

Impact Report

Cohort 2 — 2022



Resilient Leaders Initiative

powered by Rural Opportunity Institute

Our Team

Who We Are

Administrative Staff

Courtney Richardson
*Strategic Initiatives Program
Manager*

Naomi Marsh-Suleiman
Director of Operations

Vichi Jagannathan
Co-founder

Tatyana Weathersbe
AmeriCorp VISTA Fellow

Seth Saeugling
Co-founder



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 Why

We know people are not to blame for the trauma and stress that impacts them, and that trauma is caused by unjust systems.

We know resilience is an inner strength in all humans, regardless of background, and we as people are wired for connection and healing.

How might we create systems and institutions in rural communities that support people's healing from adversity by understanding history, reshaping practices, and fostering deep-rooted connections?



Special thanks to:

Area L AHEC

Part of the NC AHEC Program

Recruit • Train • Retain

ROI's work exists underneath the fiscal sponsorship of Area L AHEC, a 501c3 non-profit that has served our community since 1973. Area L provides and supports educational activities and services with a focus on primary care in rural communities and those with less access to resources to recruit, train, and retain the workforce needed to create a healthy North Carolina. Located in Rocky Mount, Area L AHEC is one of nine centers in the NC AHEC Program and serves Edgecombe, Halifax, Nash, Northampton, and Wilson counties.



Dear Community,

It is with great pleasure that we present another report of an exciting initiative by Rural Opportunity Institute (ROI). You may be familiar with the ways ROI supported youth, organizations and communities in rural eastern North Carolina; our mission is to interrupt the cycle of generational trauma through educating our communities about healing and resilience. After several years of working with rural communities, we are continually inspired by the incredible resources available in these often-overlooked places. Rural community members constantly show us their tenacity to overcome challenges, desire for change, and passion for justice. We couldn't be more honored to witness that.

We share with you our outcomes and results of Cohort 2, part of our Resilient Leaders Initiative (RLI). Cohort 2 is composed of five public organizations from various institutions in our community, who worked together to implement trauma-informed practices into their organizations. With guidance from ROI, Cohort 2 designed new strategies to solve challenges in their agencies according to their needs, and then shared these strategies with other similar groups. Through this process of learning, solving, and sharing, Cohort 2 supported ROI's mission of creating more trauma-informed communities.

Working with this Cohort has been thought-provoking and exciting. RLI allows organizations to pilot programs that are trauma-informed while connecting with other local groups to gain support and feedback. As I've witnessed the teams grow over the course of the program, my key takeaway is this: Collaboration and resource sharing is the nucleus of any social accelerator program. The journey to becoming trauma-informed is both challenging and rewarding, and the process can be made easier when you can share ideas with those in situations similar to your own. At ROI, we greatly value sharing our findings with others—so we hope this report inspires curiosity within your organization to find new solutions to your challenges.

Enjoy this report, and let us know how we can support your journey to becoming a trauma-informed organization. Together, we can build resilience in our communities to create a healthier, kinder, happier world.



Courtney Richardson
ROI Strategic Initiatives
Program Manager

What We Do



RLI 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 on healing trauma.

Resilient organizations are the backbone of a resilient community. In rural communities in particular, public agencies and community-based organizations are often the largest employers and providers of services. Therefore, in order for rural communities to thrive, these organizations must thrive as well.

RLI is an intensive, cohort-based program that guides teams from public agencies to implement trauma-informed practices at their organizations. Over nine months, leaders from these organizations build a deeper understanding of their clients through the human-centered design process. Then, they ideate, test, iterate, and implement policy and practice changes that build resilience within their organization.

Goals of the Resilient Leaders Initiative:

- ROI will work with organizations and agencies to take the best trauma-informed practices that have worked in other communities, for an organization / program like our own, and implement these best practices and policies.
- ROI will support organizations and agencies to design new, best practices for the challenges that their organization is facing. Agencies and organizations will work to build the solution for their own organization. And then share it with other organizations like theirs.

This Year's Cohort

Meet the Organizations

RLI Teams

- Edgecombe Community College College & Career Readiness**
 Desmond Sykes, Evan Parrish, Kelvin Smith, Jerry Harper, Megan Boyd, Varnell Kinnin, LaShawnda Washington, Ada Harvey.
A community college is located in Edgecombe County, with 2,151 students and 139 faculty.
- Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging**
 Ashleigh Glover, Mary Marlin, Tara Harrington
An Area Agency on Aging (AAA) that empowers senior adults, family caregivers, and individuals with disabilities residing in Edgecombe, Halifax, Nash, Northampton, and Wilson Counties to live independent, meaningful, healthy, and dignified lives.
- Wilson County DSS**
 Candice Rountree, Nikki Mears, Nichole Atkinson, Daphne Santiful, Erin Dailey, Malinda Smith
A human services agency that provides support to families and individuals, often in crisis, in navigating child protective service, housing, employment, education, healthcare, and food access.
- Southwest Edgecombe High School**
 Alyssa Stafford and Summer Hopper
An Edgecombe County High school serving over 700 students grades 9-12 each year
- Eastern Star Missionary Baptist Church***
 Youth Committee
This committee is comprised of several young adults from the Eastern Star Church community.

RLI Program Manager

Courtney Richardson, Strategic initiatives Program Manager

RLI Coaches

Victor Udoewa
 Edgecombe Community College,
 College & Career Readiness

Dr. Jaime Mendoza-Williams
 Eastern Star Missionary Baptist
 Church Youth and Youth Adult
 Committee

Tara Seibel
 Upper Coastal Plain Council of
 Governments Area Agency on Aging

Jamilah Bowden
 Southwest Edgecombe
 High School

Chuck Price
 Wilson County DSS

Coaches provided the following support to teams:

- Cheerleading and support
- Project management
- Rigor
- Using data (of all types)
- Testing small bets using the human centered design approach
- Engaging with, listening to and building accountability to the clients, customers, and community members they serve
- Learning from failure and implementing solutions
- Building buy-in/influence, customers and community members they serve
- Reinforcing the skills learned in the convenings

RLI Support Team

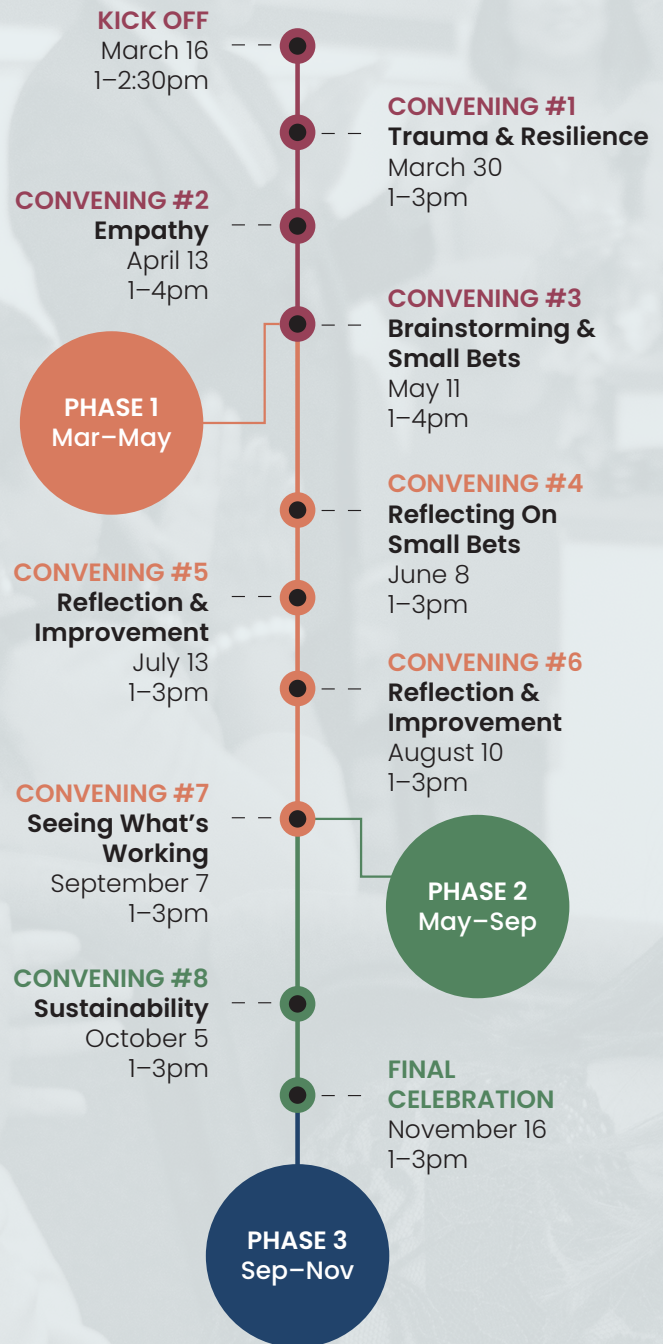
Melissa Altemose, Curriculum Auditor/Specialist
Emily Skywark, Design Support Specialist
Melissa McCoy, Data and Improvement Coach

RLI Facilitators:

Chandra Green, Historical Trauma and Resilience
Chuck Price, Trauma-Informed Systems Change
Jenny Jacklin, Storytelling and Visioning
Jonathan Santos Silva, Little Bets Reflection
Janine Chen, Workshop Facilitator

*Note: Eastern Star Missionary Baptist Church Youth and Youth Adult Committee made the tough decision to leave RLI partway through the program. We will dive deeper into what their experience taught us later in the report.

Program Timeline



Our Process

We partnered with the #2 public health university (*U.S. News and World Report*) to evaluate the implementation of the Resilient Leaders Initiative.

Our process is designed with the needs and preferences of participating organizations in mind.



**GILLINGS SCHOOL OF
GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH**





Selection Process

01 → 02 → 03 → 04

Open a brief interest form for teams within organizations serving Edgecombe County who are interested in piloting new practices that lead to healing—and reimagining policies that have caused trauma and harm.

We evaluate the pool of applicants using four criteria: previous commitment to understanding trauma, strength of their team, strategic thinking, and follow through.

The strongest candidates move forward to a round of interviews, where we dig deeper to understand each team’s commitment to anti-racism, fit within our cohort, openness to new ideas, and potential to influence the broader field.

Finally, we select four to five organizations to participate.

Once the organizations have committed to the program, we guide them through 4 STEPS over 9 MONTHS:

1. Research Possibilities
2. Identify Patterns & Opportunities
3. Prototype Possible Solutions
4. Recommend Paths Forward

Throughout the process participating teams receive several types of support from ROI:

- Expert Coaching
- Team Learning and Capacity Building
- Funding to test ideas, and ultimately, implement initiatives!

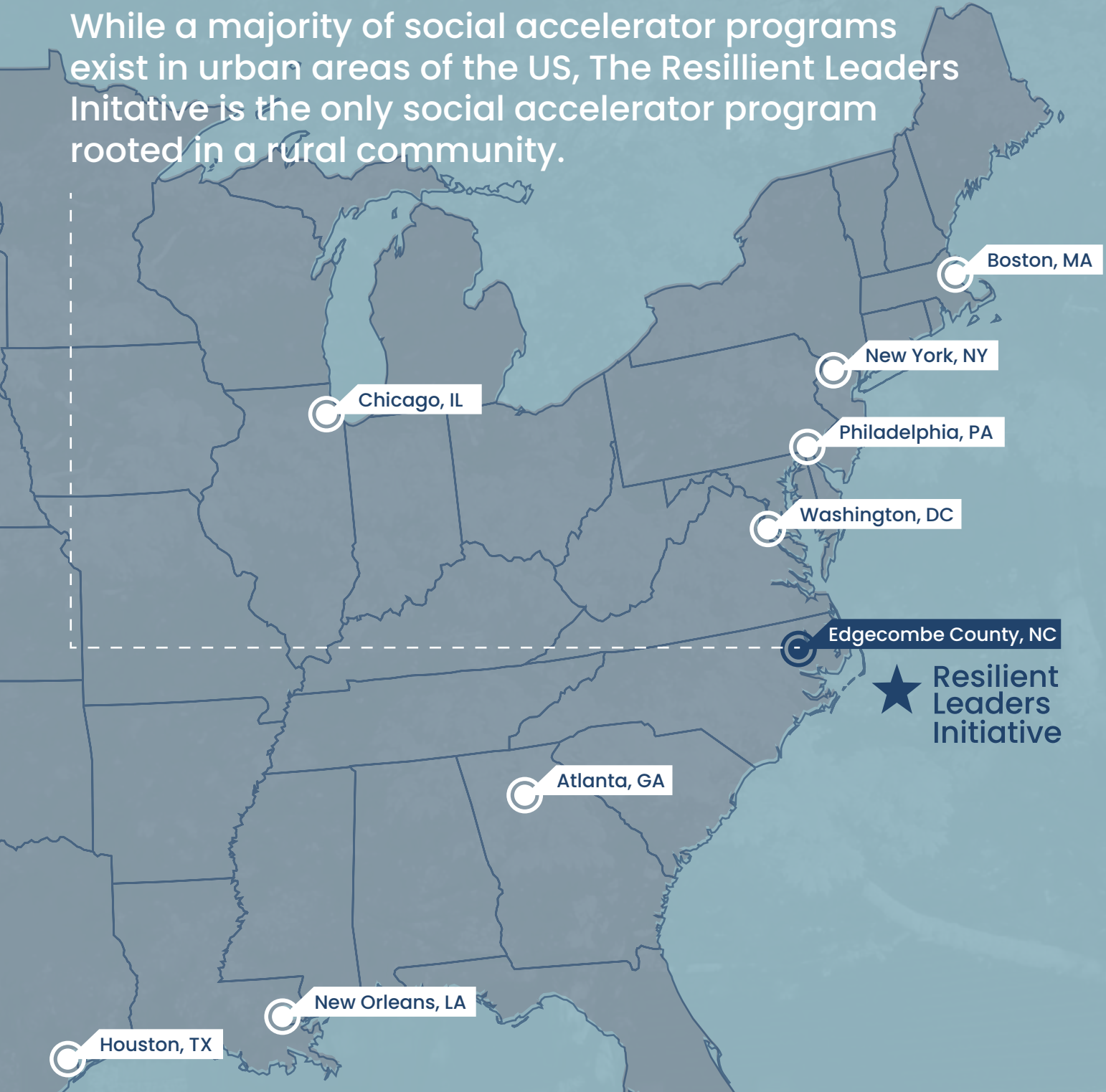


What Makes Us Unique

ROI works to shift the narrative of the urban and rural divide, especially in technology and innovation. Often, the innovation process leaves out rural communities.

How We Differ

While a majority of social accelerator programs exist in urban areas of the US, The Resilient Leaders Initiative is the only social accelerator program rooted in a rural community.



We are the only program nationally that seeks to:

- Address historical trauma as a cause of present-day outcomes
- Focus on public institutions
- Be rooted in a rural community

Program Results

Outcome 1

Participants are now centering their communities when developing new initiatives.

100%

of teams reached a shared understanding of their priority population.

83%

of participants got feedback from their priority populations on ideas developed during the program

+31%

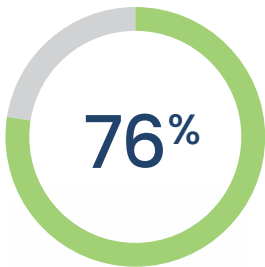
of participants who previously did so less often, grew to always approach problems from the perspective of their target population (**41% post, compared to 10% in the pretest**).

“In implementing community-building circles, we started to connect to students in ways we would not have been able to had we just stuck to our curriculum.”

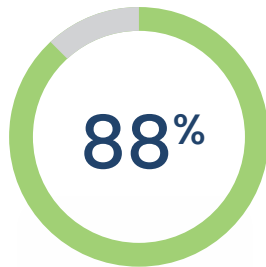
Outcome 2

Participants know more about trauma and its effects.

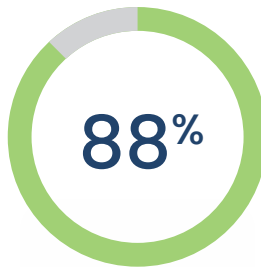
After participating in the program



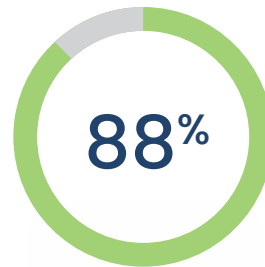
report a clear understanding of toxic stress (**31% increase**)



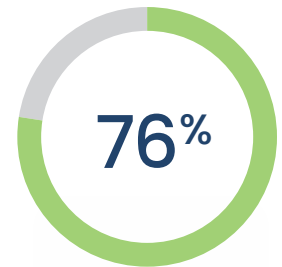
report a clear understanding of how trauma impacts brain development (**38% increase**)



report a clear understanding of generational trauma (**53% increase**)



know the importance of self-care in the workplace (**18% increase**)



76% feel prepared to respond when someone is feeling upset or overwhelmed (**61% increase**)

Outcome 3

Participants expanded their knowledge of racial equity and anti-racism practice.

61% feel confident identifying interpersonal racism (**31% increase**)

76% feel confident identifying institutional or structural racism (**51% increase**)

76% feel comfortable talking about racism (**36% increase**)

“Our desire is to be a place that caregivers can find healing and so we are working on a model that will allow people to learn and try new things, increase capacity for supportive caregiving, and increase self-determination.”

Our Impact

Program Results

ROI collected data from RLI participants at the beginning and end of the program, with the goal of understanding progress on RLI's intended short- and medium-term outcomes.

A Learning Moment

One of our biggest learning moments this year happened when one of the agencies in our cohort decided they could no longer participate in the program. Several internal factors had shifted for them, and they decided that they no longer had the capacity to carry out their project. From this, we learned how much staff time and transformational thinking RLI demands of teams. We're working on clarifying RLI's level of commitment during our assessment and selection process.

Sustaining the Pilot

Participants are ready to carry this work on into the future.

71% agree that they know how to sustain the pilot in the future.

64% agree that they have the resources to sustain the pilot into the future.

100% of teams received funding to carry their projects into the future.

\$64,000 total distributed to RLI teams.

"It was great learning that there were trials and errors from the other teams. And that things can and will change."

Little Bets Learning Journey Reports



Edgecombe Community College College & Career Readiness

Chosen Challenge

Socio-emotionally supporting students to achieve their academic goals.

What We Learned in Empathy Interviews

Trust between students and faculty is essential for us to find out how to support students—we cannot understand their challenges if they don't feel comfortable talking to us. Students experience various barriers to completing their education, and all have unique journeys and needs.

Our Solution

- Weekly, teacher-led, peer mentoring groups to single-parent students and other students to support their well-being and reduce barriers to academic achievement and graduation.
- English language acquisition and specialized support for ELA students, providing timely and appropriate help.

Our Progress

So far, we've led a pilot peer mentor group with promising results.

What's Next:

- Secure grant funding for consumable goods and technological resources.
- Expand to each of our campuses and satellite locations.
- Inspire other instructors to take part with compelling storytelling.
- Incorporate this initiative into instructional professional development.

COMMUNITY VOICE

"Sometimes language barriers present challenges, but the biggest obstacle is being a single mother." - Student



UPPER COASTAL PLAIN
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments Area Agency on Aging

Chosen Challenge

Disrupting cycles of trauma that can be perpetuated between older relatives as caregivers and their youth.

What We Learned in Empathy Interviews

Participants in the older relatives as caregivers perceived their coping skills as strong but that they were interested in more ongoing, streamlined support.

Our Solution

Provide access to information, tools, and resources through an Options Counseling model.

Our Progress

We've completed a pilot that shows a link between Options Counseling and building resilience.

What's Next

We will leverage the data we collected to seek more funding and expand the pilot.

COMMUNITY VOICE

"All the time I experience joy. I have really enjoyed this program. Every time you call I feel joy." - Older Adult

Over 9 months, participating teams led the way to test out and implement trauma-informed ideas that respond to stress and trauma and ultimately build resilience within our agencies and communities. Along the way, ROI provided coaching, capacity building, and structure to support the teams.

WILSON COUNTY DSS

Wilson County DDS

Chosen Challenge

Responding to the needs of the community can create stress that can be difficult to manage, resulting in compassion fatigue. We decided to implement staff wellness strategies, shifting our internal culture to self compassion and care.

What We Learned in Empathy Interviews

There was an overwhelming desire for an agency culture that values wellness. Many staff love their jobs and love serving the community and they are interested in strategies for managing stress.

Our Solution

Implement empathy interviews, gratitude groups, and other stress management practices across the agency.

Our Progress

After participating in pilot empathy interviews and gratitude groups, staff said that they felt cared for and more connected to the team.

What's Next

- Share our data and final report with our director and all leadership within the agency
- Remodel our employee break room and a new outdoor seating area.



Southwest Edgecombe High School

Chosen Challenge

To help students feel supported and engaged at school and overcome their barriers to attending school.

What We Learned in Empathy Interviews

Students don't feel connected to their teachers, making it difficult for them to attend school.

Our Solution

Meet teacher needs via in-person Professional Development AND implement community building supports in our classrooms such as community circles, restorative brain breaks, and classroom affirmations.

Our Progress

Our data reflects that students feel more comfortable with peers, more trust in the teacher, and more engaged with the content as students engage in community circles each day.

What's Next

- Sustain the pilot by recruiting more teachers to engage in SEL practices.
- Vamp up the classroom space and provide materials for teachers interested in embedding SEL (Social Emotional Learning) work into their daily instruction.
- Survey students to gauge the effectiveness of Amani's new tools and activities.

COMMUNITY VOICE

"I love helping people. I hear, there's something about me that I light up a room. I believe to shine your light, you have to take care of yourself."

- Staff Member

COMMUNITY VOICE

"I feel safe and cared about by my classroom community. I enjoy participating in class and knowing my classmates helps me to learn effectively." - Student

RESIDENT-LEAD DECISION-MAKING RLI Accountability Board

Mission

To support public agencies in our rural community to implement trauma-informed practices and policies that reduce isolation and/or punishment and promote restorative justice and healing.

Purpose

Provide independent feedback & accountability for the Resilient Leaders Initiative, a capacity-building cohort program for community-based organizations in Eastern NC. Review requests for funding from Resilient Leaders Initiative organizations that are developing pilot programs to build a more trauma-informed, resilience-focused community.

Membership

Community members from diverse backgrounds and experiences, with particular attention to those creating and facilitating resilience-building spaces and training within long-standing institutions in the community.

Accountability Board Members

Stephen Sutton

Leandra Clay

Quarry Williams

Carol Allen White

Victor Jones

Values

Invest in community-based organizations seeking to better understand the needs of the people they serve and to develop innovative practices to meet those needs. Provide financial support for initiatives that prioritize the voices of those with lived experience of trauma and resilience.

Role

Design and implement an equitable process for reviewing and approving requests for funding from Resilient Leaders Initiative participants. Attend bi-monthly meetings to discuss requests and provide feedback to organizations on their applications.

Responsibilities

Review requests for funding & materials from teams in the Resilient Leaders Initiative.

- Use a process to evaluate requests and provide rigorous feedback to participating teams.

In the Press NC Health News

Edgecombe County Puts Trauma Front and Center to Heal the Community

A local program trains rural leaders on how to help community members work through difficult past experiences and create systems that will heal rather than harm. [Read More >>](#)

Edgecombe Community College division works with regional group

Read an in-depth case analysis of Edgecombe Community College's progress with ROI's Resilient Leaders Initiative. [Read More >>](#)

The Walton Family Foundation: Tapping the Potential of Rural Communities

A North Carolina nonprofit uses human-centered design to find innovative solutions to rural challenge. [Read More >>](#)

Financial Support

The Resilient Leader Initiative would like to thank our dedicated supporters who allow us to continue our work.

Chrissy and Rob Barnhill Family Fund

Anonymous Trust

The Anonymous Trust focuses its grant making activities predominantly in eastern North Carolina with heightened attention to rural and under-resourced Tier one and Tier two counties. Its trustees and staff commit to providing hands-on financial and advisory support to the agencies with which it partners. It adheres to a multi-sector geographic funding strategy which spans many areas including health and human services, the arts and

cultural activities, education, historic preservation, community and economic development and the environment. Its mission is to engage communities in the conversation so that all might thrive.



RLI Cohort 1

One Year Later

Quarry Williams
RLI Cohort 1 participant

Photo by Clarissa Donnelly-DeRoven

We sat down with RLI Cohort 1 participant Quarry Williams to learn how his team has made an impact with their pilot program, HOPE. Here's what we learned.

Quarry Williams

Coordinator, Alternative Education
Edgecombe County Public Schools

"Lots of the students we work with have experienced trauma," Quarry explained. "Through RLI, we gained strategies to help not only understand what these students are going through, but to help them through the challenges they face in everyday life."

To solve this challenge, Quarry and his team focused on the HOPE program. HOPE stands for Honor, Opportunity, Purpose, Excellence. The program relies on these principles to help middle and high school students across Edgecombe County with various needs, ranging from recovering credits, finding a class schedule that works for their lifestyle, or addressing behavior concerns. After a principal or superintendent recommends a student for HOPE, they will build a plan for their success and gain access to daily support from a health and wellness

counselor. This assistance has already led the students to make great progress. "The program provides kids with a sense of purpose, empowering and transforming them," Quarry says.

"Since working with RLI and using our new skills to bolster the program, the culture and the way people view HOPE has gone from a 'dumping ground' for 'bad students' to an inspirational place for success," Quarry proudly shares.

This year HOPE is well underway to achieving its goals. Students will work on a project called PhotoVoice, an art therapy program that shows students how to use photography to tell their stories. At the end of the project, students will showcase exhibits of their own work.

HOPE Pilot Outcomes

Across all HOPE students, suspension days dropped from **8.15%** in the fall semester to **5.86%** in the spring semester.



Across all HOPE students, disciplinary actions dropped from **21** in the fall semester to **13** in the spring semester.





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