



## The Use of Appreciative Inquiries In Rural Communities

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### Abstract

Counties in East Texas experience elevated levels of poverty and underemployment, and limited access to important services. However, in these rural areas in Texas, United States, social capital and relationships are considered some of the most important strengths. The connection between people, ongoing support for each other, and the need to bring about change in their communities, lead people to use their own power to create sustainable change. When addressing specific needs such as rural access to services, substance use, mental health care, and supporting families with infants and children, it is important to build on the social capital of the communities. How do we connect people to engage and intervene in a sustainable way? In rural communities, coalitions have emerged for many years as an innovative way to address needs. Coalitions bring people with the same purpose together. To establish coalitions, community social workers use appreciative inquiries to strengthen the social capital and develop important sustainable and focused connections between people.

The article focuses on the usability of the appreciative inquiry approach in rural communities and details three case studies of effective rural coalition development. In all three case studies the purpose was to (1) identify the needs, challenges and strengths as described by people with lived experiences and diverse stakeholders, (2) identify specific priorities and (3) develop and sustain a coalition to address the priorities in a sustainable way. As with any appreciative inquiry, the data collection takes place at the same time as reflection and development of action. A descriptive process to discover, dream, design, and deliver to establish coalitions (destiny) is introduced. At the center of this process are the people with lived experiences who participate in the discovery process, serve on the coalitions, and they are the key to the development of the coalitions.

**Key Words:** Lived Experiences, Engagement, Social Connections, Inclusion, Coalitions

### Introduction

Rural communities in the United States are typically characterized as underserved, impoverished, with limited resources and an inability

to address their residents' needs. Authors such as Butler et al. [1], Crumb et al. [2], Rimmner et al. [3] and Tiruneh et al. [4] emphasize rural challenges including mental health problems, inequality related to employment, illicit drug use, substance use, and limited resources and services. However, many authors talk about the strengths, resilience, and social capital in rural communities. Fleming et al [5] describe rural communities as resilient, with the ability to recover from threats and challenges. Earnshaw et al. [6] emphasize that in rural communities, resilience is enhanced by support and social networks which evokes a sense of safety. In addition, Belanger [7] describes the importance of social capital and community connections in delivering services to rural residents. In rural East Texas, the focus of community-based projects is on building on the social capital to strengthen community resilience and connections. Social capital is described by Anderson et. al. [8] as:

A connection among individuals, and it is based upon trust, common norms, and reciprocity (p. 255).

Different approaches to community practice exist. Social workers and other professionals these practice approaches to facilitate change in rural communities. These are often used as integrated approaches. For example, collective impact is a change strategy used to initiate collaboration between stakeholders to effectively transform communities. The model suggested by Kania and Kramer [9] utilizes partnerships to effectively change systems on a long-term basis. The community-driven approach highlights the importance of effective community development, while addressing social and economic development at the same time. Participatory action approaches focus on residents who are most affected by specific circumstances and their participation in solutions. Urquilla, & Shelton [10] and Brikenmaier & Berg-Weger [11] emphasize the importance of including community residents most affected by their circumstances as part of the change strategies.

This article specifically describes how the appreciative inquiry was used to collect information about early childhood development service, resources and needs. The findings were used to build and strengthen social capital and forged new community coalitions. Three different community case studies specific to East Texas are

presented. These case studies illustrate how social workers leading inter-professional teams can use appreciative inquiries to engage with communities, conduct assessments, identify specific needs and challenges, and connect people to develop, strengthen, and build coalitions, while exploring the social problems in the community. University-community partnerships are at the center of each of the case studies. Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) School of Social Work and its' Center for Rural Social Work Research and Development have extensive experience addressing various social issues among vulnerable rural residents, including behavioral health, substance use, access to services, creating coalitions and partnership networks. SFASU faculty, staff, community members, and students are engaged in research and service activities within many rural East Texas communities, but also throughout the state, nation, and even globally.

For this article, community is defined as a group of individuals who have the same experiences and includes residents, people directly impacted by the issues, families, service providers, professionals, and city and county stakeholders. Kevany et al. [12] refer to communities of knowledge, which are groups of people who are discovering and sharing knowledge (p.35). The following communities of knowledge are mentioned in the three case studies:

1. Residents who live in and provide services to Wards 1 and 2 in Lufkin, Texas (geographical similarity).
2. People who experience opioid use, substance use service providers, and community residents in Panola, Harrison, and Gregg Counties, Texas (geographical and behavioral health similarity).
3. Parents, extended family, grandparents of infants and toddlers, childcare and child welfare workers in Angelina County, Texas (geographical and early childhood brain development similarity).

## Methods: Appreciative Inquiries in Communities

The appreciative inquiry approach was initially developed by Cooperrider [13] and it introduced a new way of thinking about systems. Radina et al. [14] describes appreciative inquiry as originally a change theory used in organizational settings and applied as a strengths-based way of thinking to understand how humans can collaborate to make positive, organizational change. Later, researchers and community practitioners discovered the value of appreciative inquiries in communities. For example, Kevany et al. [12] examined the use of appreciative inquiries in rural communities, specifically how it relates to rural well-being. Appreciative inquiries are at the center of a paradigm shift from deficits to strengths. The approach is used in addressing development of youth, eradicating social isolation, enhancing quality of life and creating positive environments.

While the method of appreciative inquiry has been used effectively in organizations and communities on a global level, its' utilization has been limited in the social work profession. However, the principles of appreciative inquiries are similar to those of community practice approaches used by social workers. Bellinger and Elliot [15] refer to appreciative inquiry as under-used in social work, with the potential to contribute to evidence-based practice. The approach can be very beneficial for social workers to use. In terms of the approach's strengths in a community context, it focuses on positive issues, includes residents in conversations about change, empowers people to initiate change and promotes engagement. Furthermore, the approach creates a sense of hope in a community. Some of the weaknesses observed in the use of the approach in rural communities include the length of time it takes to complete a comprehensive enquiry. In addition, the time to develop trust may take longer than anticipated by project teams. Nevertheless, the approach allows for

excellent opportunities to engage community residents in conversations and reflection.

Conversations among people with lived experiences are at the core of a community appreciative inquiry. Bastian et al. [16] emphasize the value of conducting deep conversations and uncovering meaningful narratives during appreciative inquiry reflection. According to Kevany et al. [12] the focus of appreciative inquiries is on "exchanging knowledge" (p.35). An appreciative inquiry is an approach to discover the strengths, dreams, resources, assets, challenges, barriers and needs of a community. It is an ongoing discovery, based on the inclusion of people with lived experiences, residents, informal leaders, city and county leaders, partner agencies, businesses, and other individuals who have some degree of financial, physical, or emotional investment. Appreciative inquiries aim to listen to the voice of the community accurately and attentively, reflect on what is most important to its residents, and design appropriate strategies. Kevany et al. [12] explains:

The best understanding of communities and of the lives of the community members can be obtained from the community members themselves. They are the experts on their lives and communities and are aware of what is working and what is not (p. 35).

*Discovery, dream, design, delivery, and destiny* are the main steps in the implementation of the appreciative inquiry approach. These phases are all based on in-depth conversations. Social workers, researchers, and community members collaborate to form the appreciative inquiry teams guiding the research.

The *discovery* phase starts with conversations to develop an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of people most affected by a specific phenomenon. Conversations also include strengths, assets, resources, resilience, and positive experiences. These conversations typically include different role-players respecting that people with lived experiences are the experts of their own lives and can best tell their stories. Questions to start the conversation include *what matters to the people with lived experiences, how do they show resilience during challenging times, and who will be involved in leading and creating the change*. Typically, during this phase, a group of people will emerge who are interested in the project. Groups start out large and participation increases as the discovery phase unfolds.

The *dream* phase builds on the discovery of a community's strengths, resources, and resilience. During this phase, conversations develop around individual and collective dreams for a community. The community reflects on the opportunities, possibilities, and their ideas of change. Ongoing and deliberate communication about dreams can take different forms including individual and community conversations, key informant interviews and conversation cafes. The methods of appreciative inquiry are valuable and allow for continuous reflection, which is needed to identify community priorities for change. Dreams do not necessarily have to be realistic. Questions to start the conversation include *what matters to the people with lived experiences, how should the community look, and what opportunities and possibilities should be available to the community*.

During the dream phase, there is typically an increase in people interested in the project. People are excited about change and reflect on how they can become involved. The invitation to join a coalition is still open to anyone who is interested and is strengthened by the social capital and connections in the community.

The *design* phase utilizes the information from the discovery and dream phases to develop solutions and strategies for the specific community and ends with the identification of specific priorities. Ongoing communication is based on *how to make dreams a reality, possible effective solutions, and opportunities for change*. The design phase brings different stakeholders together to find the most effective

solutions and there is a deliberate effort to establish the coalition. The needs assessment and priorities are in place, and people interested show commitment to the project. Conversations focus on the purpose of the coalition. With the focus on delivery, the coalition uses priorities to identify specific goals, activities, and tasks to meet the purpose. This leads to the development and implementation of a strategic plan. For a coalition to be effective, it must include people who can make a difference in addition to people with lived experience in the strategic plan development. The coalition should review its membership and invite people to strengthen their purpose. During this phase, the coalition starts developing a strategic plan. Mutual respect is the basis of the coalition. Wilkins [17] conveys:

As public involvement in research continues to evolve, the types of relationships with researchers have changed from being participants in research projects to being consultants, advisory board members, and even patient and community principal investigators (p. 6).

The *delivery* phase enables the community to be empowered and strengthened to address its dreams and priorities. Conversations change to actions which can include establishing access to services, modification of existing services, and strengthening of coalitions and partnerships. Questions in the conversations now examine *what the best ways are to deliver services, how can we create access to services, and how can we change the way we plan and deliver*. Members are now starting to convene regularly. In the rural communities described in the case studies, continuous engagement was intentional, and meetings took place weekly and monthly, based on the needs of the coalition and the requirements of the projects. Though backbone or lead agencies are suggested as the point and place of convening, this is not always possible in rural communities. Realistically, agencies may not emerge with the resources to act as backbone organizations, and the task is put on individual members or teams who are willing to take the lead. Verleysen et al. [18] suggest that:

While engaging in these joint activities people are building new generative connections that bring a feeling of joy, aliveness, hope, caring, and potential, leading people to create more and new things (p. 13).

The *destiny* phase is the actual impact on the community. For the purpose of the three case studies, impact is defined as a deliberate action to change, enhance or empower the community. Any impact should be sustainable, meaning that any change should be based on the needs of the residents, with the opportunity to continue efforts and solutions.

This phase is considered as a conclusion while deep conversations continue. At this stage, the focus is on impact, evaluation, and modification of the project. Cooperrider [13] describes this phase as conclusion and ongoing creation of a culture of appreciative learning. The implication is that if the project is sustainable, the deep conversations continue. The author also emphasizes the importance of inviting stakeholders to listen and view the change and mentions an “appreciative eye” for innovative ideas. At this stage, mutual respect is developed from ongoing communication, consistency in actions, and attentive listening. Participation in activities leads to partnerships. These strong connections lead people to develop and create new innovations in natural ways, while strengthening resilience [19, 20]. Mutual respect and trust develop because of open and transparent communication and inclusion. When people feel included, they can emotionally invest in a specific strategy. People with lived experiences feel that their perceptions, stories, and experiences matter, and there are opportunities for increased involvement because they feel valued. Suarez-Balcazar et al. [21] emphasize how respecting the space and history of people with lived experiences sustains partnerships and solidifies relationships between researchers and community members (p. 325).

As a result of the appreciative inquiry approach, coalitions can be established. According to Chavis [22]:

“Coalitions, partnerships, and other collaborative efforts bring together representatives of community institutions in order to combine resources and to foster relations needed to address threats to the community” (p. 311).

Sustainable community driven coalitions develop because of participatory and inclusive action. Bergold & Thomas [23] state that participatory action is geared towards planning and conducting the engagement processes with the people whose lives, worlds, and meaningful actions are being explored. The appreciative inquiry focuses on the voice of the community and telling the story of the community in its own collective words. When people recognize that their voices are being heard, they take ownership of sustainable change such as building coalitions. People feel that they are in control of the change, not social workers, researchers, or outsiders. Appreciative inquiries are ideal for the establishment of community driven coalitions.

For the purpose of this article, a coalition refers to a group of people (members) who forms an alliance to address specific needs and develop actions in communities. Members of the coalition agree on the common agenda and appropriate actions. Coalitions can be temporary or permanent, based on the specific common agenda. Coalitions differ from community partnerships, which often has more of an individual (agency to agency) than collective (multiple agency) nature.

Community driven coalitions are transparent and accountable and use local social capital to navigate the change processes. Coalitions use the knowledge gained from the discovery and dream phases to navigate the design, delivery, and destiny phases of an appreciative inquiry. It is important to include people with lived experiences and local stakeholders in coalitions. Chavis [22] explores community coalitions:

Coalitions provide direction to comprehensive community initiatives that address a broad array of complex social problems (e.g., violence, crime, disease, and substance abuse) and increase community capacity (e.g., economic development). Expectations for community coalitions and partnerships have been high. At times, communities cannot be stopped if they can form a coalition, create a plan, and take care of business. Even with all this enthusiasm, it is unclear how much is really known about the effectiveness of community coalitions and their development. (p. 310)

At the very core of coalition building is the engagement of people with lived experiences. Other stakeholders include community residents, people with interest in specific issues, formal and informal leaders, and service providers. Community practitioners can monitor and support rural community engagement to build sustainable coalitions. For example, they track the raw numbers of persons engaged through the appreciative inquiry process and other data on the emerging rural coalition including group representativeness (e.g., sectors represented, community representation, diversity), group relationships (e.g., trust, feeling heard, conflict management), communication (e.g., frequency, productivity, and quality of communications among members and staff), and sense of ownership (commitment, sense of pride and investment in the future of coalition).

## Results: Case Studies in Rural Communities

The following case studies illustrate how appreciative inquiries were used to assess needs and to establish coalitions to take action. The School of Social Work's research team in collaboration with community partners and funders selected the appreciative inquiry approach for each of the projects. For each project the facilitator team took the initiative and worked with the community to “buy in” to the idea of participation and inclusion. Funders were actively involved in each of the project.

The East Texas area comprises of 38 counties which include an upper Northeast region and a Southeast region. Almost two million



people live in East Texas according to the Texas Demographic Center, [24] Population Projections. The population growth in the Southeast region is 0.2% and in the Northeast region it is 3.4%, much lower than the 15.9% average growth of the State of Texas. Several of the counties in East Texas have a higher poverty rate than the Texas state average of 14.7%, including Angelina County at 17.3% and Gregg County at 17.6%) American Community Survey [25].

Sustainable financial, capital, and economic development are needed to enhance service delivery, retain young adults in the rural job market and prevent families from moving to urban areas. Even though sustainable financial capital is an ongoing challenge, rural communities do have the social capital to address pressing needs and one of the most important strengths in rural East Texas is social capital. People work together for the purpose of a better community. Social capital is more than individual relationships and encompasses the collective strengths and power of these relationships; the holistic interactional community is comprised of more than its individual members. In the East Texas region, community members and volunteers are engaged with welfare agencies such as United Way, Court Appointed Special Advocates CASA, and East Texas Food Bank. Some community residents volunteer with formal agencies and others provides valuable services to coalitions, sharing their knowledge and expertise.

Three case studies are presented on rural counties in East Texas. In each case study, Institutional Review Board approval with consent to collect data from participants was obtained from Stephen F. Austin State University. Communities for the three case studies are defined in terms of geographical area and/or shared experiences related to a specific issue. Appreciative inquiry participants and community stakeholders were invited to read reports and participate in data dissemination. The research in different communities in East Texas required various adaptations of the initial appreciative inquiry model. The following three case studies illustrate that the process of an appreciative inquiry builds and strengthens the connections between different entities collaborating on a community project.

### **Case Study 1: Impact Lufkin**

#### ***Case study overview***

The Impact Lufkin Community Revitalization project was made possible through a collaboration between the residents of Wards 1 and 2 in North Lufkin, Texas, T.L.L Temple Foundation, and Stephen F. Austin State University School of Social Work during 2016 - 2017. The success of the project can be contributed to many factors, including a respected key community leader and residents who served on the project team. The team progressed from volunteers to coalition resulting in the establishment of a community driven non-profit organization. Once a thriving community with numerous businesses and organizations, North Lufkin today have many businesses closed, leaving an unstable business climate and a deficit in critical services and resources for residents.

#### ***Goal of the project***

The goal of the project was to identify the strengths, resources, challenges, assets, and needs of the community as perceived by residents and leaders. It included to ensure that residents knew that they were the “experts” of their life experiences within the community and that their “voices” were heard and respected by community stakeholders.

#### ***Discovery***

The appreciative inquiry approach included a variety of engagement and reflection methods, which were critical to the success of the project. Multi-source data collection methods such as children and youth drawings, photo voice, community assessment surveys, conversation cafés, focus groups, community walk-throughs, and interviews resulted in rich data. Bilingual residents were recruited as interpreters to support non-English speaking residents.

The residents identified a need to revitalize their community by

identifying needed resources that were critical for economic growth to improve the quality of life for children, families, and senior adults. Critical services and resources were in other areas of the city, while many residents in North Lufkin experienced hardships accessing needed services due to lack of transportation. The art projects and photo voice included children, youth and adults. The children’s art told the stories of environmental challenges impacting the quality of life through neglected sidewalks, inaccessible bus stops, abandoned and dilapidated houses. Resident’s drawings included dreams of a neighborhood center, parks, sport fields and places to connect with others.

#### ***Dream***

The community residents and their leaders dreamt of a revitalized community, with safe sidewalks and streets, bus stops and accessible bus routes, parks where they can take their families, accessible health services and a beautiful physical environment. Most of all the community residents wanted a neighborhood center with a library, picnic area, soccer field, fishing pond and walking trails. The only local swimming pool was threatened to be covered with cement and closed by city officials because the park was dangerous, and lifeguards could not be secured and retained. Residents wanted the pool to open, since it was in the community and accessible to all.

#### ***Design***

The community created developed a common agenda to address their needs. A coalition of residents, service providers, leaders, church groups, agencies and business worked together to prioritize and take action. One of the committees started working on the establishment of a social service agency which could address the needs in an organized way. Another committee focused advocacy to keep the pool open and funding to train lifeguards.

#### ***Delivery***

The appreciative inquiry resulted in numerous positive outcomes including beautification projects and clean-up efforts in the physical environment. Dilapidated and abandoned houses were part of the clean-up efforts. Due to advocacy efforts which included the funders, a community health clinic relocated to the North Lufkin area, resulting in access to health care. Consequently, the project team advocated for safer sidewalks and additional bus routes were provided for residents. Covered bus stops were constructed to shelter children and older residents from inclement weather. As for the pool, lifeguards were trained, a pool supervisor appointed and the pool stayed open. A community garden was established and maintained in the neighborhood. These were all actions due to the coalition’s work, city officials and residents’ collaboration and the availability of funding.

#### ***Destiny***

A non-profit organization was established and they acquired land to build a neighborhood center. Now in the first phases of the project, the non-profit built several houses on the land. Additional applications for funding were submitted to promote the sustainability of the project. Residents were empowered through this project to take control of their neighborhood by asserting their voices, establishing a common agenda, and collaborating with key stakeholders.

### **Case Study 2: Panola, Harrison, and Gregg County Community Initiative**

#### ***Case study overview***

In 2020 during the onset of COVID, the Texas Health Institute and Stephen F. Austin State University School of Social Work collaborated with three counties in Northeast Texas. The model of appreciative inquiry was utilized for the assessment and analysis of Opioid Use Disorder in Panola, Harrison, and Gregg County, Texas. The project planning started prior to COVID and the appreciative inquiry took place during the high of the pandemic leading to a change in the application of the appreciative inquiry methods. Following the planning, the research team had to engage the community through

virtual methods. Challenges included travel restrictions, rapidly changing policies, rural internet access, and social distancing protocols. Some phases of the project required extra time, additional steps, and flexibility. Virtual meetings made it possible for stakeholders from all three counties to interact and collaborate together. People in rural communities that experience homelessness, mental health challenges, and incarceration are some of the most vulnerable groups that struggle with substance use and addiction. It was important to include them in the discovery and design processes.

### **Goal of the project**

The goal of the Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) project through HRSA Health Resources & Services Administration is to strengthen and expand the capacity of a rural community in East Texas to engage high-risk populations and provide prevention, treatment, and recovery support for Opioid Use Disorder.

### **Discovery**

The appreciative inquiry involved community conversations, focus groups, and key informant interviews. Innovative strategies included the training of ten community facilitators early in the project timeline. They co-facilitated community conversations and assisted with networking and outreach. Coalition building started in the discovery phase, and there were efforts to recruit new coalition members during all phases of the appreciative inquiry. Some of the research team members hoped that the initial group of community stakeholders that assembled as an interim steering committee would form the coalition, while other members of the research team advocated for more inclusion outside of the committee. Therefore, it was important to keep the invitation to join the coalition open to community members and people with lived experiences, and the research team promoted a supportive environment to increase participation and reduce stigma.

Focus group participants explored the pervasive stigma faced by rural residents that use illicit drugs and opioids, highlighting the need for community education, harm reduction programs, increased awareness, criminal justice reform, and accessible services in the rural communities where people live and work. This is obviously aggravated by unemployment. Job opportunities are more limited in rural areas, and a participant shared the following: *“I just don’t think that people are quick to give a job and even a housing situation to someone with opioid addiction even though they can be reliable workers”*.

### **Dream**

After one year of virtual interactions, the community was able to come together collectively for in-person strategic planning sessions, verbalizing the dream and designing a formal coalition. The dream was not only to address the substance use crisis, but to establish a coalition to sustain the work done by the project team.

### **Design and delivery**

The Panola, Harrison, and Gregg County Community Initiative involved a dozen entities with secured and signed Memorandums of Understanding agreements. The representation is diverse and a variety of agencies, residents, volunteers were included in the coalition. As a result of the open invitations to participate in the appreciative inquiry, members include prevention, treatment, and recovery providers, Tri County Community Action, City of Longview Partners in Prevention, County Judge, East Texas Council of Governments, Workforce Solutions East Texas Board, Evergreen Healthcare Partners, Next Step Community Solutions, One Love World, Twelve Way Foundation, and community partners with lived experience. The coalition works to improve and strengthen the systems of care for substance use to help rural residents in Northeast Texas.

### **Destiny**

Despite the challenges related to COVID, the project resulted in strong connections among stakeholders, a coalition and an action plan for the three counties. The coalition worked with the initial project team to secure further grant funding.

## **Case Study 3: Champions for Children: Early Childhood Brain Development**

### **Case study overview**

In 2022, an early childhood development project was initiated. Angelina County in East Texas is often referred to as a childcare desert. Though Lufkin has a variety of childcare services, smaller towns in the county, do not have adequate services. The limited access to childcare services impacts the ability of parents to enter the workforce. Grandparents and other family members often take care of the grandchildren. Episcopal Health Foundation (EHF), Angelina County and Cities Health District (ACCHD) and Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) School of Social Work collaborated with the Angelina County community to establish an early childhood brain development coalition.

### **Goal of the project**

The goal of the project is to (1) identify the needs of infants and toddlers and their families in Angelina County, (2) develop a strategic plan to address the needs and (3) establish a coalition.

### **Discovery**

To effectively identify the needs and challenges experienced by infants, toddlers and their families, the team embarked on an appreciative inquiry. Over a year, the team engaged in the discovery and dream phases and conducted community conversations, focus groups, and key informant interviews to learn more from parents and grandparents with lived experiences. In addition, the conversations extended to professionals, caregivers, and volunteers who interact with toddlers, infants, and families. Specific themes were identified which highlighted the need for accessible services. A parent participant stated, *“It’s like a deep dark secret to get information about subsidy eligibility and services”*. In addition to affordable childcare services, parents need support to access childcare services. A service provider participant explained that parents need assistance with filling out various applications: *“Sometimes paperwork is very daunting for parents. They do not want to tell all their business. They will not apply for the things that they could have because of that”*. There is a need for public awareness efforts regarding prenatal care and parenting support for expecting mothers and fathers. Parents rely heavily on social media, social contacts, and “word of mouth” instead of either actively seeking out or following information provided by health clinics, pediatricians, or community programs/organizations. Service provider participants shared their experiences that parents often feel helpless and overwhelmed when immediate access is unavailable: *“It (accessibility to services) should not be this hard. Most of the time it seems like a limitless chain of no answers, no returned calls and a lot of time wasted”*. Hispanic families often experience language as a barrier to accessibility. *“For our Spanish speaking community, many do not have the means to translate their needs. We need to reach out to our Spanish speaking community to provide them with information and resources available to them”* (Service provider participant).

### **Dream**

Based on the data from the discovery phase, project team and an initial coalition dreamt of a county with access to early childhood brain development services and strong parent-infant/toddler connections. The coalition wanted to establish services as needed, provide information to parents and other stakeholders, and raise awareness about early childhood brain development.

### **Design**

Consequently, during the design phase, a formal coalition was established. This coalition used the data collected through the conversations to reflect on and generate additional data. As a result, insights led to the development of thirteen specific priorities. After a year during the delivery phase, the results and priorities were in place and the coalition focused on six specific priorities. The coalition established a campaign to raise awareness specific to parents’ ability

to connect with their infants and children. The Chamber of Commerce plays a key role in sharing information with the community.

### **Delivery and destiny**

The Champions for Children Angelina County coalition is now in the delivery and destiny phase. The coalition includes parents, current and retired service providers, social work students, and volunteers. The coalition focuses on specific tasks and services, while efforts are made to be recognized and visibility enhanced. In addition, the coalition secured positive leadership and will evaluate its' effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

Bushe and Kassam [26] completed a meta-case study analysis on the transformational role of appreciative inquiry. The authors concluded that appreciative inquiries result in generative metaphors that compels new actions. This is evident from all three the case studies. Not only did the appreciative inquiries lead to in-depth discovery and self-reflection, it resulted in deliberate actions to change. In terms of the appreciative inquiry as a method to engage community residents, it seems that the use of an appreciative inquiry approach is considered as valuable in rural areas. Residents, leaders, service providers and volunteers respect and value the approach. The appreciative inquiry approach in this East Texas case studies utilized conversations to share diverse experiences to allow different stakeholders to engage in reflection, discovery, dream, design, delivery, and destiny phases to develop coalitions. To build respectful relationships, it is important to actively listen and understand the realities of people with lived experiences while taking the time to strengthen connections and partnerships.

Even though appreciative inquiries are not often used in social work, rural communities clearly benefit from the reflective and discovery nature of the approach. The three case study examples in the article also provide information on how the appreciative inquiry approach was used to establish outcomes for diverse types of communities. An appreciative inquiry is not a cookie cutter approach, but rather a unique way to embrace the diverse nature of a community. The appreciative inquiry acknowledges the strengths and resilience of the community, but the application of appreciative inquiries is not without challenges. Communities often resist change, based on historical views of outside interferences, research saturation, or over exposure to outsiders wanting to change the community.

More importantly, there are many more opportunities than challenges. There are several similarities in the application of the appreciative inquiry across the three case studies. People that live in these rural communities are the experts of their own lives. They are in the best position to describe their life circumstances, experiences, and perceptions about the world in which they function. Appreciative inquiry team members respect the "lived experiences" and stories shared with them, while creating welcoming environments, through which people with "lived experiences" could effectively reflect and interact. Conversations about the "lived experiences" were most important when developing a comprehensive understanding of the strengths, resources, resilience, and challenges. The welcoming environments are always based on inclusion and participation. Inclusion and participation are mutually re-enforcing activities, based on respect and trust. While inclusion means everyone is invited to the conversation, it does not necessarily mean everyone feels comfortable enough to participate. For people with lived experiences to feel comfortable, they should be encouraged to participate and recognized for the values they add to the research. It is crucial that all people with experiences of a specific phenomenon are invited and included in the conversation. They have first-hand expertise with engaging in change.

Reflective and active listening, and emphasizing consistency in positive actions, lead to the development of trust. At the center of these coalitions is social capital, including people that are directly

affected by certain challenges, service providers, and community stakeholders interested in creating change. When people have a shared interest based on the need to change, they develop a connection, a vision, and a dream. As a natural occurrence, connections become stronger, people relate to each other, and see the possibility of hope. In East Texas, the shared vision to bring about change in each rural community resulted in a sustainable coalition.

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