



***“...it just was a transformation in the community—
from ‘we don’t have nothin’ to these beautiful over-
looks. It was a tipping point.”***

— Letcher Co. Leader



Visitor Overlook of Pine Mountain
Photo Credit: Letcher Co. Tourism

A visitor in the valley cradling Whitesburg, KY, can see the timbered slopes of Pine Mountain. Atop the mountain, on a drive that has been recommended by popular websites like “Only in Your State,”¹ tremendous vistas drew people seeking spectacular photographs, but without a safe place to get the perfect image. A new leader of the board of tourism identified the untapped opportunity. Pulling together community partners, she set in motion a plan to build safe overlooks and increase the number of visitors spending time in the county.

During the construction phase, vandals painted graffiti on the unfinished structures. A photo of the scene was circulated on social media locally. According to one person on the project, the reaction to the photo was one of two types. Either, a sense of “Why bother? We can’t have nothin’ people just destroy it. There’s no pride. This is a fool’s errand.” Or a reaction of resoluteness, “No, we’re not gonna put up with this anymore. This has got to stop. We’ve got to take pride in ourselves and our community and

the things that we do.” It was the latter attitude that prevailed, and the miscreants were caught and prosecuted. He recalls, “We never saw that before. I only saw the apathy side of it ... We did do something; we prevailed ... It was one of those dynamics that you can’t prove, but it was real. That was real to a lot of people.”

The success of the Pine Mountain overlooks was a catalyst for future collaboration, leading to more small wins. The project illustrates what the interviewee describes as the breaking down of silos. The result is a community with a common purpose to uplift everyone. Within six weeks, from the inception of the idea to the dedication, the project was completed. The local leader said, “*it just was a transformation in the community—from ‘we don’t have nothin’ to these beautiful overlooks. It was a tipping point.”*



INTRODUCTION

This case study is part of a series by Fahe which documents the work of Members and Partners throughout Appalachia. **This project emphasizes Fahe's guiding charge of Leadership.** It's strategic plan notes that for more than thirty years Fahe has increased the scale and reach of our Network's interventions. Fahe does this by identifying and supporting the development of local leaders who are committed to delivering interventions that include development of safe, well-designed homes that are affordable and providing those leaders with access to the expertise, capital, subsidy, training, and other resources that support and catalyze positive opportunities for the communities and people they serve. Each case study illustrates what that means in practice. Fahe's role in supporting and sustaining local leadership varies depending on the self-identified needs of that place and the vision of leaders who serve it. **Following the lead of our Members, who work every day on the challenges facing their neighbors, Fahe deploys resources when and where Members identify the greatest need and opportunity for impact.** Fahe was founded in 1980 by a group of Central Appalachian affordable housing organizations. Now a Network of more than 50 nonprofits working in six states, Fahe advocates on their behalf with national stakeholders for intentional investment. Organized in state caucuses, Members collaborate to craft solutions for their communities' challenges with a regional perspective. Through topical working groups, they can break down geographic silos and focus on shared solutions. Fahe's Network platform helps leaders from different sectors work together to create responses that are innovative, place-sensitive, person-focused, and efficient in the use of available resources. **Through training, support, capital, and connectivity,**

local leaders have the institutional support to become architects of our region's future.

Persistent poverty and economic mobility are two topics that are high on the agenda of scholars and policymakers. Experts want to bridge the gap between the increasing wealth among a smaller number of people, or places where opportunity clusters, and those people and places losing ground in the fight for prosperity. Sociologist Kathryn Edin explained the difference between places that are fertile grounds of opportunity and those which are not, "her best guess is 'some kind of social glue'—the ties that bind people, fostered by well-functioning social institutions."² Edin offered a second insight—referencing a long-range study of people who were able to move into better places conducted by economists Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence Katz— noting that "it took a generation for the effects to manifest."³ When families moved to a "higher opportunity" neighborhood, older siblings did less well than their younger siblings, because they had less time in the place. But the reality is, not everyone can move. **Some 21 million people living in persistently poor, largely rural counties need the same opportunities that experiments like HUD's Moving to Opportunity offered in urban places, like Chicago.** Chicago native (and former first lady) Michelle Obama, sums up the dilemma neatly: "*It was one thing to get yourself out of a stuck place...It was another thing entirely to try and get the place itself unstuck.*"⁴ She was reflecting on her own neighborhood, and those she worked in as a city official; however, the observation also applies to Appalachia and other persistent poverty regions.⁵

Fahe works with the people who are getting the places "unstuck." **Local leaders are doing this by mending the fabric that holds their communities together.** Letcher County, KY, is

the location of Housing Oriented Ministries for Service ([H.O.M.E.S.](#)). The organization has been a Fahe Member for 35 years. Letcher County leaders are fighting some of Appalachia's most stubborn problems, and they exemplify our region's greatest strengths. In fact, Letcher County's successful efforts in one of the most challenged places in the country are the reason for looking at it more closely. The lessons this community teaches include how to breakdown organizational silos, the power of strong and supported individual leaders, the importance of connections that go outside the community, and the advantages of looking beyond a five-year planning cycle to advance prosperity for generations to come. Change in regions that struggle does not occur without a deep, abiding commitment to place that is shared by community leaders. Leaders in Fahe's Network not only have the desire and commitment, but also the support of a wider network which helps nurture the conditions that lead to sustainability and provide opportunities for communities to become unstuck.

because funders and decision-makers gravitate toward larger places with more people to maximize impact, and helping more youthful residents means the benefits last longer. This sort of cost-benefit analysis discourages some policy makers from including places like Letcher County in their proposals to uplift rural America, but the people here are investing anyway. Contradicting these caricatures, a dynamic culture of resilience sustains this community. As one community leader says, *"We believe in this. We are investing because there are other ways this pays us back."*⁷ Letcher county's economy and geography are challenges, but there are other factors in the community which support and sustain collaboration. Fahe's Network demonstrates that local leaders are catalysts for change. For example, the work Long does through H.O.M.E.S. create influence far beyond his job duties.

LETCHER COUNTY KENTUCKY

Across every measure of socio-economic disadvantage, Southeastern Kentucky is one of the most challenged areas in the country. The litany of historic, structural difficulties facing rural America is exemplified in the decades of resource extraction, health disparities, economic disinvestment, and disinterest in national politics prevalent in Letcher County. Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, outside interest in this area increased, leading one scholar of the region, Elizabeth Catte, to coin the term "Trump Country piece" to characterize the cascade of stories explaining the troubles of small town America, especially coal country.⁶ **The small, aging population discourages big investment**

"We believe in this. We are investing because there are other ways this pays us back."⁵

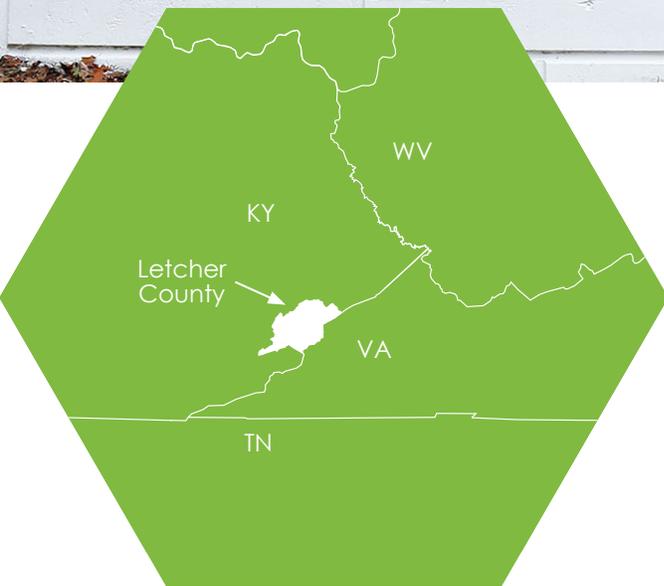


Data Overview

ECONOMY

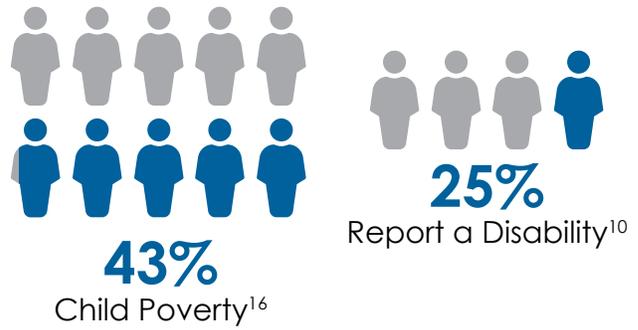
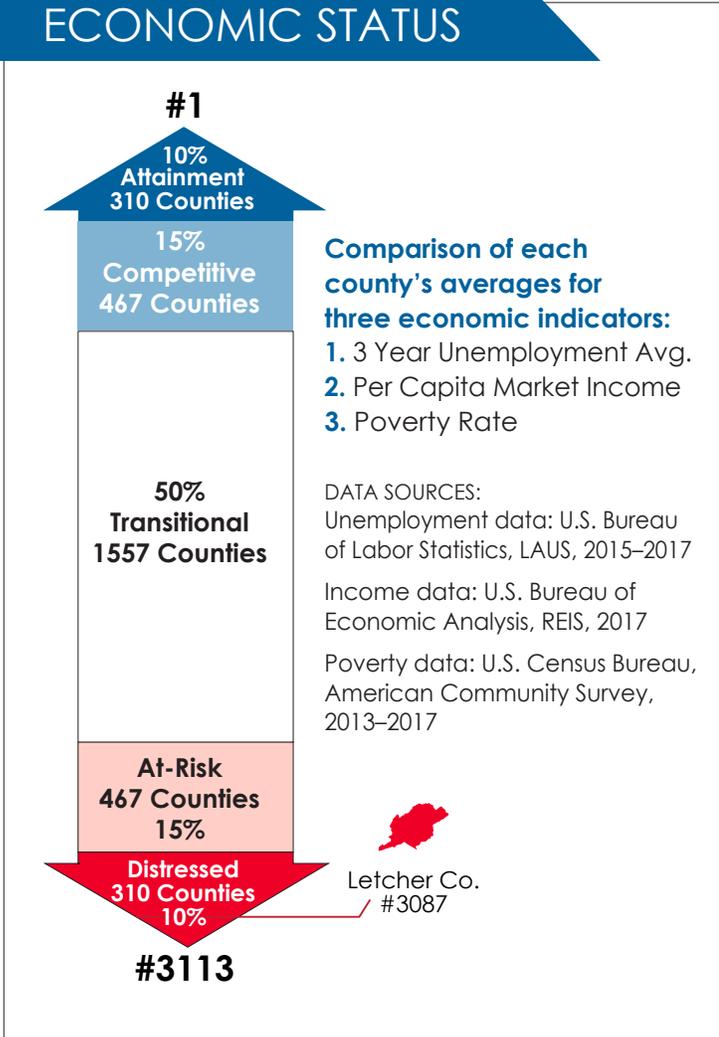


Mural in Jenkins, KY (Letcher Co.)
Photo Credit: Lacy Hale



Letcher County is part of the Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) most disadvantaged sub-region, Central Appalachia. **The ARC designates Letcher County a distressed county**, the most severe economic status assigned by the agency. This corresponds to placement in a national index comprised of unemployment rates, income, and poverty rates. **In FY 2020 Letcher County had dropped to 3087 out of 3113 counties in the United States, falling from its FY 2010 ranking of 2980.⁸ Since 1990, the population in Letcher County has fallen more than 14%.** The state of Kentucky grew from 3.69 million to 4.46 million people from 1990 to 2018.⁹ During those three decades Appalachia as a whole saw an increase in population (more than 4 million people, or approximately 17%), due to growth in urban areas. A lower population means fewer potential workers, and the aging population means even fewer of working age. With a median age of 41, and 25% of the population reporting a disability, the workforce may be less attractive to potential employers.¹⁰

2020 NATIONAL ECONOMIC STATUS



dents drive significant distances to cities where employers can offer better wages.¹³

Income is another important indicator of economic well-being. Here, the story is somewhat better in relative terms. **In 1990 median family income in Letcher County was 37% of the median for the nation as a whole, and by 2017 that had risen to 79% of the national median. In 2017 that was \$43,800 in Letcher County, compared to \$61,372 for the whole country.**¹⁴ This occurred during a time when Americans saw largely stagnant wages.¹⁵ However, **child poverty is a startling 43% according to the 2019 Annie E. Casey Kids Count data release.**¹⁶

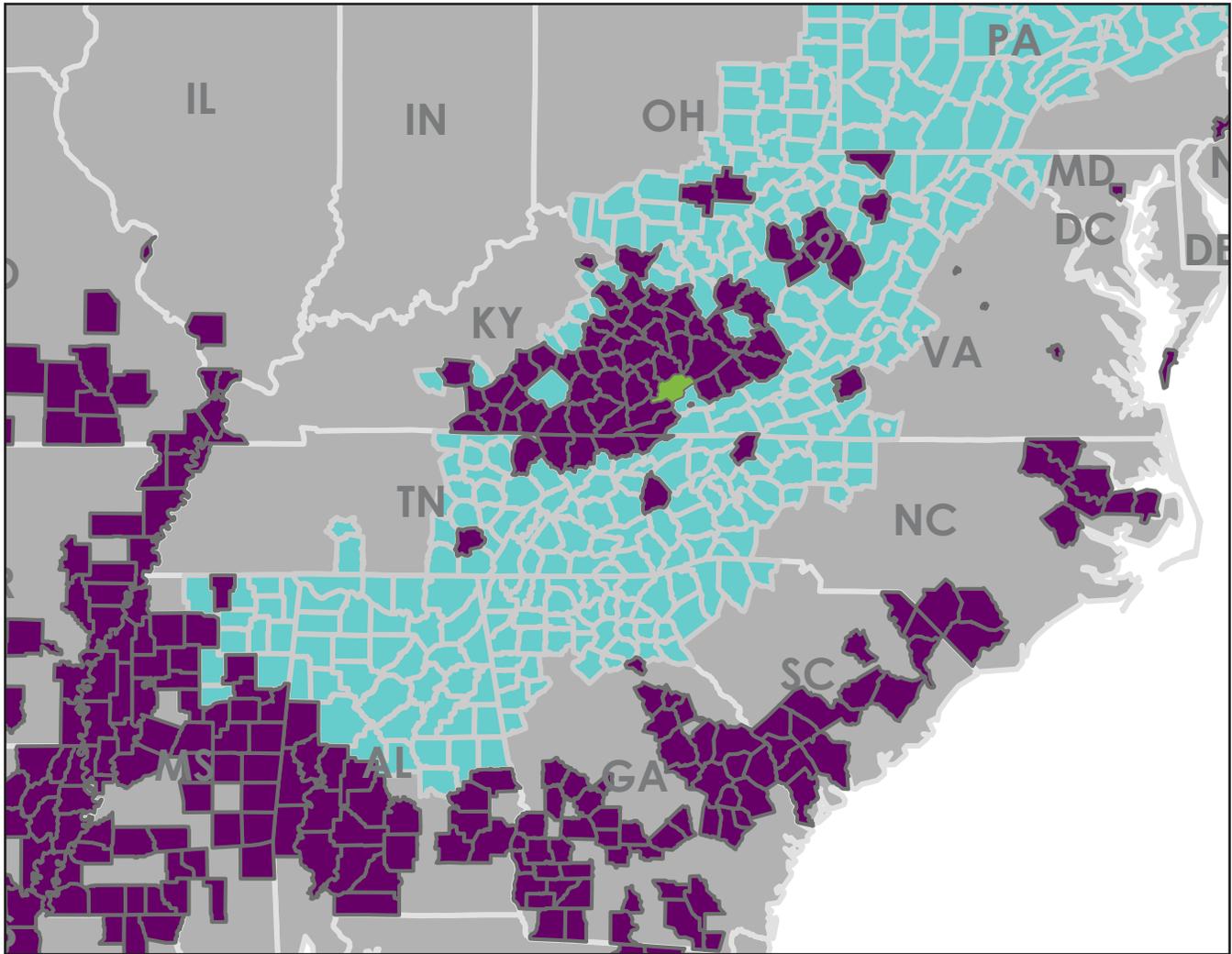
The stubbornly lower income level in the county reflects the high and persistent levels of poverty in the region. Persistent poverty is defined as having a poverty rate of 20% for 30 years. According to the Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Fund, there were 473 counties identified as persistently poor in the United States as of October 2017, and 43 of them are in Kentucky, including Letcher County.¹⁷ The Housing Assistance Council explains that these areas suffer from isolation in terms of geography and inadequate infrastructure, while lacking resources and opportunities to support economic growth. **After decades of disinvestment, these areas have become invisible to the rest of America.**¹⁸ **In addition to economic distance from the rest of the country, these areas also face significant health challenges.**

The graying of Appalachian areas, like Letcher County, also increases demand for healthcare and supportive services, making the absence of appropriate infrastructure even more painful.

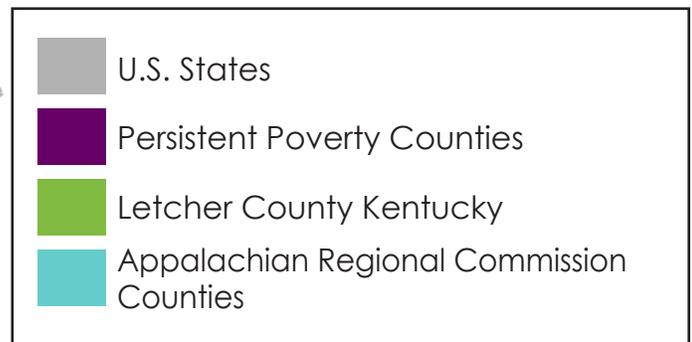
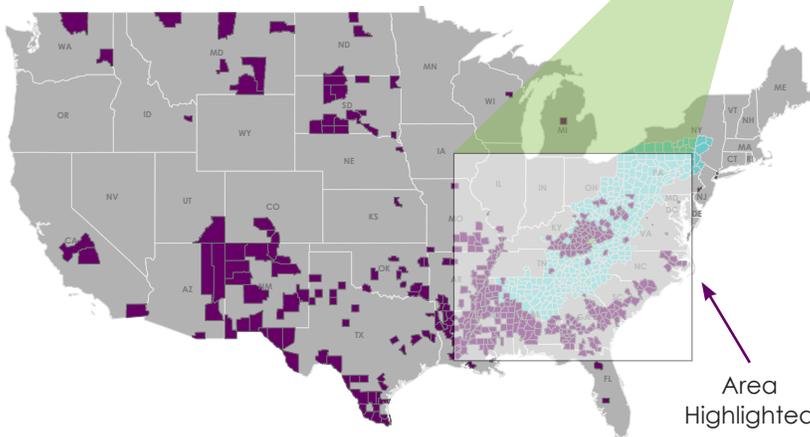
As with much of this part of Appalachia, the local economy historically revolved around coal mining. The entrance to the town of Jenkins, Letcher County's largest city, is marked by a sign that proclaims, "A City Built on Coal." Many houses in the area were built by Consolidated Coal Company, and later Bethlehem Steel when it owned the mine. The mine in Jenkins closed in 1988.¹¹ In its prime, the town was considered a "premier" camp.¹² However, coal jobs began declining in the 1960s, and have continued to disappear. The jobs that remain are in healthcare, education, and retail. Other resi-

NATIONAL PERSISTENT POVERTY COUNTIES

SOURCE: Appalachian Regional Commission,
 US Census Bureau American Community Survey (2017).
 US Treasury CDFI Persistent Poverty counties (October 2017).

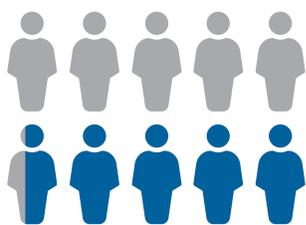
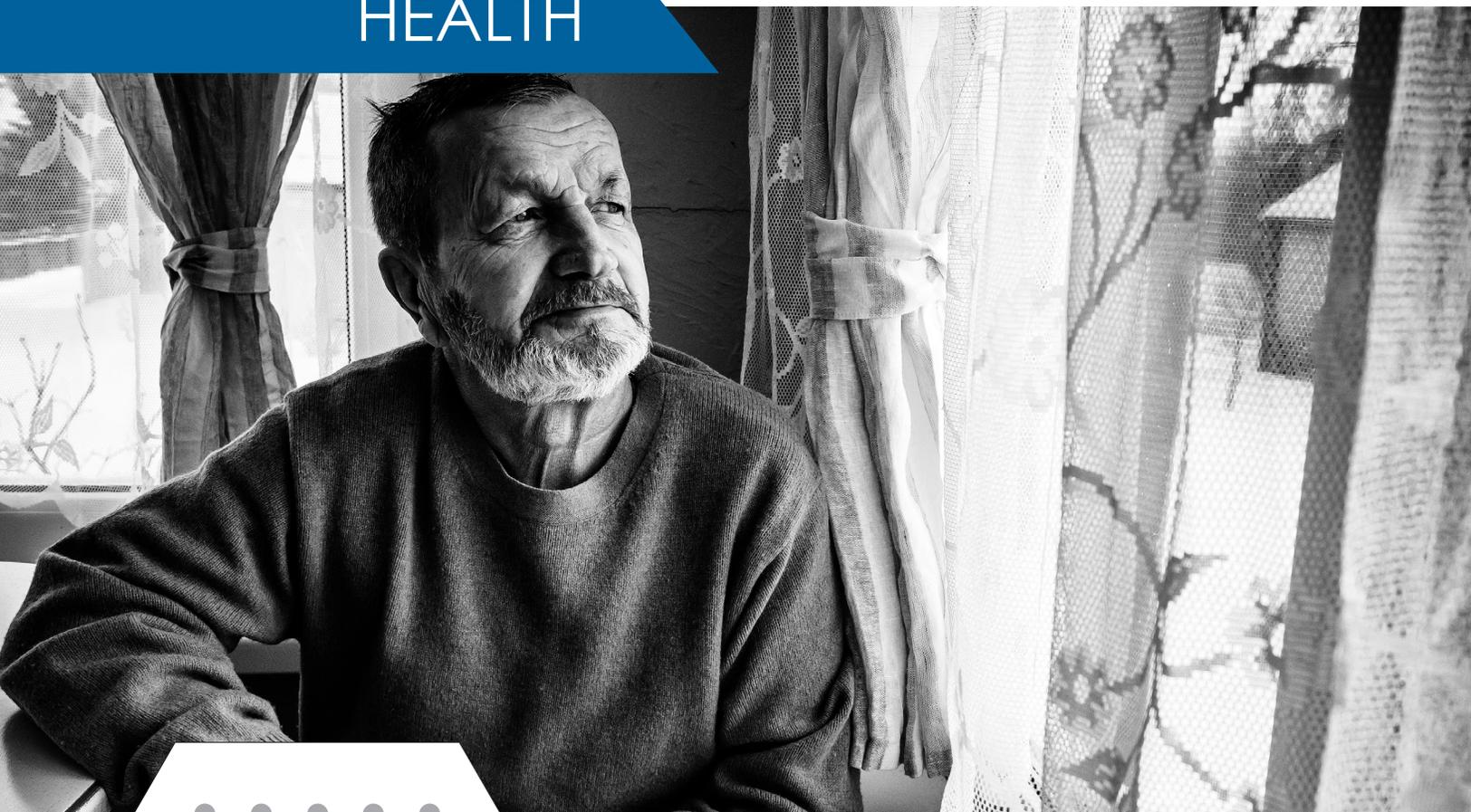


Not pictured, Alaska (3 persistent poverty counties)
 and Hawaii (zero)



Data Overview

HEALTH



44.1%

Letcher County
Drug Overdose
Mortality Rate²¹

Population health is driven by multiple factors, including social and environmental as well as physical ones. Recognizing that everything from school quality to housing, employment, and neighborhood safety affect overall health, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been tracking numerous indicators at the county level for many years.¹⁹ **According to their County Health Rankings project, Letcher ranks 109 and 101 out of 120 counties in Kentucky, sharing its position in the bottom 15% with neighboring southern and eastern Kentucky counties.** In terms of social and economic factors it ranks 108, and in health factors it ranks 106. However, in the index's sub-category of severe housing problems (defined as the percentage of households with at least 1 of 4 housing problems: over-crowding, high housing costs, lack of kitchen facilities, lack of plumbing facilities), Letcher County is only one percentage point higher than the

2020 County Health Rankings for the 120 Ranked Counties in Kentucky

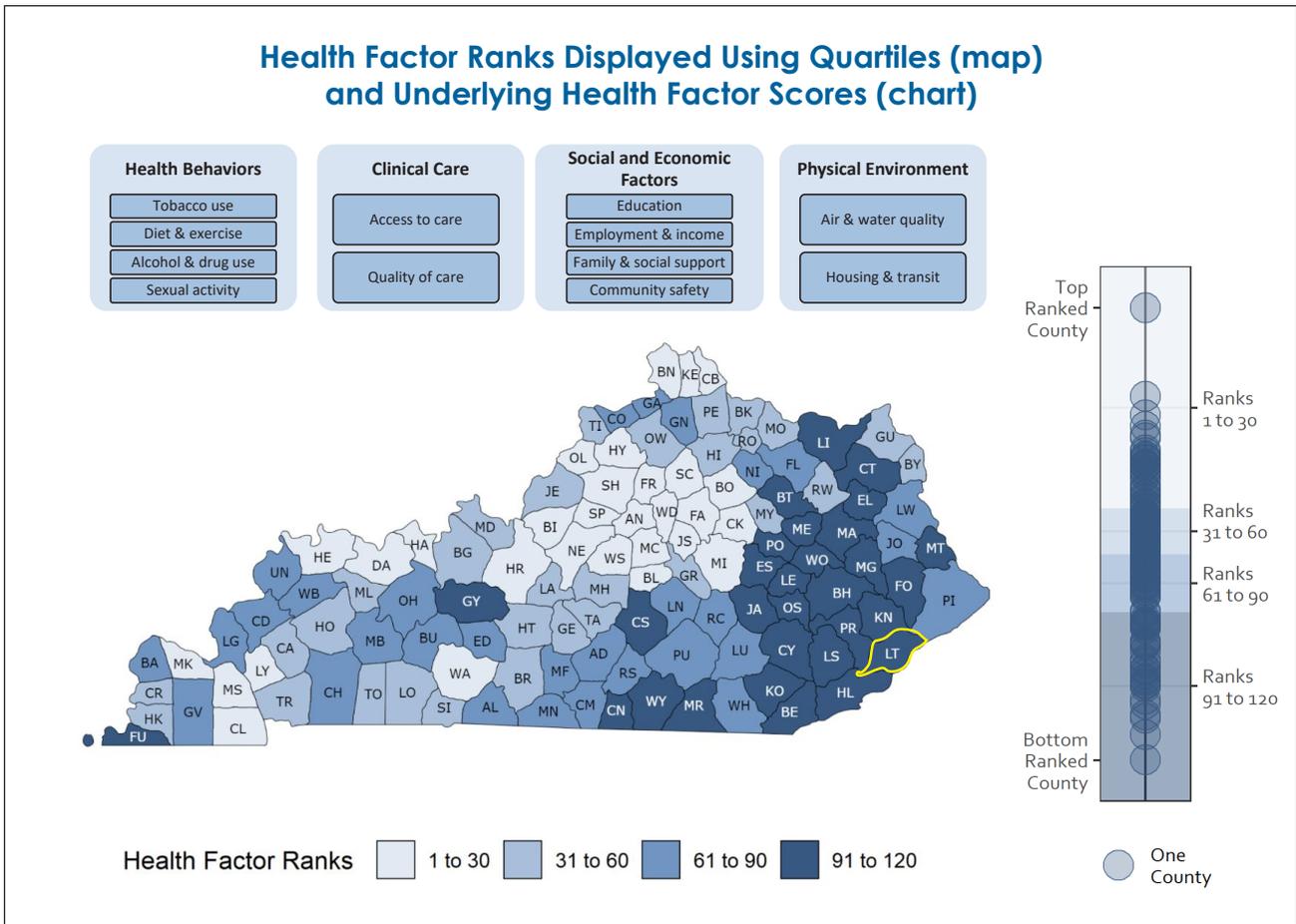
County	Health Outcomes	Health Factors	County	Health Outcomes	Health Factors	County	Health Outcomes	Health Factors	County	Health Outcomes	Health Factors	County	Health Outcomes	Health Factors
Adair	61	72	Clark	50	15	Harrison	51	34	Madison	29	13	Perry	118	91
Allen	78	68	Clay	117	120	Hart	48	59	Magoffin	102	114	Pike	97	89
Anderson	28	12	Clinton	62	93	Henderson	66	30	Marion	54	55	Powell	104	94
Ballard	31	70	Crittenden	64	88	Henry	24	27	Marshall	22	18	Pulaski	73	77
Barren	32	43	Cumberland	42	84	Hickman	30	56	Martin	105	105	Robertson	79	53
Bath	84	102	Daviess	14	9	Hopkins	47	42	Mason	46	54	Rockcastle	95	69
Bell	108	111	Edmonson	20	63	Jackson	96	109	McCracken	25	29	Rowan	72	51
Boone	2	2	Elliot	101	108	Jefferson	37	47	McCreary	111	116	Russell	93	82
Bourbon	41	28	Estill	103	99	Jessamine	23	20	McLean	89	38	Scott	8	5
Boyd	74	44	Fayette	5	10	Johnson	94	75	Meade	16	36	Shelby	7	14
Boyle	36	7	Fleming	56	62	Kenton	19	24	Menifee	83	95	Simpson	57	35
Bracken	88	45	Floyd	116	103	Knott	112	106	Mercer	49	26	Spencer	3	6
Breathitt	120	117	Franklin	55	25	Knox	106	112	Metcalfe	67	66	Taylor	38	39
Breckinridge	43	52	Fulton	98	104	Larue	21	33	Monroe	85	81	Todd	65	57
Bullitt	6	21	Gallatin	90	67	Laurel	60	79	Montgomery	58	41	Trigg	11	32
Butler	68	73	Garrard	53	48	Lawrence	99	90	Morgan	82	96	Trimble	69	50
Caldwell	33	31	Grant	77	64	Lee	113	115	Muhlenberg	45	80	Union	80	86
Calloway	9	23	Graves	34	74	Leslie	107	113	Nelson	18	11	Warren	15	17
Campbell	17	4	Grayson	81	92	Letcher	109	101	Nicholas	87	83	Washington	44	19
Carlisle	40	40	Green	27	49	Lewis	100	107	Ohio	59	76	Wayne	75	97
Carroll	86	78	Greenup	52	37	Lincoln	91	85	Oldham	1	1	Webster	71	87
Carter	76	98	Hancock	13	8	Livingston	63	65	Owen	39	60	Whitley	114	71
Casey	92	100	Hardin	12	22	Logan	26	58	Owsley	119	119	Wolfe	110	118
Christian	70	61	Harlan	115	110	Lyon	10	16	Pendleton	35	46	Woodford	4	3

[Copyright and full report: CountyHealthRankings.org](http://CountyHealthRankings.org)

state of Kentucky as a whole, which points to the role played by local housing professionals to meet this need. Nationally, in the most healthy counties 9% of people have severe housing problems. **In Kentucky, the rate of severe housing problems is 14% and in Letcher County it is 15%.** Another troubling sub-ranking is severe housing cost burden, defined as spending 30% or more on the cost of housing. Here, Letcher is a bit higher than Kentucky as a whole (14% compared to 12%) and twice as high as the best performing counties in the U.S. (7%). According to the 2019 study, *“increases in the share of households severely cost burdened are associated with more food insecurity, more child poverty, and more people in fair or poor health.”*²⁰

Any discussion on health in the U.S. must include prescription drug addiction. Opioid misuse has devastated Central Appalachia, including

southeast Kentucky. **According to the Opioid Community Assessment Tool, the drug overdose mortality rate in Letcher County for 2008-2012 was 75.1 compared to the statewide rate of 32.0 and a U.S. rate of 18.1. Remarkably this rate fell to 46.3 from 2013-2017, while the Kentucky rate increased to 44.1 and the rate nationally rose to 25.1.**²¹ Although it lacks many healthcare amenities compared to wealthier places, Letcher County's healthcare is supported by proximity to two regional schools of medicine. Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, TN, has developed partnerships with Appalachian Regional Healthcare to host residents from the DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine. The physicians they host are obtaining training in internal medicine.²² The county's relationship with the University of Pikeville's Kentucky College of Osteopathic Medicine provides additional healthcare access.



[Copyright and full report: CountyHealthRankings.org](http://CountyHealthRankings.org)

With the 2019 opening of an office in Whitesburg that is part of the **Fahe-managed Kentucky Access to Recovery Program (KATR)**, **Letcher County became one of the first communities in the state to have access to a unique health program that is easing the transition from recovery back into the community.** The Whitesburg site is one of three field offices implementing programs across 14 Kentucky counties. Fahe administers the KATR program, partnering with the State of Kentucky and Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services (KCFS). In fact, the siting of the KATR program in Letcher County is due to advocacy at the state level by Fahe leaders. Initially the program was slated for two urban areas, but Fahe presented a compelling case for serving the rural, southeastern portion of the state. Just a few months into the

program, the success of the Letcher County program has exceeded expectations and met pent-up demand. The program is meant to provide wrap-around support and eliminate barriers for individuals in recovery. For example, many people lack a supportive network or access to basic services like safe housing, transportation, or childcare. Without such basic needs met, maintaining employment and obtaining health-care are even more difficult, and relapse becomes more likely. Though the office is located in Whitesburg, the services extend to the neighboring KY counties of Harlan, Perry, Knott, and Pike. Although H.O.M.E.S. is not directly involved in this project, the strong relationship with the Letcher County community makes the Whitesburg location a natural choice for this extension of Fahe's Strategic Program work.

Data Overview

HOUSING



Letcher County, Kentucky
Photo Credit: Malcolm J. Wilson

According to a Fahe-commissioned analysis of housing stock by the Virginia Center for Housing Research at Virginia Tech (VCHR), **15% of the houses in Letcher County were built before 1939, and 41% were built before 1970. The percent of households facing housing cost burden in Letcher County is estimated at between 18-22%.** This is slightly better than neighboring Harlan and Pike County, KY, or Dickenson County, VA. In those counties, residents face a cost burden that is between 22-26% (rounded). The VCHR report indicates Letcher County has what can be considered a tight housing market, with vacancy rates below 2%, which means “the lack of for-sale and for-rent inventory may drive up housing costs.”²³ In addition to the lack

of supply, the age of the housing and changes in systems like heating and cooling over the years have left the stock in southeastern Kentucky very energy inefficient. Even the large, higher quality homes left from the coal heyday are known colloquially as “energy hogs.” **The VCHR study documents median utility costs for the Public-Use Micro Area containing Letcher County between 41.5-57.7% of monthly income for residents.** Another feature of the housing in this area is the prevalence of manufactured homes. Nine of the ten counties with the largest proportion of mobile housing units are in Kentucky. **In Letcher County 26.9% of homes are manufactured dwellings.**²⁴



Photo Credit:
H.O.M.E.S.



H.O.M.E.S. — A DEVELOPER WITH A PURPOSE

The set of challenges is what motivates the work of Housing Oriented Ministries Established for Service (H.O.M.E.S.). The 501(c)3 housing developer is headquartered in Whitesburg, KY. Created in 1984 from the merger of Whitesburg Home Repair Program and East Kentucky Housing Development Corporation, H.O.M.E.S. exists to provide affordable housing to low-income families in Letcher County, as well as other nearby places that have significant needs. **H.O.M.E.S. is also member of Fahe, a Network of 50+ Members throughout Appalachia. Fahe's platform has directed or leveraged investments of greater than \$1 billion to more than 600,000 people since its inception in 1980.**²⁵ Fahe is unique in its ability to bring and effectively deploy capital to a tremendously underserved region while centering the work of local leaders and community needs. Fahe's success in this work has been cited by multiple studies looking for best practices in community development.²⁶ The Collective Impact approach provides a useful framework for understanding the role Fahe plays as a backbone

organization in relationship to H.O.M.E.S. Fahe plays a supportive, coordinating role to uplift communities in the region.²⁷

Each year H.O.M.E.S. repairs approximately 50 owner-occupied homes. The organization also operates 50 units of energy efficient affordable rental housing.²⁸ **The nonprofit has developed more than 250 new homes, a notable accomplishment in an area with a stagnant real estate market.** The programs offered by H.O.M.E.S. include new home construction, rehabilitation and repair for owner-occupied housing—including energy audits, affordable rental housing, and community improvement, such as razing hazardous or blighted dwellings. The community improvement role also extends to other sorts of work, which keeps the organization interconnected to other groups doing good in the county. The H.O.M.E.S. website lists a dozen staff including managers for construction, energy efficiency, and rental programs, as well as skilled workers from the construction team, including carpenters, electricians, and crew

leaders.²⁹ Scores of volunteers help with projects each year, traveling to Kentucky for alternative spring breaks and other service opportunities. The most recent IRS form 990 reports that H.O.M.E.S. relies predominantly on program revenue to support its operations, reporting only 21% of its income from "Contributions and Grants," "Investment Income," or "Other Revenue."³⁰



Photo Credit: H.O.M.E.S.

In response to the substantial cost burden faced by residents of Letcher County due to energy costs alone, H.O.M.E.S. has developed a line of business as a provider of the Appalachia HEAT Squad® (AHS) program. The program is a collaboration between Fahe, NeighborWorks America, and local Members.

The program replicates and expands a successful program developed by NeighborWorks of Western Vermont.³¹ It provides energy audits and improvements to homeowners who wish to lower their energy bills. The new program included training for crew members to obtain credentials from the Building Performance Institute, which is a unique expertise in the community. Eventually the income from the repairs for AHS clients will help diversify the revenue at H.O.M.E.S. and preserve existing housing stock. H.O.M.E.S.'s membership in Fahe enabled its launch of the AHS program, which was facilitated by an Appalachian Regional Commission POWER grant, and initially identified through Fahe's relationship with a fellow NeighborWorks member.

In addition to lowering bills to increase affordability, the impact of housing on

health is evident in the findings of the energy auditors. Long notes, "we find as many health factors as we do energy factors," but closely tracking the incidence of health data is beyond the scope of their work. Examples of these health factors include asthma and other breathing issues which are caused or exacerbated by poor air quality. The causes vary, but many houses are damp and circulate mold and mildew through improperly vented air returns.³² As noted above, both the Virginia Center for Housing Research Housing Needs Assessment and the County Health Rankings data document that there are many older homes and many manufactured homes which may benefit from energy audits and repairs. **Through the Appalachia HEAT Squad® program, once the repairs are identified, H.O.M.E.S. can connect borrowers to affordable loan products at Fahe to finance improvements or stabilization. Often the energy cost savings from lowered bills results in a net gain for the homeowner.**

The foray into energy efficiency and the need in the community to cope with cost-burden of extremely high energy bills motivated H.O.M.E.S. to continue its efforts. They are partnering to bring solar power to southeastern Kentucky. In collaboration with other Letcher County organizations, including the Letcher County Culture Hub, where Long is



Photo Credit: Appalachia Heat Squad



an active board member, solar panels have been installed at H.O.M.E.S., media nonprofit Appalshop, and the Hemphill Community Center. Again, H.O.M.E.S. crew members had the opportunity to obtain training and a unique skillset, this time in the installation of the new panels. Additionally, H.O.M.E.S. is partnering with the solar panel provider to become its Eastern Kentucky installation crew. **This will allow the company to serve families in southeast Kentucky reduce their energy cost burden with their own rooftop energy source.**

Solar panels require a large upfront investment, with energy savings realized over the life of the system. “Net-metering” allows energy produced in excess of customer need to go to the grid, with credits toward the energy bills of property owners. Kentucky’s electrical grid was designed with large coal operations in mind. With the departure of those companies, and the absence of new commercial customers, the maintenance of the grid now falls to residents. The costs are high. This tension between supporting the grid and allowing homeowners to benefit from the solar energy they generate for the power companies resulted in a conflict

about the way net-power would be credited—prior to the adoption of new legislation, utility companies had to pay consumers for solar generated power at the same rate they would charge them. In spite of advocacy efforts by a coalition of grassroots solar users, Kentucky state legislature passed a law which allows the Public Service Commission to set the rate which customers are paid. This change could discourage adoption of solar energy by individual homeowners for the foreseeable future.³³

Nevertheless, **the expansion into this aspect of energy efficiency illustrates several facets of H.O.M.E.S.’s role in the Letcher County community, as well as the role played by Executive Director Seth Long.** In addition to building a new line of business, and upgrading the skills of his team, the boldness of this new direction has brought media attention to the community. Long has given interviews on regional radio and television.³⁴ Financing for solar installation came through another regional partner, MACED.³⁵ Long’s role as a leader of this project has given him an additional platform to share his community’s successes.



COAL
JOBS IN
KENTUCKY
FELL

69%

BETWEEN
1989 & 2019

SOURCE:
Bureau of
Labor statistics

NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Given the inescapable talk about coal jobs in Appalachia, a person might be forgiven for continuing to talk about replacing the coal economy. But in reality, coal-related employment has been declining for decades. **Between 1984 and 2014 the share of U.S. produced coal that came from Eastern Kentucky dropped from 13% to 4%.** The decline in jobs began around 1950 due to mechanization that increased productivity while displacing workers. However, the individuals employed in coal mining continued to earn good pay—a report by the Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank notes that **the average wage for a coal miner in Eastern Kentucky was \$72,809 in 2014, nearly double the area's average wage.**³⁶ The Bureau of Labor statistics reported that mining jobs fell 69% in Kentucky between 1989 and 2019. A hoped-for solution, in the tradition of single-industry silver bullets, was a federal prison planned for Letcher County. The project was approved by Congress, and expected to be a big boon to the regional economy, bringing both construction and permanent jobs. However conflict with environmental groups has brought the project

to a halt, stymieing hopes for a big economic development win.³⁷

As the last of the coal has been hauled away, southeast Kentucky is faced with a loss of basic government services. For example, some counties have had to stop providing law enforcement, others lack adequate water.

The decline of coal severance taxes revenues has put a significant strain on local government budgets. The severance tax is “imposed on a non-renewable resource that is ‘severed’ or extracted within a specified taxing jurisdiction.”³⁸ **In Letcher County the payments from severance taxes used to be over \$1 million per quarter, but the county now receives about \$350,000, a loss of 2.6 million dollars annually.** For years the large and reliable sum supported public administration practices that failed to prepare for a day when coal was gone. Administrators made large outlays for depreciable items like vehicles and equipment, but failing to build reserves for the future. In some southeastern Kentucky counties the poor practices morphed into corruption.³⁹



Photo Credit: Letcher County Culture Hub

“Even when there are differences—large differences—there are issues that we can all work on together, even though we disagree on politics ... like trash. We can all agree on working together on the issue of trash.”

— Seth Long

Now, the most basic government functions are in need of innovative solutions, as even activities like waste management were paid for by the declining coal severance funds.

Letcher County must pay hefty fees to ship its trash to London, KY for disposal. The reality of the mismanagement over the years prompted residents in many coal-impacted counties to elect new judge executives in the 2018 elections.⁴⁰ Letcher County's new judge executive invited Long to join him on a visit to Sevierville, TN where a trash composting program has dramatically lowered the cost and environmental impact of waste management. Long says, *“I'm a common sense type of person. I went down there as a skeptic,”* but now he is convinced. *“They have positive cash flow,”* he says with conviction. Long goes on to explain **that with the composted trash, there is an opportunity to recover mined lands for new purposes.**⁴¹

Restoring the scarred mountains so they can supporting the economy again is a vision that offers some hope. The Culture Hub, where Long serves on the board, has been an important part of weaving together relationships that have been an important part of creating shared vision for the community. *“Even when there are differences—large differences—there are issues that we can all work on together, even though we disagree on politics ... like trash. We can all agree on working together on the issue of trash.”*⁴²

Long sums up the way forward: *“There's no*

silver bullet for our community.” **The old way of a one-industry economy, was a monoculture that smothered innovative ideas. It did not work in the past and is not going to work now.**

However, economic development still tends to focus on single employers as a silver bullet solution. Long says, *“My vision ... small businesses, microbusinesses are not the silver bullet, but like the silver bb.”* He compares the different activities in Whitesburg to the spray of buckshot from a shotgun: *“all these silver bbs ... it's not the thing that saves us, but it's a piece of the puzzle.”*⁴³ Everything from maple syrup, to Culture Hub projects like the community kitchen, to solar energy are part of this dream.

The efforts of the Letcher County Culture Hub are an example of these “silver bbs” commonly known as “creative placemaking” in the economic development literature. **Creative placemaking occurs when “partners from disparate sectors use arts and culture activities to strategically shape the character of a region or neighborhood.”**⁴⁴ An anchor of the placemaking work in Letcher County is Appalshop. One of ten Community Film Workshops created during the War on Poverty, to provide jobs for artists and capture stories of the people, it was the only rural project and the only one still in operation. Founded in 1969, the non-profit supports film-making, storytelling, theatre, and other media and music projects.⁴⁵ Appalshop has helped develop a certificate in media production available through Southeast



Photo Credit: APPALSHOP

Kentucky Community and Technical College, providing job training in a field that cuts against the stereotype of the jobs available in the region. This program continues Appalshop's economic development legacy.⁴⁶ Another Culture Hub partner is the Hemphill Community Center which, along with Appalshop and H.O.M.E.S., will benefit from the installation of solar panels. The community center has been in existence since the early 1970s and continues to be a gathering place.

Since 2016, commentary and analysis have looked at Appalachia for an explanation for the election of President Donald Trump. Their pieces frequently fail to mention the low rates of voter participation, even if support among those casting ballots is overwhelmingly one-sided. For example, **Letcher County's 2018 mid-term election voter turnout was 45%, while its presidential election turnout in 2016 was only 50%, compared to national rates of 49% and 61%, respectively.**⁴⁷ John Gaventa, a scholar of Appalachian political movements, reflected on his years of study in coal country highlighting that recent activity "*challenges notions of the ballot box as the sole indicator of 'representation' or agency and voice.*"⁴⁸ Noting that this area of the country has one of the highest non-participation rates in national elections, Gaventa reviews a variety of political movements in the region. Among the findings is that alongside the "formal national politics" are "localized, place based projects" that contradict the prevailing narrative.⁴⁹ Rather than silence or acquiescence confirmed by a lack of turnout to the

voting booth, residents clearly have a voice to use. In April of 2019, the New York Times published an opinion piece titled, "*The Best Way to Rejuvenate Rural America? Invest in Cities.*" The authors discussed research that presented the case for investment in mid-sized cities, citing the spillover benefits to outlying areas when the cities they are closest to succeed.⁵⁰ The argument has a zero-sum proposition underlying it—with limited resources, the investments need to go to those places with the highest rates of return. The state of Kentucky was selected as one example. The cities of Bowling Green and Elizabethtown-Fort Knox, both near Louisville, are contrasted with remote Letcher County. While Bowling Green and Elizabethtown have added jobs in the last decade, the number of jobs in Letcher County has fallen. The piece concludes:

"Proximity to cities does not solely explain rural prosperity. And some direct investments, such as broadband and rural entrepreneurship, can improve rural fortunes. Yet in an economy where private investment flows to places with dense clusters of prized assets, the best rural policy may be supporting the development of small and midsize cities across the country, improving rural residents' access to jobs, customers, training programs and small-business financing."

In response, Seth Long sent a letter of his own. It ran under the headline, "Invest in Rural Areas, Too."⁵¹ He writes, "*In a country struggling to deal with the wide gap between rich and poor, concern for our fellow neighbors can be an equally important guide to addressing equality.*" **The people in Letcher County are not waiting for a single solution to solve the problems left by coal.** They are focusing on a strategy that ensures, as the Culture Hub emphasizes, "*[they] own what they make,*" in order to push back against the decades of an extraction economy.



Photo: Seth Long

LEADERSHIP

One of Fahe's key charges from the 2017-2021 Strategic Plan is leadership. Fahe's Network of more than 50 members is led by talented leaders in communities throughout Appalachia. The plan for Fahe is to deepen its commitment to leadership development throughout all of the communities where Fahe's Members live and work. Several factors help promote *leadership in the community*, not merely in the success of the organization. There are five factors identified. First, is **support for operational stability** in the form of access to lines of credit or access to capital. Second, is the **opportunity for formal training** through a variety of national partnerships, including NeighborWorks America. Third, is **collaboration and exchange of ideas** with fellow non-profit leaders through statewide caucuses, topical working groups, and service on Fahe's governing board or committees. Fourth is the **opportunity to collaborate on funding or grant opportunities** which require a greater capacity than an individual member might have, but which can be executed by several members with Fahe's grant

management. Last is the **opportunity to advocate for their home communities and regions on the national stage** through relationships that are facilitated through the Network platform. While Members are the "boots on the ground," they delegate to Fahe the responsibility to keep an eye on the horizon for opportunities and to share the story of community change on behalf of the Network.

Successful members have strong, stable leadership. Seth Long epitomizes this. Prior to joining the staff, in 1991, Long had already volunteered for H.O.M.E.S. for four years. Long's family visited the area and decided to stay. They came to southeast Kentucky from Pennsylvania to use his skills in construction and management to serve others. The need for affordable, decent housing in the county hit close to home as it took him and his wife three years to find a house that was neither sub-standard nor overpriced. Even then, Long says they would not have purchased the property without his construction expertise. His knowledge enabled



SouthDown Farm
Maple Syrup
Photo Credit:
SouthDown Farm

them to make significant necessary improvements. Long has deep wells of energy and an indefatigable work ethic. As a teenager, Long worked 40 hours a week at a dairy farm while completing high school. As a proud alumnus of the Future Farmers of America, he has a lifelong connection to agriculture. **The Long family own and operate SouthDown Farm where Long's entrepreneurial energy is channeled into a passion for developing Kentucky Maple Syrup as a brand.** The farm, along with his role at H.O.M.E.S. create a nexus for cross-sector community collaborations and civic engagement.

Driving through nearby Jenkins, also in Letcher County, where old coal camp homes still predominate, Long seems to know something about each business that passes along the highway. Inching down a steep road where houses are stacked up the hillside, he pauses to greet a H.O.M.E.S. tenant unloading oxygen tanks from his car—a reminder of the shift from coal jobs to healthcare. “Working today?” Long inquires kindly.

Long's knack for casting a vision emerges during the drive. Pointing out the steep ravines that cradle the highway connecting Jenkins to Whitesburg, Long asks rhetorically, “Look at

the terrain around us—what do you do with Ag here? There's not tillable property ... that's why we got into maple syrup.” Throughout the 50 acres of property he owns are maple trees. Starting from milk jugs and internet tutorials, SouthDown farm is now a commercial producer of maple syrup, tapping 300 trees in the past year. **Long's plan for the business goes far beyond roadside stands and festivals, imagining a future market for Kentucky maple syrup powered by strong branding and customers from across the nation placing online orders.** In developing the business he's become well versed in food packaging and safety regulation. He has become an advocate for food industry regulations that lower barriers to entry for cottage producers. The state of Kentucky has some of the strictest laws in the country, so Long has found himself driving over an hour a way to make statements at a regulatory hearing.

In Whitesburg, a former school has been re-purposed as a commercial kitchen for community use. **The Community Agricultural Nutritional Enterprises (C.A.N.E.) community kitchen is a permitted facility, which allows small farmers to prepare their food under conditions that permit them to do commercial**

sales online or to grocery stores. Long's family have utilized the space to prepare a popular SouthDown Farm product: apple butter. The building is also a focal point for local health improvement efforts associated with the Whitesburg farmers market. Partnering with Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation in Letcher County resulted in a program known as the Pharmacy, where residents received tokens as part of a prescription for purchasing fresh vegetables from the market.⁵² The farmers then exchanged those tokens for cash. Exercise and social programming also occurs out of this former school building. H.O.M.E.S. volunteers and crew contributed labor to the renovation project. Long says, "... it's hard to capture this on a report ... leadership in the community. I'm not just a leader when I have my H.O.M.E.S. hat on." Long sees his role not just in the "8 to 5" but also off-the-clock as well. Long notes that there are others in the community who combine their vocational or professional work with their desire to see their communities prosper.

"... it's hard to capture this on a report ... leadership in the community. I'm not just a leader when I have my H.O.M.E.S. hat on."

— Seth Long

Long took on the leadership of H.O.M.E.S. at a time of critical transition for the company. Since then, with both great ambition and resolute effort, the company and his community are undertaking the strenuous work of "turning the flywheel" to borrow Jim Collin's evocative metaphor. In many ways, **Long is a model of the Level 5 leader** concept developed by Collins in the book *Good to Great*. **The Level 5 leaders "display a powerful mix of personal humility and indomitable will. They are incredibly ambitious, but their ambition is first and**

foremost for the case, for the organization and its purpose, not themselves ... they are often self-effacing, quiet, reserved, and even shy."⁵³

In contrast to the popular stereotype of leadership, the Level 5 leader "cuts against the grain of conventional wisdom, especially the belief that we need large-than-life saviors with big personalities to transform companies."⁵⁴

When Seth Long was promoted to executive director, he thought his first day on the job might be his last. Following the resignation of the previous executive director, he learned that they were far behind on bills, payroll was due, and he felt like the most responsible thing to do for the company would be to sell assets to pay creditors, layoff himself and the rest of the staff, and shut down until they could make a plan to reopen. Later that day, Seth received a call from Fahe CEO Jim King. King had reached out to offer a warm welcome to the new leader. Long recalls telling him somberly, "*Jim, this is a condolences call, not a congratulations call.*"

Long explained the financial situation and his intentions. However, King implored him not to give up, instead asking Long what it would take financially to cover payroll and immediate bills in order to keep the doors open at H.O.M.E.S. Long recalls a warning from King that shutting down operations would make it very hard to ever reopen. With a rapidly disbursed loan from Fahe, Long was able to begin some revenue generating projects, stabilize the company, and set about thinking in strategic, long-term ways. Now a member of the Fahe board, Long notes that working with other leaders on long-term visioning is a practice he hopes to implement with his board at H.O.M.E.S. Long is a leader within the Fahe Network as well. He gives his time to "mission tours" and in one-on-one meetings for national funders seeking insights into what is going well in Appalachia. Serving on the board at Fahe provides an opportunity to bring



the long-term visioning and other best practices back to Whitesburg, while he helps other Member leaders learn from the successes in Letcher County.

Since those early days, Long has also grown as a leader in his community. Over time he realized that despite his focus on “bricks and sticks,” he needed to be involved in what was happening outside of H.O.M.E.S. So, in order to build relationships with other local leaders, he joined the board of the Letcher County Culture Hub, “a group of very different organizations politically and socially, and we’ve gotten together sitting around the table to work on issues in the community, all sorts of issues that matter to each of us regardless of our affiliations.”⁵⁵ The dwindling population of rural communities means that many leaders have to serve in multiple roles. Long’s influence includes his work at the Culture Hub, his role as proprietor of SouthDown Farm, a booth in the Farmers Market where he takes his produce, and even working with the incoming judge executive, to solve to their burgeoning fiscal issues related to waste management. Several other leaders active in the Culture Hub have similar resumes.

In rural Appalachia such overlap is typical.

The ways in which local leaders, particularly in small towns and cities, are taking on the challenges facing their communities has attracted attention from policy and media elites. In 2016 journalist Thomas Friedman began writing about “complex adaptive coalitions,” non-partisan, diverse groups of stakeholders who want to make things better in their communities. In one respect, the Letcher County coalition fails to align—Friedman states, “all successful complex adaptive coalitions have some kind of college or university in their town.”⁵⁶ While Letcher County is not home to a university, there are other organizations providing the glue to community leadership efforts. **The Culture Hub is a key venue, and Fahe’s support as a backbone organization is also woven into the community fabric.**

The successful coalitions Friedman studied share three additional features:

1. They are started by civic leaders with no formal authority, and not by politicians. They are driven by “a relentless ‘what-works attitude.’”
2. They begin with a vision, strategy, and benchmarks for rebuilding their community, which enable them ‘to harness each element of the community and mobilize their unique resources, and society innovations, behind this vision...’
3. They understand that there are no quick fixes for regenerating a community, which is why civic leadership is so crucial—“because civic leaders can adopt a long-term view that transcends political tenures.”

The collaboration of leaders through the Culture Hub network exemplifies the third point. A journalist covering the Whitesburg effort reports, “Hub partners have managed to sidestep their differences over politics and coal, long-standing divisions that could threaten their



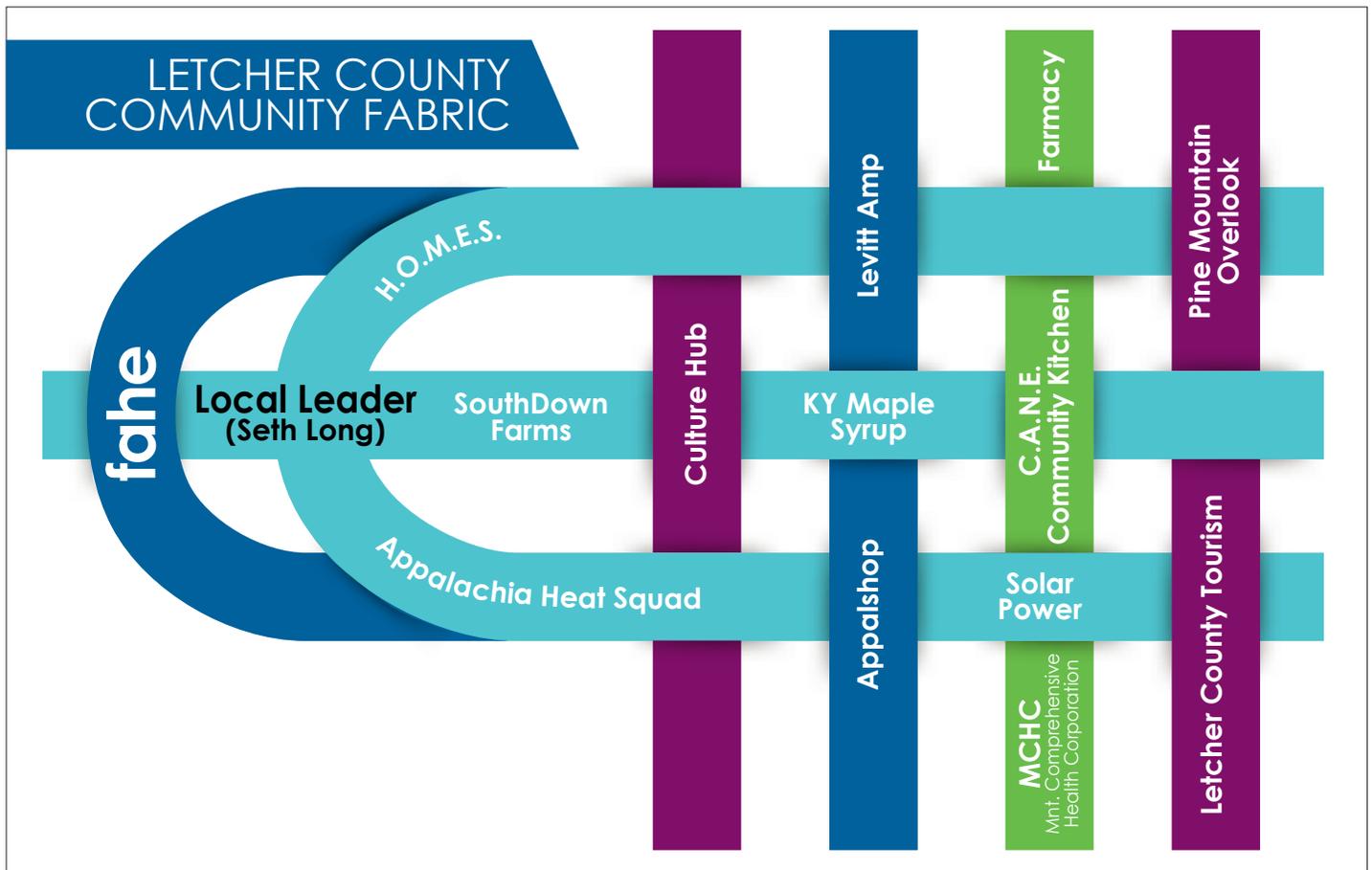
“I feel like there isn’t a silo, that our work here in the community ... housing is important but it’s more about a healthy community and what that brings in ... So it touches food; it touches health; it touches education; it touches economic development. We need all those things to have a good community. 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

ability to work together.”⁵⁷ The third point is also emphasized by Long, for whom party identity is not an important consideration. He says, “if we gotta wait for the government to do it—whatever flavor you’re talkin’ about—I think that’s a waste of time ... while we appreciate the funds that come along ... and those type of things ... I don’t want to be dependent on them.” Long explains that every “wind of change” requires adjustments that undermine long-term sustainability, which he says is “such an important key to success. You cannot be completely tied and dependent on those sources of funding. I would love to have the day come when H.O.M.E.S. is in a place where I could care less ... what was happening in Washington.” **Freidman adds one additional criteria: progress is due to relationships, not technology.** Long exemplifies these characteristics. Long says, “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.”

Healthy rural communities exemplify these qualities. The strength of civil society in rural America has also been highlighted in the Stanford Social Innovation Review. In an August 2018 article in the SSRI, **Allen Smart and Betsey Russell describe civil society as a carpet where each member of the community has “a responsibility for continual care and reweaving. In densely populated areas, there are enough citizens to supply fibers so that others can coast along for free. In small rural towns, everyone must contribute ... and stay especially vigilant when it unravels ... ”** in order to keep society function-



ing.⁵⁸ Smart and Russell write that civil society is “rooted in actions, not words”—Long’s “bricks and sticks” and the identity of being “do-ers.” Second, civil society “abhors silos,” and as noted above, Long identified the absence of silos as a critical component of the Culture Hub’s impact. “Individuals play many roles concurrently to keep rural places running,” according to Smart and Russell’s analysis.⁵⁹ **As Long moves from Culture Hub board, to H.O.M.E.S. executive director, Fahe board member, to farmer, to advocate, he is gaining “a breadth of awareness and civic knowledge that can be elusive in larger urban settings.”**⁶⁰ The Culture Hub fulfills the role of “convener,” another feature of resilient and successful collaborative civic efforts. **In a similar fashion, Fahe serves as a convener for the Members, setting the table for them to connect with each other and with local leaders across the nation.**⁶¹

One such of the power of local collaborations is the Levitt AMP Whitesburg Music Series. Annually the Levitt Foundation sponsors a concert series in a small to mid-sized city. The finalists for the award are selected through an online voting process. The grantees host a series of 10 concerts in an underused public space. In 2018 the City of Whitesburg was chosen from hundreds of applicants to receive one of the \$25,000 matching grants. The pavilion selected as the venue for the summer music events is located at the former site of a railyard and was in need of substantial repairs, H.O.M.E.S. crews stepped in to get the structure up to standard. In 2019 Whitesburg again was chosen. **Even though it was the smallest town in the competition, the Whitesburg proposal received the highest number of votes in the public comment phase. The concert came to fruition through the joint efforts of the City of Whitesburg, the Mountain Heritage Festival Committee,**

In 2018 the City of Whitesburg was chosen from hundreds of applicants to Levitt AMP Music Series to receive one of the \$25,000 matching grants.

Photo Credit: Levitt AMP



“We believe in this. We are investing because there are other ways that this pays us back.”

— Seth Long

Appalshop, Whitesburg/Letcher County Farmer’s Market, and CANE community kitchen.

The roles that Long and H.O.M.E.S. play in the community underscore another theme shared by nonprofits who are successful. They need stability and operating capital in order to do the good work in their community that isn't tied directly to revenue. Long notes, referencing their work to support the successful Levitt AMP concert series and the construction of overlooks on Pine Mountain, they don't receive funding to pay for the expense of having employees working on these projects. He says, *“I don't have a grant to be here and do good things.”* He also explained that through community collaborations he was able to dispel some local misconceptions about H.O.M.E.S.'s operating model. The fact that they operated as a social enterprise, with revenue generated through production and rental income, *“came as a shock to older groups in the community,”* who assumed

H.O.M.E.S. operated off endowment support or a large, ongoing foundation grant. However, Long says, *“We believe in this. We are investing because there are other ways that this pays us back.”*

Due in part to H.O.M.E.S.'s membership in Fahe, and partly to his own ambition for his adopted hometown and farm, **Long's influence flows in two directions. One is horizontal, across his community through his work as a leader of H.O.M.E.S., as a member of the Culture Hub, as a vendor at the local Farmer's Market, and as someone who makes his home there. The other is vertical, as Long advocates for his community at public hearings for solar power or to lower barriers to entry for cottage 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.**

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