

A photograph of a man in a yellow and purple soccer jersey with a "wish" logo and a Nike swoosh, holding a soccer ball. A young child in a blue and white striped shirt and blue shorts is reaching out to touch the ball. Another man in a white shirt and grey cap is partially visible on the left. The background is a green chain-link fence and grass.

Case for Support

Rural Opportunity Institute
Powering Resilient Communities



Who We Are

Our Mission: ROI supports youth, organizations, and communities to interrupt the cycle of generational trauma and design innovative solutions for healing and resilience.

Our Vision: A system that builds the capacity of rural, majority-Black communities to support people's healing from adversity to achieve health, safety, connection, and self-determination.



Our Community

Located in rural Eastern NC, Edgecombe County is a deeply resilient community. It is home to the first town founded by freed slaves after the Civil War (Princeville). Princeville is the first place Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave

his "I Have a Dream Speech," and the hometown of Janice Byrant Howroyd, the first African American woman to own a private company valued at more than \$1 billion.

And yet, due to the compounded effects of systemic oppression

and historical trauma that have disadvantaged rural, majority-Black communities like Edgecombe County for centuries, we see poor outcomes for children and families in Edgecombe County.

A child poverty rate of 37%, one of the highest in the state. 69.93% of adults in Edgecombe County believe there is not enough economic opportunity and social mobility for themselves and their families.

Educational opportunities that are not meeting the needs of students. Edgecombe has the lowest level of 3rd grade reading proficiency in the state—only 31.2% of 3rd graders are reading at or above grade level. The county's high school graduation rate is 77.3%, also one of the lowest in the state.

Insufficient access to healthcare. The county's population to physician ratio is 2,903:1 and the mental health provider to population ratio is 1,793:1. On top of low access to providers, 26.4% of children in Edgecombe are food insecure, compared to NC's average of 17.1%.



Our Story

Seth and Vichi founded ROI because as former teachers, they cared deeply about improving outcomes for youth, and they were curious about how human centered design could help. To find out, they partnered with the local school district to engage Edgecombe County community members in a series of meetings. Over the next 9 months, Vichi and Seth attended and hosted **over 300 meetings to engage over 1,000 people**. Their objective was to listen to community members—parents, youth, religious leaders, teachers, school administrators, law enforcement, public health officials, doctors, and small business owners—to understand their experiences and inform ROI's mission and direction.

This human centered design process uncovered a pattern:
STORIES OF UNADDRESSED TRAUMA.

As the work went on, more community members got involved, transforming the project into a community-run initiative. The community found that trauma impacts almost every aspect of life in Edgecombe County. And often, **people and organizations respond to stress and trauma with punishment and isolation**. In other words, when people struggle with toxic stress, they are often isolated from the very networks that could provide connection and healing:

- Children are suspended or expelled from school when they lose their tempers.
- Adults who use substances to self-soothe are often arrested, imprisoned, and denied employment opportunities for non-violent drug-related offenses.

The community identified a high leverage antidote to trauma: *Replace punitive practices with responses that offer restoration and healing.* **This strategy builds resilience at the individual, organizational, and community level.**

4 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT ROI

We center the community. ROI partners directly with community members to build new trauma-informed solutions.

We work in rural areas. Our core innovation is to develop and implement impactful solutions in rural settings.

We apply systems thinking and design thinking. One of ROI's greatest strengths is operationalizing these ways of thinking, and doing so in a way that centers community voice and input.

It's working. In the short tenure of ROI, we have already demonstrated our model is capable of profound and transformative impact in our community.

Our Work

Our initiatives combine **big ideas** with **grassroots leadership** and **community ownership**. Our initiatives fall into four focus areas:

Resilient Community Members

Trauma & Resilience 101

ROI's two-hour Trauma & Resilience 101 covers the basics of trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACES), and resilience. We offer this program to Eastern NC community members for free four times a year and have reached over 15,000 people locally.

Listening Circles

A listening circle is an opportunity for a group of people to build resilience skills through facilitated storytelling. From April 2020–April 2021, we hosted five listening circles for Edgecombe County middle and high school students. In 2022, we're building on this initiative to engage youth more deeply in leading listening circles.

Reconnect for Resilience® Training (RFR)

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Resilient Organizations

Resilient Leaders Initiative (RLI)

RLI is an intensive, cohort-based program that guides teams from public agencies to implement trauma-informed practices at their organizations. This is the first social accelerator program in the country that is based in a rural community, focuses on public agencies (instead of startups), and centers healing trauma.

Resilient Leaders Initiative Case Study

HOPE Program Makes Mental Health Supports Available in Schools, Funded by Medicaid

Hope is an alternative school that enrolled in ROI's RLI program in 2020. Program Coordinator Quarry Williams had a challenge in mind: students did not have access to mental health supports necessary to be successful in school. Through RLI, he designed an innovative and sustainable solution: to bill Medicaid for student mental health services. This novel solution is replicable, and its impact reaches far beyond student achievement to health equity and family wellbeing.



Resilient Ideas

Small Bets Lab

ROI's Small Bets Lab is a process for exploring promising but risky ideas that show incredible potential to transform the toughest challenges that rural communities face. Modeled after corporate innovation programs like Google X and Bell Labs, the Small Bets Lab is where our initiatives are born.

Current Small Bets

- Local Policy Change: School Resource Officers
- Using technology to heal trauma
- Community Data Dashboard
- Statewide Policy Change: Healthcare Storytelling
- Youth Leadership in RLI Initiatives

Resilient Resource Hub

Our online Resource Hub is an open-source platform that shares what has worked in our community with leaders from around the globe. It is home to toolkits, resource guides, articles, and videos to support changemakers who share the commitment to spreading trauma-informed community solutions. We have also worked on two podcasts: The Resilience Zone, hosted by two adolescents in our community, and On the Edgcombe, centering the experiences of those in law enforcement.

Small Bet Case Study: Biofeedback Breathing Program

Biofeedback Breathing is a computer-based software that helps individuals understand and control their nervous systems' responses to trauma. Our core innovation: Bringing this technology to rural communities to support those who have much at stake: students, first responders, parents, and inmates. We piloted Biofeedback Breathing in a local school and saw a 57% decrease in anxiety symptoms within students who took part in biofeedback breathing. We're now poised to scale this solution across the country.

Impact

Our programs are driving results that foster real and significant positive change for people who are experiencing trauma.

Impact on Community Members

96%

of RFR participants say that this training will help them at work.

Impact on Organizations

92%

of RLI participants are now more knowledgeable of the extent to which individuals in their community experience trauma.



Piloting Impactful Ideas

100%

of students in our Biofeedback Breathing Program said their ability to calm down has increased.

ROI's Social Innovative Approach



Listen to and engage deeply with community members about their greatest **unmet needs and desires**



Integrate cutting-edge practices with **deep local knowledge**



Test possible solutions and **collect data to learn** what did and didn't work



Embed successful practices into local institutions and policies



Create structures and procedures to ensure transparency and representation in decision-making



Document what works, promote lessons learned, and **share insights** broadly equip leaders in other communities to scale what works

Take Action

Less than 1% of philanthropic dollars end up being invested in majority-minority, rural communities like our own. With your help, we can change that.



TO EXPAND OUR
IMPACT, ROI IS
RAISING **\$1 MILLION.**

How you can support

You belong in ROI's community of supporters if:

- You believe in leveraging the assets of rural communities to build innovative solutions to complex challenges like trauma, poverty, and inequality.
- You believe rural communities deserve resources, health, safety, and connection.
- You're excited about approaching social change in a new way.

Please consider contributing to our work in one of the following ways:

1. Recurring Gifts

Gifts made on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis are the most impactful type of donation you can contribute to ROI. It helps us forecast our revenue accurately and frees up staff time so they can focus on our resilience-building initiatives.

2. Multi-year Pledges

Make a three or five-year pledge of any amount to show your long-term support of long-term solutions. This helps us build organizational sustainability.

3. One Time Gift

If you're inspired to give, but not ready to make a recurring or long-term commitment, this is the best option. We appreciate you being part of our work no matter how much you give.

No matter how big, your investment has a direct impact on building resources, health, safety, and connection in rural communities.

If you can't support us financially at this time, we are also seeking mentors with experience in entrepreneurship, law, human resources, and sales who are willing to donate their time and expertise to scaling our resilience work.



Rural
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Institute

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