North Carolina's rural communities.* https://downhomenc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/dhnc-2018-report-FINAL.pdf

Environmental Protection Agency. (2021, September 2). *EPA report shows disproportionate impacts of climate change on socially vulnerable populations in the United States.* https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-report-shows-disproportionate-impacts-climate-change-socially-vulnerable

Evans, S., & Boyte, H. (1992). *Free spaces: The sources of democratic change in America.* University of Chicago Press.

Federal Election Commission. (n.d.). *Campaign Finance Statistics*. https://www.fec.gov/campaign-finance-data/campaign-finance-statistics/

Franko, W., Kelly, N., & Witko, C. (2014, January 15). *How roadblocks to voting make income*

inequality worse. Scholars Strategy Network. https://scholars.org/contribution/how-roadblocks-voting-make-income-inequality

Gabelein, M. (2016, December 27). *Counties paying commissioners widely varying salaries.* Carolina Public Press. https://carolinapublicpress.org/26325/counties-paying-commissioners-salaries/

Gaventa, J. (2021). Linking the prepositions: using power analysis to inform strategies for social action. *Journal of Political Power*. *14*(1), 109-130. https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1878409

Gethin, A., Martinez-Toledano, C., & Piketty, T. (2022). Brahmin left versus merchant right: Changing political cleavages in 21 Western democracies, 1948-2020. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, (*137*)1, 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab036

Gilens, M. (2012). *Affluence and influence: Economic inequality and political power in America*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s1jn

Gimpel, L., Lee, F., & Thorpe, R. (2011). The wellsprings of candidate emergence: Geographic origins of statewide candidacies in the United States. *Political Behavior, (30)*1, 25-37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2010.12.005

Gimpel, J., Lovin, N., Moy, B., & Reeves, A. (2020). The urban-rural gulf in American political behavior. *Political Behavior.* (*42*), 1343–1368. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09601-w

Hall, E. (1999). If there's one thing you can tell them, it's that you're free. In D. Billings, G. Norman, & K. Ledford (Eds.), *Back talk from Appalachia: Confronting stereotypes (pp.* 191-199). University Press of Kentucky.

Hartley, T., van den Bergh, J., & Kallis, G. (2020). Policies for equality under low or no growth:

A model inspired by Piketty. *Review of Political Economy*, (*32*)2, 243-258. https://doi.org/10.1080/09538259.2020.1769293

Hicks, A. (1999) *Social democracy and welfare capitalism: A century of income security politics*. Cornell University Press.

Hollnsteiner, M.R. (1979). Mobilizing the rural poor through community organization. *Philippine Studies*. (*27*), 387-416.

Hometown Action. (n.d.). *About*. https://www.hometownaction.org/about

Horowitz, J.M., Igielnik, R., & Kochhar, R. (2020, January 9). *Trends in wealth and income inequality.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/

Huber, E., & Stephens, J. (2012). *Democracy and the left: Social policy and inequality in Latin America*. University of Chicago Press.

Institute for Healthcare Improvement. (n.d.). *How to improve: Model for improvement.* www.ihi.org/resources/Pages/HowtoImprove/ScienceofImprovementEstablishingMeasures.aspx

John Jay College (n.d.). *Evidence generation - Process and outcome measures*. https://johnjayrec.nyc/evgenmeasures/

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. (n.d.). *History*. https://kftc.org/#history

Korpi, W. (1983). *The democratic class struggle*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Korten, D. (1980). Community organization and rural development: A learning process approach. *Public Administration Review*. *40*(5), 480-511. https://doi.org/10.2307/3110204

Langley, G., Ronald, D., Nolan, K., Nolan T., Norman, C., & Provost, L. (2009). *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance*. Jossey-Bass.

Laverack, G. (2001). An identification and interpretation of the organizational aspects of community empowerment. *Community Development Journal*. *36*(2). 134-145. https://10.1093/cdj/36.2.134

Lilford, R. J., Brown, C. A., & Nicholl, J. (2007). Use of process measures to monitor the quality of clinical practice. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, *335*(7621), 648-650. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39317.641296.AD

Lomotey, K. (2020). *The disquisition at Western Carolina University: The capstone experience in the university's EdD program*. [Unpublished manuscript]. Western Carolina University.

Manalili, A. (1990). *Community organizing for people's empowerment*. Kapatiran-Kaunlaran Foundation.

Marx, K. (1974). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. International Publishers.

McGranahan, D. (2010). *Challenges for rural America in the 21st century.* Pennsylvania State University Press.

Mertens, D. (2012). Transformative mixed methods: Addressing inequities. *American Behavioral Scientist, 56*(6), 802-813. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211433797

Mills, C. (2001). The power elite. In D. Grusky (Ed.), *Social stratification, class, race, and gender in sociological perspective (2nd ed., pp. 282-292).* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429306419

Morgan, D. (1996). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.

National Park Service. (n.d.). *The battle of Blair Mountain.* https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-battle-of-blair-mountain.htm

The New Conversation Institute. (n.d.). *What is deep canvassing?* www.deepcanvass.org

North Carolina State Board of Elections. (n.d.). *Election results*. https://www.ncsbe.gov/results-data/election-results

National Conference of State Legislatures. (2021, September 21). *2021 legislator compensation*. https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/2021-legislator-compensation.aspx

New York City Department of Education. (n.d.). *Measuring your progress: The basics of phase 4.* Continuous learning. https://nycdoeishandbook.org/chapter-4/

North Carolina Division of Social Services. (2007, June). *How rural is North Carolina?* Practice notes. https://practicenotes.org/vol12_no3/NC.htm

Payne, B., Brown-Iannuzzi, J., & Hannay, J. (2017). Economic inequality increases risk taking. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, (*114*)18, 4643-4648. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1616453114

Pennsylvania Stands Up. (n.d.). *About.* https://pastandsup.org/about/

Piketty, T. (2020). *Capital and ideology*. Harvard University Press.

Pierskalla, J. (2015). The politics of urban bias: Rural threats and the dual dilemma of political survival. *Studies in Comparative International Development*. (*51*)3, 286-307. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-015-9194-2

Rachleff, P. (1995). Review: [Untitled]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire Urbaine*, *23*(2), 60–62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43559808

Rosset, J., Giger, N., & Bernauer, J. (2013). More money, fewer problems? Cross-level effects of

economic deprivation on political representation. *West European Politics*. (*36*)4, 817-835. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2013.783353

Saldana, J. (2013). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage Publications.

Santiago, A.M., Gutierrez, L.M., & Soska, T.M. (2016). Remembering the other 46: Community organizing, planning, and development in rural areas. *Journal of Community Practice*, *24*(3), 231-234. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2016.1224252

Schuster, S. (2021, June 21). *2020 U.S. House races cost $86.8 million, a record*. Michigan campaign finance network. https://mcfn.org/article/2020-u-s-house-races-cost-86-8-million-a-record

Solt, F. (2008). Economic inequality and democratic political engagement. *American Journal of Political Science*. (*52*)1, 48-60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25193796

Stephens, M. (2016). Challenges for social-change organizing in rural areas. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. *75*(3), 721-761. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12154

Surie, G. & Hazy, J. (2006). Generative leadership: Nurturing innovation in complex systems. *E:CO*. *8*(4), 13-26.

van Holm, E. J. (2019). Unequal cities, unequal participation: The effect of income inequality on civic engagement. *The American Review of Public Administration*, *49*(2), 135–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074018791217

Verba, S., & Nie, N. (1972). *Participation in America: Political democracy and social equality.* Harper and Row.

United States Census Bureau. (2017, August 9). *One in five Americans live in rural areas*. https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html

United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Quick facts: Watauga County, North Carolina.*

https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/wataugacountynorthcarolina

United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Quick facts: Ashe County, North Carolina.* https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ashecountynorthcarolina

United States Department of Agriculture. (2019, October 23). *What is rural?* https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural/

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *North Carolina.* https://www.rural.gov/community-networks/nc

World Bank. (2017). *Women's empowerment in rural community.* https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/917631485554140658/pdf/Womens-empowerment-in-rural-community-driven-development-projects.pdf

Woodard, R.S. (2006). *The Appalachian Power Company along the New River: The defeat of the Blue Ridge project in historical perspective* [Master's thesis, Virginia Tech University].

Zweig, M. (2004). *What's Class Got to Do with It? American society in the twenty-first century.* ILR Books.

Appendix A

Pre-Intervention Survey

Name:
Date:

Please indicate your impressions of the items listed below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I know how government works in my local community.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
2. I have leadership skills.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
3. I am confident in my abilities to make things happen in my community.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
4. I have been active in my community politically or with other community organizations/groups.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
5. I am a consistent voter.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
6. I am educated around local candidates and issues when I vote.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
7. Working class members of my community have power and are a part of local government decisions.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
8. I believe my vote and voice matters.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
9. If we elect more working people, things will get better for working people.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
10. I know how to identify problems in my community and organize efforts to address them.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Is there anything else you would like us to know about you?

Appendix B

Training Evaluation Form

Name:
Date:
Training:

Please indicate your impressions of the items listed below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The training met my expectations.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
2. I will be able to apply the knowledge learned.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
3. I feel I have developed skills I can use in Down Home's work.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
4. I feel more empowered because of the training.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
5. I feel more confident and educated on this topic because of the training.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
6. The trainer was knowledgeable.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
7. I feel the training increases working-class power in my community.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
8. Class participation and interaction were encouraged.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
9. Adequate time was provided for questions and discussion.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

10. How do you rate the training overall?

Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

What aspects of the training could be improved?

Other comments? (Use the back if necessary)

Appendix C

Model/Theory of Change Evaluation Form

Name:
Date:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am more educated around local issues, more skilled, and more engaged in my community because of Down Home.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
2. Down Home trainings and workshops increase skills that can lead to increased power.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
3. Members setting chapter meeting agendas and driving chapter work helps build working class power.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
4. Running local issue campaigns is an effective tool to build working class power in my community.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
5. Endorsing candidates and leveraging those relationships is effective in building working class power in my community.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
6. I believe by NOT endorsing candidates, Down Home would have more access to all local candidates and would better increase working class power in my community.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
7. Participating in larger state-wide campaigns (Medicaid expansion, public school funding, etc.) is a positive way to build working class power.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
8. Attention around working class issues and power have improved since Down Home arrived in my area.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
9. Down Home's model is effective in building power.	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Please list any comments or additional information you would like to share on the back.

Appendix D

DOWN HOME
NORTH CAROLINA

Training Request Form

Name:

Email:

Date:

Type of Training Requested:

Which organization is offering the training?

Requested/Expected Start Date:

Describe why you are requesting the training or how you feel it will help your development in Down Home's work:

Appendix E

Member Group Questions:

How has Down Home impacted change among you as an individual, if any?

How has Down Home impacted community change, if at all?

What organizing practices or Down Home activities have been most effective in building working-class power locally?

What practices have been least effective?

How have your attitudes toward politics and/or systems changed, if at all, through your experience with Down Home?

Do you feel more inspired and/or equipped to affect change through your work with Down Home? If so, how?

Are there other ways your life has changed because of your affiliation with Down Home?

Have there been any negative consequences of your involvement with DH?

In your opinion, what needs to happen to build working-class power in your community that DH does NOT do?

Do you feel the candidate endorsement process increases or decreases access to local leaders and politicians?

What are other comments, issues, suggestions, or feedback you have about your experience with Down Home?

Appendix F

Staff Group Questions:

Do you feel the DH model and theory of change are effective in developing member leadership?

Do you feel the local chapter is an effective resource for building working-class power?

What are the best outcomes you have seen so far from members?

How do you think member outcomes could be improved?

Have you seen working-class power grow in your community because of the DH chapter? If so, how?

How do you think working-class power in your community could be improved?

What is the most effective part of DH's model and theory of change, in your opinion?

If you could change or add one element to your work to improve working-class power, what would you choose?

Do you feel the candidate endorsement process increases or decreases access to local leaders and politicians?

What are other comments, issues, suggestions, or feedback you have about your experience with Down Home?

Appendix G

Community Partner Group Questions:

In what ways has Down Home positively impacted the community, if at all?

What organizing practices or Down Home activities have been most effective in building working-class power locally?

What practices have been least effective?

What is the general opinion of the community around Down Home's presence and activities?

How do you think working-class power in your community could be improved?

What are examples of local initiatives that have increased working-class power in the past?

Do you feel the candidate endorsement process increases or decreases access to local leaders and politicians?

What are other comments, issues, suggestions, or feedback you have about your experience with Down Home?