



**Testimony to the
Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy
“Rural Water: Modernizing our Community Water Systems.”**

**Committee on Agriculture
United States Senate**

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Northeast & US Caribbean affiliate of**

Rural Community Assistance Partnership Incorporated

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**Rural Community
Assistance Partnership**

Introduction & About RCAP

Thank you, Chairman Welch, Ranking Member Tuberville, and members of the subcommittee for this opportunity to discuss the importance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development (USDA-RD) suite of programs and services in fostering rural economic development and prosperity. USDA-RD is the only federal agency dedicated solely to rural America and plays a key role in improving access to capital while working alongside trusted partners to ensure rural areas remain great places to live and thrive. I also want to thank the committee for their work on writing the next Farm Bill.

My name is Jennifer Day, and I am the Director of Development with RCAP Solutions, the Northeast and US Caribbean RCAP. Prior to this position I was the Director of Community and Environmental Resources responsible for grants and contract compliance for a team of 30 Technical Assistance Provider serving rural communities in New England, New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) is a national network of non-profit partners working to provide technical assistance (TA), training, and resources to rural and Tribal communities in every state, U.S. territory and on Tribal lands and in the Colonias. Through our network, more than 350 technical assistance providers build capacity that leads to sustainable and resilient infrastructure and strengthens rural economies. Our approach is grounded in long-term, trusted relationships with thousands of rural, Tribal, and Colonias communities across the country.

For 50 years, the RCAP network has partnered with multiple federal agencies including USDA-RD to bridge the gap between federal programs and the communities they serve. RCAP assists rural communities with funding applications and every phase of the project planning and development process, as well as providing training and technical assistance. We help communities understand how to properly manage and operate their infrastructure in a fiscally sustainable manner and ensure that federal borrowers meet the terms of their loans.

Last year, RCAP served more than 3.5 million rural and Tribal residents in more than 1,650 of the smallest, most distressed communities. The average population of these communities was 1,520, with a Median Household Income (MHI) of less than two-thirds the national MHI. We served almost 300,000 individuals from Indigenous communities. In addition, we served more than 1 million people of color.

USDA-RD water, wastewater, and solid waste grant and loan programs and their associated technical assistance programs directly benefit communities with safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation services. Additionally, these programs are important to the health and safety of rural Americans and the economic vitality of their communities. RCAP supports robust reauthorizations of the Water and Environmental Programs (WEP) in the next Farm Bill, programs whose impact can be demonstrated in every U.S. state and territory – including in Vermont, where flooding last week and the major disaster declaration highlights the

importance of the long-term managerial and financial work that is RCAP's specialty, including enabling small systems to prepare for, and recover from, emergencies.

In Vermont, WEP funding allowed RCAP Solutions to work directly with 25 communities in the past few years on a range of critical water and wastewater needs. The systems we work with are small and typically low-income. In Vermont, those 25 communities have an average population of 578 and an MHI of \$46,731. Water and wastewater systems in communities of this size are typically managed by volunteer board members with little or no experience in the technicalities of taking chlorine samples, infrastructure planning, or hiring an operator.

With WEP funding, we provide training, both online and in-person, to system managers and operators alike. We help board members who were previously proud of not having raised rates in a decade, see the light and communicate the need to have sustainable rates that cover their true operating expenses. These expenses include a reserve account to cover future upgrades and, in the process of explaining the necessary rate adjustment to customers, helps gain public support. We help communities hire engineers, train volunteers on their roles and responsibilities as board members, and in places like Pownal and Craftsbury Vermont help the public to understand the next steps once Per- and Polyfluorinated Substances (PFAS) has been detected in the water supply. We work with water and wastewater system managers to document system failures, communicate the importance of system upgrades, and provide public education to ensure that all stakeholders can make informed decisions when it comes time to vote on bond measures. The need to plan for system upgrades and comply with regulations does not discriminate based on system size, and technical assistance providers like RCAP help to fill the capacity gap.

In Bristol, Vermont, we're helping the town address high-strength wastewater that has limited the potential for adding connections to the system. In Alburgh, we're working as a liaison between the Village Trustees and the primacy agency to communicate the ramifications of new permit conditions on the community, in the process helping the village to access state planning loans.

We're helping to protect USDA-RD investments after major projects completed for fire districts in Coventry, East Berkshire, and Burke resulted in a near complete turnover of board members, a common occurrence with small systems where volunteers get "burned out". In each of these communities, RCAP Solutions is helping build managerial capacity by assisting the new boards with budget projections, adjustments in water rates and policies, public outreach efforts, and leveraging additional state and federal funding opportunities. TA providers are often the glue holding things together during a transition of system management, serving as trusted advisors and often, helping to find and train replacement board members.

The RCAP Technical Assistance Providers (TAPs) do this work across the country in partnership with local USDA-RD offices. Project referrals can come from local USDA-RD offices in each state. RCAP meets frequently with these offices and state regulatory agencies to discuss priority systems and topical issues for technical assistance and training. During in-person and online

training events for boards on sustainable utility management and application assistance, RCAP and the USDA-RD staff talk about the services that we can offer at no charge to the community as they are supported by the federal technical assistance grants. While there are professional Rural Development staff members working to assist these communities, their capacity can be limited so partnerships with technical assistance providers in the field magnifies the impact of USDA-RD's field staff. This field structure is especially helpful to communities and utilities that lack the human and financial capacity to access and administer available funding. RCAP works in partnership with USDA-RD to directly assist underserved rural communities including access to the Tribal and Colonias funding set-asides.

Local USDA-RD offices often connect communities to RCAP because of our ability to demonstrate an accurate median household income for a water or wastewater service area. Criteria for receiving grants through WEP and other federal funding programs are often based on census data and affordability criteria, measures that fail to represent non-traditional systems and manufactured housing communities. For the Shattuck Hill Mobile Home Park in Newport, Vermont, failing septic systems required immediate action to protect public health and the environment. RCAP Solutions performed an income survey to demonstrate that the MHI for the community was just \$20,544, allowing USDA to provide a grant for 75% of the \$484,000 cost to upgrade the wastewater system and address regulatory compliance issues. Following completion of the income survey and funding award, RCAP Solutions helped the community comply with the award terms and conditions, including helping to complete the required Emergency Response Plan and Vulnerability Assessment. Similar stories can be told about the Sunset Lake Cooperative in Hinesburg, the town of Randolph, and the East Thetford Water Company. It can be told for thousands of systems across the country. RCAP's funding application assistance and other related tasks helped communities in the Northeast and U.S. Caribbean receive 57 funding awards in FY22 alone, resulting in over \$88M in grants and low-interest loans.

The RCAP network is the sum of six regional partners across the U.S. that collectively cover every state and U.S. territory, including Tribal lands and Colonias:

- Communities Unlimited (CU) – The Southern RCAP
 - Serving Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas.
- Great Lakes Community Action Partnership (GLCAP) – The Great Lakes RCAP
 - Serving Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.
- Midwest Assistance Program (MAP) – The Midwest RCAP
 - Serving Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming.
- Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) – The Western RCAP
 - Serving Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Washington.
- RCAP Solutions (RSOL) – The Northeastern and Caribbean RCAP

- Serving all six New England States, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands
- Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project (SERCAP) – The Southeastern RCAP
 - Serving Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

In line with RCAP’s mission of even further expanding its impact in rural communities in the years to come, laid out in the sections below are some of RCAP’s key recommendations for the 2023 Farm Bill. Also included are some relevant case study examples of RCAP’s work in these areas.

Rural Utilities Service Water and Environmental Programs (WEP)

RCAP Water and Environmental Programs Farm Bill Recommendations:

- Reauthorize the **Water & Waste Disposal Technical Assistance & Training Grant Program** to the maximum amount (Section 306(a)(14)(A) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act 7 U.S.C. 1921 et seq.), set-aside no less than 10% of funding for expanded technical assistance and capacity building. RCAP also requests additional language for emergency response technical assistance to meet the growing need in assisting rural communities to plan for and recover and rebuild after natural disasters.
- Reauthorize the **Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program** (Section 306 of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act).
- Reauthorize the **SEARCH -Special Evaluation Assistance for Rural Communities and Households Program**, include additional matching flexibility under the program to include in-kind or waivers in cases of extreme need.
- Reauthorize the **Water & Waste Disposal Predevelopment Planning Grant Program**, include additional matching flexibility under the program to include in-kind or waivers in cases of extreme need.
- Reauthorize the **Solid Waste Management Grant Program** (Section 310B of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act) at \$20 million a year over five years.

RCAP has been providing on-the-ground technical assistance and training to small and rural water and waste systems for 50 years in all 50 states and the U.S. territories. Through our partnership with USDA-RD, RCAP and our regions in one year alone helped rural and Tribal communities from across the country leverage approximately \$400 million in infrastructure funding from a variety of federal, state, local, and private funding sources. Through these programs we also conducted 140 training workshops, serving more than 1,300 systems and reaching about 2,500 participants.

Water & Waste Technical Assistance

RCAP has been a leader in the regionalization space, especially when it comes to sustainable solutions for small, rural, and Tribal communities. In addition to intensive technical assistance, and training work as a neutral third-party facilitator helping communities navigate what is often a complicated undertaking, RCAP developed a process to help guide both TA providers and communities through the ins and outs of regional collaboration. RCAP also developed two helpful research products: one outlining ten lessons learned from communities across the country who have participated in activities across the regionalization spectrum; and another, outlining local, state, and federal policy recommendations that would help incentivize and ease the pathway to sustainable and resilient regional solutions. Regionalization is not a silver bullet, but we believe it should always be on the table for consideration, especially as the water workforce dwindles, regulations become more stringent and disasters more intense and frequent — no one must go it alone.

Across the United States, we see communities facing threats to their drinking water from several harmful contaminants, such as lead and PFAS. Rural communities have historically been overlooked by federal investments when it comes to addressing water challenges, especially the nearly 23 million households who rely exclusively on groundwater delivered through private wells for their drinking water. In Massachusetts RCAP Solutions partnered with the Health Foundation of Central MA on a 3-year study of 500 wells across the state and found that at time of testing one third of the wells had contaminants that exceeded state standards for drinking water. We then worked with legislative partners to propose statewide legislation to protect the public health of well owners. As other states move to enact similar legislation, the need for the USDA-RD Rural Decentralized Water Systems Grant Program will increase, and continued access to these funds for low- and moderate-income homeowners will protect the health of their households, giving them equitable access to safe drinking water.

Beyond those on small water systems and private wells, we also know that many communities are hauling water by hand as a practice in Tribal areas and the Colonias. Lack of access to water and sanitation, a result of both historical and geographical factors, is most prevalent in Alaska, the Dakotas, and northern New England, but there are additional pockets of this issue throughout the U.S.

A report from DigDeep and the US Water Alliance shows that gradual improvements are being made in this space, but that the rate of progress is declining. The population without complete plumbing in the United States was reduced from 1.6 million people in 2000 to 1.4 million in 2014. For comparison, those lacking complete plumbing dropped from 27 percent in 1950 to 5.9 percent in 1970. This data suggests that communities making up the remaining access gap face particularly entrenched challenges. ([Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States by Dig Deep and US Water Alliance](#))

One solution to help drive positive public health benefits for millions of rural Americans is The Healthy H2O Act, introduced by Senator Baldwin and Senator Collins. This bipartisan legislation would improve quality of life in the communities we serve by having USDA-RD provide direct assistance to households and licensed childcare centers on private wells in low-income, rural communities to test drinking water for contaminants and fund filtration technology for proper remediation.

Water and Environment Program Loans including Predevelopment

I am a committee member on the Franklin County MA Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) working group facilitated by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments. In 2022 we reviewed a study of Franklin County water and wastewater systems. The report assessed \$300 million total infrastructure upgrade needs at 12 public wastewater and 16 public water districts. It would cost another \$52 million to provide 3 wastewater and 3 drinking water systems for the identified unsewered or private well only communities. This \$350 million need in one of the most rural counties in Massachusetts, with only 24 towns and one city, is more than 25% of the \$1,334 million dollars in water/wastewater funding available for the entire state. As more needs are identified and as construction costs climb, the funding gap will continue to widen, even with the significant influx of funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law over the next few years.

In most cases, it takes multiple years of predevelopment planning and multiple funders to successfully implement each project. Big cities have planners and engineers on staff or have access to predevelopment funding to hire consultants to help design projects and estimate costs. The small systems have volunteer boards, part time clerks, and operators that rely on federally funded predevelopment grants and technical assistance, like the RCAP network provides, to assist with multiple tasks – including but not limited to community engagement, application assistance, and affordability qualifications. Continued support, increased funding and state office oversight of the SEARCH and Water and Waste Predevelopment grant funds will support more successful applications to WEP. This should also continue to increase funding in the next five years to leverage the predevelopment and infrastructure dollars spent by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to make sure that no small and/or rural systems are left behind.

In addition to planning, technical assistance after a large construction project is completed, helps to make sure the community adapts to their new reality. Examples include increasing water rates and the public outreach necessary to support it; adjusting the capital improvement plan and budget to include appropriate contributions to reserve funds for replacement of new equipment; and helping to develop financial monitoring procedures to meet the conditions of the USDA-RD construction loan.

Solid Waste

RCAP has been providing solid waste management services to low-income small, rural, and Tribal communities for decades. Since 2014, with funding from the USDA-RD, RCAP has assisted more than 160 rural communities (26 of which were Tribal), serving more than 1 million rural residents in 30 states and the Caribbean territories. Of those served, 28% were low-income and 45% were people of color. RCAP has more than 20 highly experienced staff who provide solid waste management technical assistance and support across the nation.

Puerto Rico has twenty-nine (29) landfills, and many of them are unable to address critical regulatory compliance issues around the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. The EPA is focused on closing those open dumps which pose the greatest threat to the environment and to people's health. Without new, compliant environmental systems in place, there will be more pressure on the remaining facilities - many of them already limited in capacity. RCAP Solutions' work in Puerto Rico supports efforts to limit illegal dumping, find sustainable solutions, and increase recycling rates in Puerto Rico, which are commonly cited in the 7-12% range and significantly lower than the nationwide rate of 32% reported by EPA.

Waste generation on the island exceeds landfill capacity, and is expected to, for years to come. Solid waste and debris from increasingly frequent hurricanes exacerbates the issue. Waste diversion and recycling presents challenges for most municipalities, largely due to the cost of exporting materials, the lack of infrastructure, and the lack of diversion management facilities. This situation increases the illegal dumping of debris, appliances, and construction and demolition materials. Illegal dumping, difficult to monitor and control in rural areas, creates both public health and environmental problems. The education of communities, municipal staff, and stakeholders is a priority. Many communities are also transitioning from municipal management of the landfill facilities to private companies who are overseeing the compliance and operations. Time will tell if this approach is working, but municipalities must continue to participate in planning for the future of waste solutions in Puerto Rico.

Lajitas is a small sector in Barrio Guayabal, Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico. The community has suffered due to littering and illegal dumping, creating environmental and public health hazards. Basketball courts and surrounding areas were used for dumping and the areas alongside the roads were severely impacted by littering and improper management of solid waste. The community is near the Guayabal Water Reservoir, shorelines of which have fallen victim to waste from the Jacaguas river. The illegal dumping and litter build up have been overwhelming.

The community called RCAP Solutions seeking help and we were able to facilitate meetings and suggested the formation of a community organization. RCAP Solutions worked to empower community members to implement coordinated actions with the municipality. The municipality eventually adopted a ticket system for the collection of debris and bulky waste. Insufficient waste collection by a private hauler was also addressed, an issue RCAP Solutions helped to document and present to the municipality.

In the Paso Hondo sector of Lajitas, waste collection had never been offered by the municipality due to narrow roads and steep terrain. RCAP Solutions and Fundación Wepa! invited the

municipal administrator to a site visit, and an agreement was reached in which the municipality would direct the private hauler to implement curbside collection using a small waste compactor truck. To ensure the effectiveness of the new collection program, they promised to give each household a 55-gallon drum to be used as a trash can. For one resident of the Paso Hondo neighborhood, *“I’ve been living in this community for more than 45 years and [this] is the first time I have seen a garbage truck coming for our waste. I used to carry the garbage to the collection area all my life and the area was full of flies and bad odors. I am really happy that this is happening.”*

Rural Housing Service Community Facilities Programs

RCAP Community Facilities Programs Farm Bill Recommendations:

- Reauthorize the **Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Program** (Section 306(a)(26) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act), set-aside no less than 10% of funding for national multi-state technical assistance and capacity building, and to create additional flexibility under the program by removing caps on funding.
- Reauthorize the **Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program** (Sec. 306(a)(19) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act).
- Authorize a **Community Facilities Connect Program** to provide five-year direct community facilities technical assistance in each state and territory, to help underserved rural areas access the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program, plus other funding sources.

One of RCAP’s most recent new initiatives was through a Community Facilities (CF) Technical Assistance Cooperative Agreement with USDA-RD. Community Facilities Technical Assistance consists of enriching resources and leveraging funding to improve, expand, or build necessary community facilities, such as healthcare facilities, city halls, fire stations, schools, etc. Over a two-year pilot period, RCAP actively worked with 42 communities in 22 states, reaching eligible rural areas with an average population of 4,461 people and a median household income significantly below the national median. With \$400,000 in funding through this cooperative agreement, RCAP was able to leverage an additional \$51 million in funding for communities from USDA-RD and other sources for these projects.

Under the pilot program, RCAP Solutions was able to assist the town of Shoreham, Vermont with evaluating and prioritizing projects to utilize ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funding. We acted as facilitator through a public input process, integrating new project ideas with the town’s existing Capital Improvement Plan, and identified and ranked criteria for selection (such as the reach of impact to residents or availability of funds from other sources). This process allowed the town to implement an independent and transparent process to allocate ARPA funds to projects that are practical, achievable, and self-sustainable—and at the same time helped the Selectboard consider other funding sources for important community projects.

Additionally, RCAP was able to provide disaster recovery technical assistance under the Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Program (CF-TAT), which was authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill. Over the course of the project, RCAP provided technical assistance to 29 federally-declared disaster impacted communities in five states and one territory. RCAP had the ability to scale to more states and impacted communities but was limited due to funding constraints under the program. The eligible rural communities served had an average population of 2,389 people and a median household income around half of the national median. RCAP unlocked and leveraged ~\$1 million from USDA-RD and other funding sources for six communities with direct disaster funding application assistance through TA.

RCAP's expertise, on-the-ground networks, and long-standing relationships make us a valuable resource for rural and Tribal communities trying to access USDA-RD Community Facility financing by providing technical assistance and support at every step of the process, from planning to implementation and leveraged funding. RCAP works with communities to integrate disaster resilience and mitigation strategies into their projects. RCAP also targets rural low-income communities and persistent poverty communities, frequently addressing common barriers to accessing and utilizing federal funds.

Currently, RCAP as a National network does not have any CF-TAT funding to meet the on-the-ground rural community need in this issue area. Program changes through the next Farm Bill and increased dedicated funding would directly allow RCAP and other qualified organizations to provide much needed technical assistance in multiple states and to model CF technical assistance programs after other successful programs at USDA-RD.

Rural Investment Initiative

RCAP Rural Investment Initiative Farm Bill Recommendations:

- Authorize a **Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Program** with dedicated resources in the Rural Development Title to support locally driven capacity building and financing for small towns and rural communities across all missions areas of USDA-RD.

Lastly, RCAP supports the authorization of a Rural Investment Initiative (RII), which, if enacted would be a locally-driven, flexible capacity building and financing program to support all mission areas of Rural Development: rural utilities, rural housing, and rural business. Many USDA-RD programs that help unlock private investment are difficult for rural towns and organizations to access. Local governments and non-profit organizations often lack the staff and technical expertise to apply for grants. It is also exceptionally challenging for often part-time local government officials and their limited staff to track and advocate for their community's fair share of funds from states or apply for federal grants directly. The RII would match rural communities and their needs to a cohort of local, regional, and national technical assistance providers, making it easier for communities to access right-sized technical assistance and ensuring better access to all USDA-RD programs, financing, and services. The RII would be

designed to provide financial capital directly to communities and strengthen human capital to unlock new investment, including public private partnerships, that would improve the capacity, economic health, and overall well-being of local communities.

RCAP is in support of the Administration's Rural Partners Network (RPN) concept but believes Congress should further codify and shape RPN to make lasting policy changes in the next Farm Bill. The RII could accomplish this, as much can and should be done to help with low USDA staffing levels and agency technical upgrades. Strong USDA-RD authorizations with dedicated resources through the next Farm Bill will ensure the agency's ability to deliver timely services, staffing, and financing to rural America while making it easier for communities to apply and access funding.

Closing

I would like to thank the committee for their work to reauthorize critical USDA-RD programs in the next Farm Bill. RCAP looks forward to working with each of you to ensure USDA-RD and rural communities have the tools they need to promote improved quality of life for rural America. On a national level, RCAP is on the steering committee of two advocacy coalitions working together on policy solutions geared towards lasting change in rural — The Rural Network and the Reimagining Rural Assistance Network. Both coalitions stand ready to work with you on a strong Rural Development Title that works for all rural places and people.

RCAP works with communities and partners across the country to advocate for and generate economic opportunities for rural areas. The services provided through these programs deliver critical assistance in the small and disadvantaged communities where it is most needed. I thank the committee for inviting me to testify today, and I look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure rural people and places have the resources they need to be successful.



Who Is RCAP?

RCAP is a non-profit national network of **six** regional organizations that provide technical assistance and training to leaders in rural communities throughout the United States

We help communities develop, operate, and maintain viable water and wastewater systems; maintain compliance with federal/state regulations; **protect public health** and the environment; and build local leadership capacity

RCAP serves more than **2,503** unique rural communities every year. RCAP employs more than **300** engineers, operators, accountants, former mayors and other experts who are out in the field assisting rural leaders

For over **45 years**, RCAP has worked with USDA and EPA to improve the quality of life in rural America

Contact Maranda Saling with RCAP for more information:
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2023 Farm Bill Priorities

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) supports the enactment of a robust and comprehensive Rural Development Title in the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. RCAP calls on Congress and the Administration to emphasize rural development programs and strategies that will create opportunities for all rural Americans including underserved places. RCAP supports several key priorities in the Farm Bill that will boost rural economies, create jobs, and improve the quality of life in rural America:

Rural Utilities Service: Water and Environmental Programs

- Reauthorize the **Water & Waste Disposal Technical Assistance & Training Grant Program** to the maximum amount (Section 306(a)(14)(A) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act 7 U.S.C. 1921 et seq.), set-aside no less than **10%** of funding for expanded technical assistance and capacity building, and include additional language for separate emergency response technical assistance activities under emergency disaster supplementals from Congress.
- Reauthorize the **Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program** (Section 306 of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act).
- Reauthorize the **Solid Waste Management Grant Program** (Section 310B of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act) at **\$10 million** a year over five years, create additional flexibility under the program by removing caps on funding.
- Reauthorize the **Rural Decentralized Water Systems Grant Program** (Section 306E of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act), include additional program eligibility and flexibility by raising the income eligibility requirements from **60%** of statewide median household income up to **100%** in cases of extreme need.
- Reauthorize the **Revolving Funds for Financing Water and Wastewater Projects Program** (Section 306 of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act).
- Reauthorize the **SEARCH - Special Evaluation Assistance for Rural Communities and Households Program**, include additional matching flexibility under the program to include in-kind or waivers in cases of extreme need.
- Reauthorize the **Water & Waste Disposal Predevelopment Planning Grant Program**, include additional matching flexibility under the program to include in-kind or waivers in cases of extreme need.

Flexible Technical Assistance Services and Coordination Across USDA-Rural Development Mission Areas

- Authorize a flexible program for expanded capacity building and flexibility across all USDA-Rural Development mission areas, including adequate resources to implement modern plans, community broadband access, create jobs, and leverage new infrastructure development to increase the resiliency of rural communities.

Rural Housing Service: Community Facilities Programs

- Reauthorize the **Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Program** (Section 306(a)(26) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act), set-aside no less than **10%** of funding for expanded technical assistance and capacity building and create additional flexibility under the program by removing caps on funding.
- Reauthorize the **Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program** (Sec. 306(a)(19) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act).





USDA Community Facilities Cooperative Agreement

RCAP REQUESTS the continuation of funding for its Community Facilities Technical Assistance Cooperative Agreement with USDA given the success and community impact of the pilot program, which ended on September 30, 2022.

RCAP currently is seeing continuing demand for our services and for flexible funding under a national community facilities technical assistance co-op program supported by USDA. The pilot funding allowed RCAP to work with towns of populations less than 5,000 and provided communities with much needed local capacity to plan for and leverage funding for the construction or improvements of crucial community facilities such as health clinics, community centers, fire stations, libraries, and other public facilities.

42 in **22**
Projects States 

4,461
Average Population 

\$43,099
Average Median Household Income 

\$400,000

2-Year Cooperative Agreement



\$51 Million*

Funding from USDA & Other Sources

RCAP IS SEEKING \$600,000 over a 2-year period to continue this program with a national scope. This program has shown itself to be incredibly useful to our technical assistance providers and the rural communities they serve. It has been a resource that fills in the gaps other existing Technical Assistance and Training programs cannot.

It funds the time, resources, and capacity necessary to leverage and implement new funding for crucial community facilities in towns with America's lowest populations and lowest incomes.

With an unprecedented amount of funding coming to communities through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), this program will help ensure that rural and disadvantaged communities have the necessary capacity to access and implement this funding in the areas that need it most.



In one project alone, RCAC (the western RCAP) staff leveraged a total of \$1,980,000 in USDA loan funds, a \$100,000 CF Economic Impact Grant, and a \$13,000 State CF Grant for a total of \$2,093,000 in funds. This helped the **Foundation for Little Colorado Revitalization (FfLCR)**, a non-profit organization located in Springerville, Arizona with their community facility for their "Local Food System Regionalization" project.



Rural Community Assistance Partnership

USDA Community Facilities Disaster Relief Technical Assistance and Training

RCAP REQUESTS the continuation of funding for its Community Facilities Disaster Relief Technical Assistance and Training program with USDA given the success and community impact of the pilot program, which ended on September 30, 2022.

RCAP currently is seeing continuing demand for our services and for flexible funding under a national community facilities technical assistance program in disaster relief areas. The previous funding allowed RCAP to work with towns of populations less than 5,000 and provided communities with much needed capacity to plan for and leverage funding for the repairs, replacement, and construction of essential community facilities like city halls, fire stations, police stations, and health centers that were affected by natural disasters such as hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, and forest fires. These disasters are not slowing down as we have seen with recent hurricanes Fiona and Ian as well as the continuous forest fires in the Western U.S so the need will continue to be there and RCAP stands ready to assist.

29

Projects
(5 states + 1 territory)



2,389

Average Population



\$35,806

Average Median Household Income



\$250,000

2-Year Cooperative Agreement



\$526,760

Funding from USDA & Other Funders

RCAP IS SEEKING \$600,000 over a 2-year period to continue to provide community facilities-related disaster relief in communities that need it most due to a lack of capacity to access typical federal aid dollars due to low population, low income and limited resources. Under this current program we were only able to fund 3 of our regional partners due to the \$250,000 funding cap so with the the requested funding increase we would be able to fund up to 6 total regional partners covering the entire U.S. and the territories including Puerto Rico which needs additional disaster recovery technical assistance right now. We could only serve communities that had disasters within the years 2018-2019. This left communities experiencing new disasters outside of eligibility for this program. If we changed the requirements to serve communities that experienced federally declared disasters within the last 5 years from the project start date, we would also be able to respond to newer disasters while continuing to serve communities that need help with long term recovery from previous disasters.



The disaster relief program was managed by the Maryland and Delaware State RD office despite being a national program. The Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Program was created in the 2014 Farm Bill (Section 6006) with the intention of the program being a national program that is managed and coordinated by the National USDA-RD Office. Congress also reaffirmed this intention in the 2018 Farm Bill found [here](#) on page 664. It would be incredibly beneficial to see this program housed for the purpose of coordination between national service providers and multiple states impacted by a disaster.



Rural Community Assistance Partnership

RCAP Solid Waste Management Programming

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) is a network of seven nonprofit organizations working together to provide training, technical assistance, and capacity building to small, rural and Tribal communities in the areas of water, wastewater, solid waste and community and economic development.

RCAP has been providing solid waste management services to low-income small, rural and Tribal communities since 2004. Since 2014, with funding from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), RCAP has assisted more than 160 rural communities and counties (26 of which were Tribal), serving more than 1 million rural residents in 30 states and the US Caribbean. Of those served, 28% were low income and 45% were people of color. RCAP has over 350 technical assistance providers located throughout the 50 states and the US Territories who live and work in the rural and Tribal communities they serve, including more than 20 highly experienced staff who provide solid waste management support.

RCAP’s wide variety of solid waste services are targeted to meet the specific needs of rural communities with an end goal of improved solid waste management and planning, while reducing potential pollution of water resources. Through this work, RCAP seeks to improve public and environmental health as well as the quality of life for rural communities. The goal of our Solid Waste staff is to reduce the use of disposable items, teach reuse of products within the communities they serve, and promote recycling and composting best practices which protect natural resources and valuable landfill space.

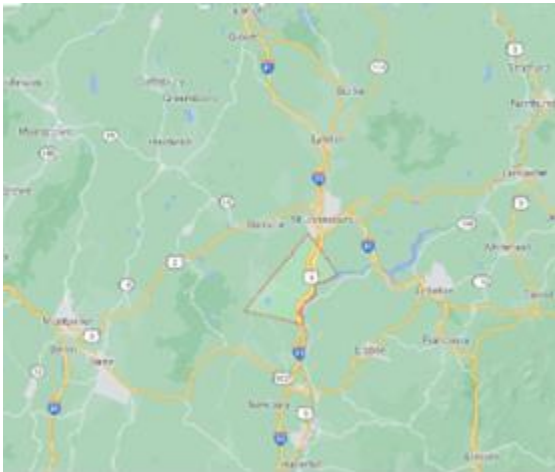
RCAP’s approach to hands on training and in-depth technical assistance is to concentrate on local capacity building so that the communities served have the tools and resources to be successful and sustainable for years to come.



Some of the categories of typical services provided include but are not limited to:

- Community and school waste stream reduction through education and program development on re-use and recycling;
- Safety and operations, including the handling and management of Household Hazardous Waste;
- Development of school and community composting programs, including vermicomposting, to reduce food waste entering the waste stream;
- Training and technical assistance surrounding emerging contaminants including but not limited to PFAS and pharmaceuticals;
- Illegal dumping site identification, mapping, prevention, and alleviation strategies;
- Solid waste best management practices, budgeting and rate analyses, and funds leveraging for equipment needs and facility upgrades; and
- Introduce communities to the concept of Integrated Solid Waste Management Systems and help develop the infrastructure to implement these best practices.

Barnet Fire District Avoids Water Violation



Location: Barnet, VT
Population: 1,663 (205 connections)
Household Income: \$36,089
Region: RCAP Solutions, Inc.
Funder: USDA RD Technitrain, 19-20
Author & Date: Mark Johnson, 2018
Services:

- Increased Managerial Capacity
- Financial Sustainability

BACKGROUND

Despite recent source water and treatment plant improvements made by Barnet Fire District #2 (BFD2), maintaining regulatory compliance is a real challenge - as it is for many rural communities. The water system, which serves about 205 customers, had been under a boil-water advisory since 2004 due to long-term source water deficiencies. In 2014 members of the community expressed a desire to acquire the system from its private owner, and RCAP Solutions facilitated several steps in this process. The goal of

the purchase was to give the community more control over the fate of its water system. As a publicly owned water system, BFD2 would be able to access federal funding sources for long overdue improvements.

THE CHALLENGE

Barnet Fire District #2 lacks adequate technical, managerial, and financial capacity to address the many challenges facing small water systems. Despite recent source water improvements, the system has struggled to maintain compliance with applicable Safe Drinking Water Act regulations, address distribution system deficiencies, or to build up reserves for future system improvements.

THE APPROACH & SOLUTION

In February of 2017, BFD2 completed a major source water improvement project. This should have marked an important milestone for the community, as they were able to lift the decades old boil water advisory following the improvements and installation of a new disinfection process. It was not the end of their infrastructure concerns, however; frequent distribution system failures were crippling the system's operating budget. To address issues in the distribution system, RCAP Solutions provided an action plan to the board, which included the recommendation to apply for a planning grant to prioritize water main replacement – including the replacement of a critical, aging water main crossing a river in the village. In addition to securing a planning grant, however, the board would need to gain the support and trust of the community for any new projects. For a system the size of BFD2, taking on more debt – which requires community support - will be a likely scenario considering their lack of reserves and mounting infrastructure concerns. For the system's board, it was more important than ever that they build on the achievements of the source water improvement project. Unfortunately, operational issues with the new chlorination system, coupled with the lack of local capacity for diagnosing and resolving those issues, contributed to a violation in late 2017 for failing to maintain adequate microbial treatment. After becoming aware of the treatment violation and continued problems with the chlorination system, RCAP Solutions responded after-hours to the treatment plant and spent the next day successfully re-establishing a chlorine residual in the system.

THE IMPACT

This action helped the system to avoid a second violation, which is critical; every violation or misstep for the board reduces the likelihood that they will be able to gain the community trust necessary for future improvements. In the weeks that followed, RCAP Solutions provided practical guidance to the system's operator and treatment plant engineer on how to improve the treatment system. RCAP Solutions has also helped community members to identify common issues with their plant equipment and to provide the system's board members with the knowledge they need to maintain compliance with state and federal regulations.

Overall, RCAP Solutions provided the board with a prioritized action plan, attended numerous board meetings to provide guidance on system operation, stressed the importance of community engagement, helped the system avoid additional treatment violations, and educated community members on treatment requirements to maintain compliance.

Revival from the Brink of Receivership



Location: Fire District #1, East Berkshire, VT
Population: 184 (63 connections)
Household Income: \$56,964
Funder: USDA Technitrain 23
Author & Date: John Kiernan, 2023

Services:

- Budgeting and Rate Assistance
- Funding Applications
- Project Development - New Source
- Engineering Procurement

BACKGROUND

Approximately 50,000 Vermonters are served by Fire Districts, which are special independent units of government, with the same authority and responsibility as an incorporated town or village, primarily serving small water systems. Many Fire Districts are struggling throughout Vermont with significant technical, managerial, and financial challenges. The East Berkshire Fire District No. 1 is no exception; USDA considers the District a “troubled asset”, at risk of defaulting on their debts and falling into receivership without technical assistance.

THE CHALLENGE

A recent construction project involved a significant capital investment in distribution system infrastructure without addressing the lack of water source capacity. As a result, customer rates increased from \$300 to over \$1,000 per year, and the system's spring sources still periodically dry up requiring conservation and boil water notices, leaving the customers frustrated. In addition, the Prudential Committee had full turnover of all Board members since the completion of construction, with no continuity and leaving the new Board overwhelmed with significant financial issues, primarily a significant increase in unanticipated operating costs due to the supply shortages, coupled with an increasing number of delinquent customers refusing to pay their water bills.

THE APPROACH & SOLUTION

RCAP assisted the District by developing a prioritized list of actions for the Board to focus on, with a breakdown that included an opinion of the costs, anticipated duration/schedules, and potential funding sources for each action. RCAP is now supporting the District with implementation – by assisting with 1) selection of an engineering consultant to resolve the technical issues, 2) preparation of applications for approximately \$700,000 in grant funds from various sources to help resolve issues without incurring additional debt, and 3) development of a financial plan to reconcile their overdue accounts payable to vendors and funding agencies. This help has given the Board some traction to visualize a transition to a system that will build reserves for emergencies and ongoing maintenance.

“RCAP has helped us get back on track, providing guidance with many aspects of water system planning and management. We view RCAP as a trusted advisor.”

- **Andy Hoadley, Prudential Committee Chair**

THE IMPACT

Since RCAP engaged with the community, the District has communicated with the funding agencies and have made progress in making past due debt payments. With

help from the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, efforts have begun to identify potential well sites for a supplemental source. In conversations with customers and the system's operator, two major leaks were found and corrected to help reduce or alleviate the need for bulk water hauling this summer. The system still has a long road ahead, but RCAP has provided the tools and helped the Board and interested parties see there is a path to sustainability for the system.

A Timely Solution to a Public Health Threat



Location: East Thetford, VT
Population: 250
Household Income: \$50,000
Region: RCAP Solutions, Inc.
Funder: USDA Technitrain 19-20
Author & Date: Mark Johnson, 2020
Services:

- Facilities Development,
- Financial Management

BACKGROUND

East Thetford Water Company provides drinking water to a village in the Connecticut River Valley of rural Vermont. In 2019, the village experienced an emergency water shortage after their primary well failed. RCAP worked with the volunteer water board to ensure they obtained financing for a replacement well.

THE CHALLENGE

East Thetford Water Company found themselves without a reliable source of water when their primary well suddenly stopped producing enough water to serve their 42 connections. Businesses and homes in the village were severely impacted.

THE APPROACH & SOLUTION

The system operator temporarily gained control of the situation by activating an emergency spring and repairing a leak in the system. With the help of the state's primacy agency, an engineer, and RCAP, system managers were able to navigate a boil water order, identify potential long-term solutions, and document income in the community to ensure that a more permanent solution could be found. Due to the small size of the village, documenting income proved to be a significant hurdle; regulations require a response rate of 90% to achieve a valid survey. As with any critical infrastructure effort, community outreach can make the difference between a successful project and a frustrating roadblock. RCAP's efforts to educate the community about the project ensured successful completion of the income survey to secure critical funding.

THE IMPACT

Less than a year after running dry, residents and business owners in the village are relieved to have a new bedrock well to rely on. RCAP helped the system achieve a timely solution to a problem that threatened public health. Without an income survey, the Median Household Income (MHI) for ETWC would have used the 2017 American Census for the entire town (~\$70k). With the survey, we showed the service area of ETWC to be \$50k. This is significant because it moves ETWC into the disadvantaged category for the State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) loan program (with the survey, now ETWC comes in under the statewide MHI of about \$57k). ETWC should now be eligible for up to 50% forgiveness of the anticipated loan value, 30-year financing instead of 20-year, and a reduction in fees.

Finding Wastewater Solutions in a Vermont Village



Location: Grafton, VT
Population: 650
Median Household Income: \$51,667
Region: RCAP Solutions, Inc.
Funder: USDA Technitrain 20-21
Author & Date: Mark Johnson, 2022
Services: WW Facilities
Development

BACKGROUND

Grafton is one of 170 villages without a public water or wastewater system in the state of Vermont. As septic systems and drinking water wells continue to approach - or go beyond - their life expectancies, the village is facing the reality that there is little space to add new septic systems or to drill new wells. This limitation impacts economic growth within the village, creates a public health issue and threatens the environment.

THE CHALLENGE

RCAP became involved with Grafton through Vermont's Village Wastewater Solutions Initiative, an interagency committee consisting of regulators, funders and nonprofits that have come together to address challenges facing villages without sewers. A Wastewater Study Commission consisting of volunteers had been formed in Grafton, but their work was stymied by a lack of understanding of available resources and how to map possible solutions.

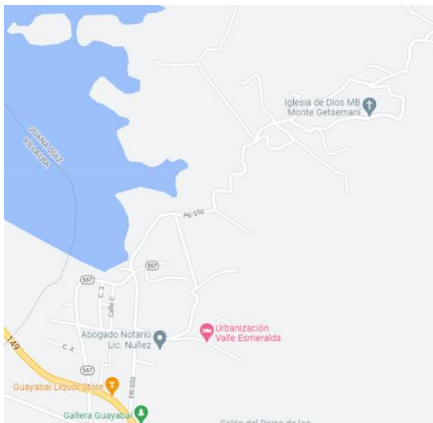
THE APPROACH & SOLUTION

RCAP's initial assistance included a review of past water and wastewater engineering studies and the development of a plan for community education and engagement. RCAP acquired water sampling kits through a partnership with the Dept. of Health, and with the Commission, held a village-wide well testing event to determine whether failed septic systems were impacting private drinking water sources. We surveyed the community on important water and wastewater issues, achieving a 94% response rate and beginning an important conversation about the future of the village. Results were compiled into a report by RCAP and presented at several public meetings.

THE IMPACT

In 2021, a major milestone was achieved toward finding a wastewater solution when RCAP helped the Commission access funds for an updated engineering study. After working with the Commission to help them understand the qualifications-based selection process, the Town has hired an engineer and is in the process of identifying decentralized wastewater options that could help guide future growth and community revitalization efforts.

“Wepa! Foundation” Reduces Waste Stream



Location: Lajitas, Juana Diaz, PR
Population: 1,651
Low-Income population: 1,209
Household Income: \$13,531
Funding: PR, Solid Waste - USDA
Author: Edwin Vazquez-Asencio, 2022
Services:

- Sustainable Materials Management Specialist
- SW Technical Assistance


BACKGROUND

Lajitas is a small sector in Barrio Guayabal, Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico. The community has been suffering due to littering and illegal dumping. The basketball court surroundings were used for dumping and the areas alongside the PR-550 were severely impacted by littering and improper management of solid waste.

THE CHALLENGE

“Without your help, I don't know how Barrio Guayabal would be able to address many of its problems.”

Vanessa Perez-Pacheco, Fundación Wepa!



The community is near the Guayabal Water Reservoir and the edges of the lake have fallen victim to the waste from the Jacaguas river. Illegal dumping and litter have been overwhelming.

THE APPROACH & SOLUTION

The community called RCAP TAP looking for technical assistance. The leaders were taught about the importance of a community organization and the opportunities to empower their members in order to implement coordinated actions with the municipality to ultimately address the situation. The TAP helped them create a community organization that established a connection between the municipality and the community. They started to create activities and formalized the new community entity as “Fundación Wepa!”

THE IMPACT

Today they are implementing solutions and the areas are in recovery. They performed small cleanups, saved the basketball court, adopted a segment of the road, built a Neighborhood Cluster Mailboxes in a recovered area. We are now looking forward to participating in the municipal recycling program. Community participation has been increasing and the communication among them is better every day. There are still challenges to overcome, but RCAP will be providing a series of trainings about a number of useful topics like reduce, reuse, repurpose, recycling, composting and pfas. This community is empowered and RCAP is leading them to sustainable solutions.

RCAP Solutions



Jennifer (Jenna) Day, Director of Development, at RCAP Solutions is located in rural Western Massachusetts and has been with RCAP Solutions since 2018. With over two decades of working in community and economic development, she brings with her a diverse skill set that includes building individual and community capacity and supporting the progress and sustainability of rural communities. Her experience as Town Coordinator in Heath, Massachusetts, as Director of the Housing Consumer Education Center at the Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority, and her tenure on the local Heath Board of Health provides critical technical, financial, and managerial expertise including extensive project management and contract compliance experience. Ms. Day's expertise also includes operating a non-transient, non-community water system. Before her promotion to Director of Development, she was the Director of Community and Environmental Resources responsible for grants and contract compliance for a team of 30 Technical Assistance Provider serving rural communities in New England, New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. She also served as a Community Specialist for New England. She has a degree in Environmental Education from Goddard College, Plainfield VT.