



LETCHER COUNTY KENTUCKY

“Weaving Appalachia: Leadership in Letcher County” is part of a series of case studies by Fahe which documents the work of Members and Partners throughout Appalachia. This project emphasizes Fahe’s guiding charge of Leadership. For forty years, Fahe has increased the scale and reach of our Network by identifying and supporting the development of local leaders through access to expertise, capital, subsidy, training, and other resources that support and catalyze positive opportunities for the communities and people they serve.

The “Weaving Appalachia” case study features Seth Long, Executive Director of Fahe Member Housing Oriented Ministries for Service (H.O.M.E.S.) who is representative of the type of leaders Fahe works with on a daily basis. These leaders step beyond simply serving an organization to applying their place-informed perspective to identify and leverage community assets to create economic opportunity and lasting solutions in one of the hardest-to-serve regions of the country.

Letcher County, Kentucky is classified as a persistent poverty county, an area where 20% or more of the population has lived in poverty for 30 years.

Letcher County lacks quality housing stock, faces high rates of unemployment and high rates of overdose deaths, and ranks near the bottom for County Health Rankings.

In light of these challenges, **leaders like Long catalyze innovative solutions and spur change by building on the assets of their communities.** They don’t have time to wait for saviors, and instead break down organizational silos to foster collaboration and create opportunity for current and future generations. A fundamental understanding is that specialization is a luxury in a rural communities—everyone has to bring their contribution to bear in order to weave finance, organizational acumen, and old fashioned sweat equity together to accomplish goals. As Long states, *“there are no silver bullets... more like silver bbs.”*

Leadership like that of Long’s flows in two directions in a community. One is horizontal, across his community through his work as a leader of H.O.M.E.S., as a member of the Letcher County Culture Hub, as a vendor at the local Farmer’s Market,



“I feel like there isn’t a silo, that our work here in the community ... housing is important but it’s more about a healthy community and what that brings in ... So it touches food; it touches health; it touches education; it touches economic development. We need all those things to have a good community. If we just stay in our silo and don’t collaborate, we don’t touch... there’s not a warp and a weft to the fabric. It’s just these one-way strings that don’t hold together. But when we’re working together it just binds it all.”

— Seth Long

and as someone who makes his home there. The other is vertical, as Long advocates for his community at public hearings for solar power, lobbies to lower barriers to entry for cottage food producers, serves as a member of the Fahe Board of Directors, and even responds in the national media to influence a reliable stream of reporting on what might help rural Americans.

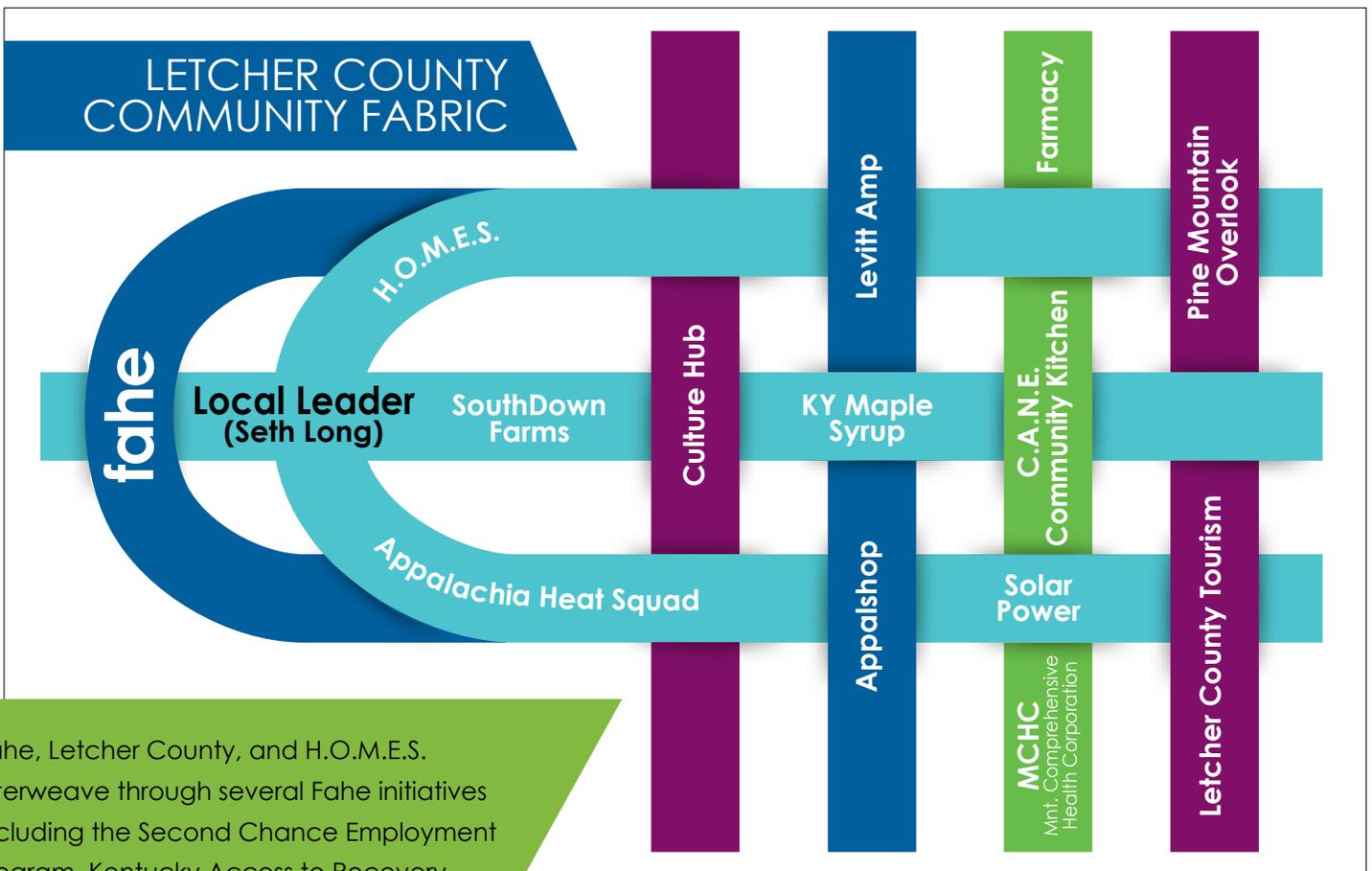
By weaving together their efforts, these community members are increasing their collective strength and pushing forward multiple solutions that meet a wide variety of interconnected needs such as housing, health, food, and education.

Research demonstrates that leaders matter. **People in the mold of Seth Long are important to changing the trajectory of persistent poverty places.** In the Fall 2020 issue of the Stanford Social Innovation Review an article [discusses “proximate leaders,”](#) defined as those with a meaningful relationship with groups systemically stereotyped

and dismissed (i.e. people living in rural areas) and who have the experience, relationships, data, and knowledge that are essential for developing solutions with measurable and sustainable impact. Allen Smart and Betsy Russell have also documented the critical role locally based, embedded leadership plays in [fostering civil society](#) and [strengthening community building work](#).

Long also notes that he does not lead alone. In fact, it is the support of others that helps him go far in his personal entrepreneurship and as an organizational leader. At the beginning of his tenure, when his organization was not on stable footing, Fahe, of which HOMES has been a member for more than 20 years, provided a crucial infusion of capital. Now, HOMES continues to support the community with affordable housing, but also with job training, opportunities to shift into green energy jobs through solar installations, partnerships with a local substance abuse recovery program, and local

LETCHER COUNTY COMMUNITY FABRIC



Fahe, Letcher County, and H.O.M.E.S. interweave through several Fahe initiatives including the Second Chance Employment Program, Kentucky Access to Recovery, and the Appalachia HEAT Squad.

tourism efforts. Meanwhile Long himself continues his own work building up his maple syrup business, partnering with the farmer's market—an important source of local food security—and simply being a good neighbor. Although Long might seem romanticized, he is highly recognizable to residents of communities like Letcher County.

As a backbone organization, Fahe is unique in our ability to bring and effectively deploy capital to a tremendously underserved region while centering the work of these local leaders and community needs. Fahe's investment in Membership organizations and local leaders, like H.O.M.E.S. and Long, keeps such leaders in place while they do the hard work of nurturing relationships and lifting up our underserved places. Fahe focuses on increasing our support for local leaders, and highlighting the potential to transform places through investment in people, organizations, and places. [Learn more about Fahe here.](#)

The full version of "Weaving Appalachia: Leadership in Letcher County" is available for [download on the Fahe website.](#)

ABOUT FAHE

Fahe's unique collaborative model connects a Network of local, regional, and national leaders all working together to ensure no community is left behind. For 40 years, the Fahe Network, now consisting of 50+ Members, has cultivated the deepest reaching platform in Appalachia to connect investments to boots on the ground leadership throughout one of the most difficult places to serve in the country. Since 1980, Fahe has invested \$1.05B, generating \$1.61B in finance. This investment was channeled through their Members and community partners, directly changing the lives of 687,183 people.

www.fahe.org

