



# Building Rural Infrastructure for Health

**PINETOP-LAKESIDE, ARIZONA**

The  
**BUILD  
HEALTH**  
Challenge®

**In Pinetop-Lakeside, a rural community in Arizona, a collaboration of community partners is building the infrastructure rural families need to be healthy.** Through community surveys and a feasibility study, and with support from The BUILD Health Challenge®, the Pinetop-Lakeside collaborative educated key stakeholders about the connection between childcare and health, leading to the development of plans for a new childcare center in the area.

While making meaningful strides in childcare policy, including advancing a bill to establish a fund for future childcare center development in rural communities across the state, another opportunity for collaboration emerged: aligning agencies and streamlining resources for residents. The team developed a resource and case management platform to create a connected continuum of care for residents and improve efficiency for getting local data into state systems.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT



Developed and deployed a new referral system that provides a continuum of care for rural residents to connect to more than 1,900 resources for a wide variety of needs, including mental health, food, housing, tribal services, early childhood education, substance use services, and more.



Implemented and expanded community-led case management technology that streamlined intake, assessment, and demographic data collection.



Created a data pipeline from local communities to the state's reporting systems that enabled communities to have real-time access to their data and removed 8 months of lag time.



Educated stakeholders and elected officials on the need for affordable childcare, resulting in the AZ State HR 2239 (Blackman), a bill that would establish a child care infrastructure fund (currently moving through the legislature).



Strengthened the community's case for investments in childcare by surveying families and publishing a feasibility study, solidifying evidence of potential impact.

## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



## Remote, Not Just Rural: Life in Arizona's White Mountains

**In a mosaic of communities in the Arizona White Mountains, a group of leaders is making key changes and investments to build infrastructure that helps families live healthy lives.** For residents of the rural southern stretches of Navajo County, access to essential services can require significant travel, with some driving an hour or more for groceries and several hours for specialized medical care and other critical resources. With a large population of Navajo residents and a proud pioneering spirit, Pinetop-Lakeside is a community that comes together to get things done, even when resources are scarce. People show up for community meetings, where all sectors of the community are frequently represented. In rural communities like theirs, people have learned how to work together, pool resources, and build creative partnerships to make things happen, even when resources are limited.



Allison Hephner, director of Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation, said that people show up for each other in the White Mountains: “When you don’t have much, you figure out how to do it by working together. If you need something, I’m going to find out. And if I can’t find out, I know somebody who knows.”

“We don’t live in rural Arizona. We live in *remote* Arizona,” said Dr. Allison Landy, a community member and early childhood expert. Even elected officials or agencies across Arizona have trouble grasping the day-to-day realities of living in geographically isolated communities like Pinetop-Lakeside. “Many times we’ve been in conversation with elected officials or with agencies that have said to us, ‘Oh, Uber has a deal. Just use Uber.’ We don’t have Uber. We have a bus system that goes from 6:00 in the morning to 6:00 at night, and that’s it,” said Hephner.

In rural Pinetop-Lakeside, resourcefulness is a way of life, and giving back is what binds the community together. Amanda Wynn from Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation said: “I want to work myself out of a job and Allison wants to work herself out of a job — which means if we can focus on what we’re really good at and allow everyone else to focus on what they’re really good at and their passion and their purpose, coming together as a community like we’re supposed to, we can make that happen.” In a community that already knows how to take care of its own, the greatest investment is in each other.

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— **ALLISON HEPHNER**

*Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation*

## Childcare as a Social Determinant of Health

In an effort to learn more about their community and use that knowledge to educate decision-makers and attract needed resources, Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation formed a partnership with a local college and Arizona Town Hall to conduct a community health needs assessment for Navajo County. Together, they researched how Adverse Childhood Experiences (commonly referred to as ACEs) were impacting adults in their community.

After receiving a BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) award in 2023, the collaborative launched a feasibility study. They found that the Arizona White Mountains community has a higher percentage of young children than the national average and experiences poverty at a much higher rate than the rest of the state. Access to high-quality childcare is not available for most families, and the centers that exist operate long waiting lists. The cost of childcare exceeds the hourly and weekly wages of most caregivers, who are faced with a heart-wrenching choice between going to school or a job versus leaving their children in unsafe environments.

The partnership quickly saw that childcare is a driver of health outcomes. Families who have access to safe, high-quality childcare can go to school or get jobs to improve their financial situation. "Better economic support leads to better access to medical care, better access to prenatal care, less likelihood of domestic abuse and violence, and lower rates of substance abuse," said Dr. Landy. "Our counties have the highest poverty rate in the state and in the top 3% of the country, high rates of incarceration, high rates of foster children, high rates of domestic abuse and neglect, high rates of alcoholism and substance abuse. A high-quality early childhood experience is a protective factor that mitigates ACEs and traumatic, toxic stress experiences. We're looking at long-term health outcome data and intervening and interrupting those correlations."

With the BUILD award, they conducted a child development survey that found 100% of respondents had difficulty finding, keeping, and locating affordable, dependable care. Roughly 90% of respondents stated they would work or attend school if they had better childcare access, with more than 90% reporting that access to childcare would increase their family's income. The data also showed that the lack of childcare prevents residents from getting jobs in the first place. This puts many families in an impossible position, as explained by one of their focus group participants: "I was working for \$15 per hour, and daycare was \$18 per hour. We are having to leave children with people we can't trust or who aren't able to care properly for children. It becomes very discouraging and has a negative impact on the quality of life because of the depth of the challenges."

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— DR. ALLISON LANDY

*Community member and early childhood expert*





## Designing a Safe Place for Children in the Mountains

**Recognizing the urgency of this problem, the Pinetop-Lakeside team of partners used the data they collected to develop a solution to provide relief and safety for families: an inclusive, affordable, and high-quality childcare center, right in their area.** Their goal was to create a “Comprehensive Childcare Center,” accessible to children from birth to age 5, including children with disabilities. They envisioned high-quality programming, teacher housing, and non-traditional hours with night and weekend services available.

Launching an affordable childcare center requires significant upfront capital investment — something the team learned could make or break the project. Key partnerships have been central to their progress. The Northern Arizona Council of Governments Head Start committed operational support and funding for at least 50% of the Child Development Center. Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) helped to fund the architectural design for the building. In parallel, Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation coordinated the development of integrated teacher housing on the same property through partnerships with more than 60 agencies, organizations, businesses, and community partners.

The childcare center planning process also intentionally engaged tribal partners to help inform culturally responsive design concepts and community needs. Together, partners developed and shared excitement around an outdoor playscape concept influenced by Apache culture and reflective of the local community.

After two years of community input, partnership development, and planning, the team was ready to break ground. Unfortunately, due to challenges aligning federal funding requirements with the school district’s procurement processes, a partnership with Head Start and the local school district to secure \$1.5 million in construction funding fell through.

Putting this childcare center project on pause was deeply disappointing for the Pinetop-Lakeside partners, but they didn’t lose sight of their goals for the community. They used

the story about the need for childcare to raise awareness of the problem across Arizona. Today, they are working with Representative Blackman on moving AZ State HR 2239 through the legislature, a bill that would establish a childcare infrastructure fund for rural areas like theirs. The speed at which this bill has made progress in one legislative session is a testament to the groundswell of support the group fostered.

“It is almost unheard of to see this level of bipartisan momentum around a rural childcare bill within a single legislative session,” said Dr. Landy. “Much of that is due to the work supported through this grant and the ability to clearly communicate the story, data, and community impact behind the effort.”



## Partners Shift Their Vision from a Childcare Center to a Comprehensive Network of Support for Families

**Bringing a bold vision to life and responding to local needs requires making strategic pivots based on new information.** While focusing on a legislative route to establish funding to build the center takes time, the group started solving a broader problem for the community. They set out to significantly improve the system that connects rural Arizona residents to health, child care, and social services across the region.

In geographically isolated areas, it is much harder for families to access resources that keep them healthy and thriving. Together with the RE:center and the technical support of technology company eTransX, the Pinetop-Lakeside collaborative transformed a hard-to-navigate Google Doc into an online, searchable resource guide that functions as part of a locally-built rural civic infrastructure with more than 1,900 resources. The [RuralAZ Guide](#) is a single access point where residents can search for and connect with resources. Additionally, they are piloting the Wellbeing Community Care Platform, a coordinated entry and case conferencing tool for the local coalition to end homelessness, enabling local housing services, programs, resources, and providers to navigate resources and collectively manage clients in real time. By creating a shared, locally managed system, partners are strengthening access, reducing duplication, identifying service gaps, connecting agencies, and building the coordinated civic infrastructure rural communities need.

To expand adoption of the RuralAZ.org resource guide and introduce the pilot for the Wellbeing Community Care Platform Case Management Tool, partners hosted a Rural Community Innovation Forum in March 2026 to introduce tools to elected officials, county managers, healthcare leaders, and community organizations. As a result, they have started new conversations with a wide

range of decision-makers interested in expanding their system into nearby communities. The partners developed tools directly within the local coalition's coordinated entry and case conferencing process to improve collaboration across nonprofit organizations, social service providers, and housing partners. The platform serves as both a public-facing resource connection system and a backend coordinated care tool for Local Coalition to End Homelessness (LCEH) partners.

The system also transformed how the region conducted the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) Count. Previously collected on paper and returned months later, PIT data was now gathered digitally in real time, allowing partners to quickly analyze trends and share live regional data with the Arizona Department of Housing during the March 2026 convening.

"The traditional process created significant delays between collecting data and being able to use it," said James Kleppinger of eTransX. "This system allowed local partners to move from delayed reporting to real-time visibility and coordinated response."

The platform's success generated significant interest from the Arizona Department of Housing, which invited the partnership to present the model to rural Local Coalitions to End Homelessness across Arizona in August 2026.

*“Instead of applying urban solutions to rural communities, we should create space for local communities to build and implement solutions with the people most impacted. Nothing for us without us.”*

— **ALLISON HEPHNER**

*Sitgreaves Community Development Corporation*



The impact of RuralAZ shows up in a myriad of ways. Case managers from Navajo County Victim Services now include a QR code for RuralAZ on all their materials, instantly connecting clients to food boxes and other resources. For Hephner, moments like these add up for providers as well as residents: better coordination means less burnout, stronger organizations, and every dollar stretching further.

This new infrastructure puts the power of data in the hands of rural community members by enabling local communities to better capture demographic data and coordinate services in real time across agencies, programs, and services, resulting in better outcomes.

The County of Maricopa has 211 as its resource guide, and Pima County has 311. Now, rural Arizona can have its own. “RuralAZ is our resource guide,” said Hephner. “It saves hours and allows us to provide services and connect people while the wellbeing community care platform provides a tool for coordinated case management.” By providing case

management in real time for people in a geographically isolated area, they can better help the residents of Pinetop-Lakeside. The goal is to care for the whole person, not just pieces of them, just as they aim to improve childcare conditions for all rural communities, not just their own.

What Pinetop-Lakeside is building is more than a resource and case management platform or the foundation of a policy win. “Rural communities understand their challenges and strengths better than anyone,” explained Allison Hephner. “Instead of applying urban solutions to rural communities, we should create space for local communities to build and implement solutions with the people most impacted. Nothing for us without us.”



**The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) invests in multi-sector, community-centered partnerships that transform systems and elevate community power to advance health and racial justice.**

Through learning, connecting, and amplifying these local initiatives, BUILD champions the national movement for health equity and moves attention, resources, and action upstream to support vital community conditions for health and well-being across the United States.

## The BUILD Model for Transforming Community Health



### **Bold**

Drive fundamental shifts in policy and sustainability, creating systems-level changes through a lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity.



### **Upstream**

Focus on the social, environmental, and economic factors that have the greatest influence on the health of a community, rather than on access or care delivery.



### **Integrated**

Align the practices and perspectives of cross-sector partners under a shared vision, establishing new roles while continuing to draw upon the strengths of each partner.



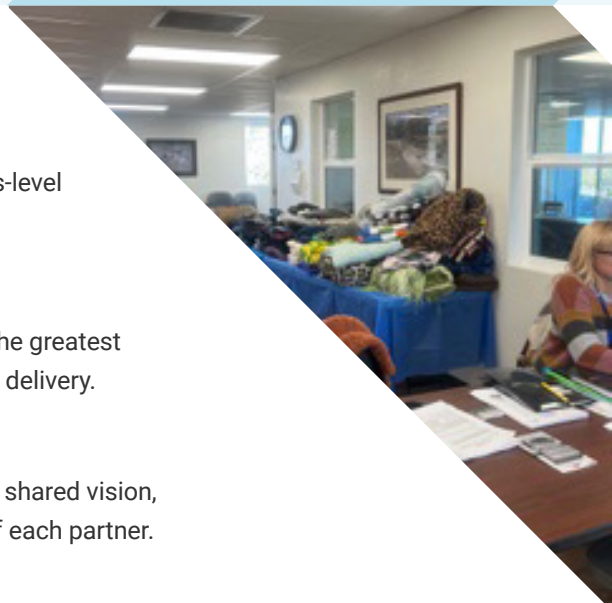
### **Local**

Prioritize the diverse lived experiences, voices, and leadership of neighborhood residents and community members throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation.



### **Data-Driven**

Use varied forms of data from both clinical and community sources as tools to identify key needs, measure meaningful change, and facilitate transparency amongst stakeholders in order to generate actionable insights.



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