



Executive Summary

Foundation for Community Health (FCH) is a strong leader and advocate in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut and the Harlem Valley of New York. It regularly provides policymakers insight into legislation, particularly regarding health care access and affordability in Connecticut. FCH staff also hold leadership positions in important regional organizations and state policy-making bodies, giving the organization political influence in state and local politics.

FCH serves a mostly rural population. Rural populations in New York and Connecticut make up a small percentage of each state's total residents (21% and 9%, respectively).¹ Therefore, rural issues, like those affecting residents in FCH's catchment area, receive less attention in each state's legislature than other policy issues. This makes advocating for the improved health and well-being of the residents in FCH's catchment area important yet challenging. While both rural and urban residents struggle with the lack of affordable housing, public transportation, food access, and health care access, cost, and quality, the policy solutions differ by rurality, and rural populations need strong advocates who understand these nuances.

FCH seeks to elevate its advocacy strategy to better:

- a) educate policymakers and other stakeholders about the underlying social, economic, and environmental issues that impact the health and well-being of residents in its catchment area;
- b) support direct and local outreach efforts to inform residents and support their self-advocacy, and
- c) support and amplify the concerns of residents and the nonprofit organizations serving them.

This report provides an overview of key learnings and recommendations from research, interviews with FCH's Board Members, subject matter experts, and focus group discussions with current and recent grant partners. Through the analysis of qualitative research, we learned that the most pressing needs in the community center around accessing attainable housing and health care services, as well as the costs associated with housing and health care. We also found that FCH is well-positioned to have a greater impact through focused advocacy work. By building on its strong

¹ Connecticut State Office of Rural Health. <https://www.ruralhealthct.org/report.htm#:~:text=Connecticut%20has%20a%20population%20of,than%2020%20years%20of%20age>
State of Rural New York. Rural Housing Coalition. 2023. <https://ruralhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-State-of-Rural-New-York-Report.pdf>

reputation, deep community relationships, and history of innovative solutions, FCH can grow from a trusted funder into a powerful force for positive change across the region.

Understanding these challenges, FCH's capacity, and its influence in Connecticut and New York policy circles, we developed a Theory of Change to guide FCH's advocacy strategies. The Theory of Change is centered on three foundational activities aimed at driving high-level outcomes:

1. **Relationship Building:** Establishing and nurturing connections with policymakers, community leaders, and other stakeholders to create trust and alignment around shared goals and build power for the region's residents.
2. **Educating:** Providing accessible, evidence-based information to empower policymakers with the knowledge needed to understand regional challenges and champion effective solutions.
3. **Deploying and Developing Leadership:** Equipping FCH and its partners with the skills, tools, and strategic vision to take on influential roles in advocating for and implementing change.

These activities are designed to reinforce each other. By strategically and continuously implementing them, FCH can elevate its community's profile, foster policy and regulatory changes at the local and state levels, and potentially attract new state and federal investments.

Key Recommendations

We recommend implementing the following three recommendations to strengthen the organization's advocacy for its community. The report provides additional context for these recommendations, including examples of how they have been implemented elsewhere and an estimate of the level of effort and other costs.

1. **Showcase the Region through Annual Events.** The purpose of this strategy is to elevate local voices and the region in policy decisions by facilitating direct connections between community leaders, legislators, and other decision-makers who can influence policy and funding decisions. Two annual events, one in each state, will bring together grantees, community leaders, and policymakers through a "roadshow" highlighting community needs and how nonprofit organizations/grantees serve the community. While parts of this strategy require a high level of investment, there is strong potential for a long-term outcome of rural-focused policy efforts and new investment in the area by creating direct pathways to influence policy and funding decisions.
2. **Develop Local Leadership to Advocate for Expanding Affordable Housing.** This strategy aims to expand access to attainable housing by building local leadership capacity, training key decision-makers, and fostering collaboration between experienced housing organizations and community stakeholders who can influence municipal housing policies

and investments. Because the policies, regulations, and environment for affordable housing are largely local issues, this recommendation focuses on building local leadership to advocate for and support town and county actions to expand affordable housing.

3. **Be a Resource for Policymakers by Providing Region-Specific Health Education.** FCH's influence on health care policy can be strengthened by leveraging existing Connecticut relationships, expanding strategic partnerships in New York, and developing data-rich issue briefs highlighting regional challenges and informing policy decisions across both states. Acknowledging FCH's relative influence in each state and the fact that health policy is largely managed at the state and federal levels, this recommendation focuses on educating policymakers through issue briefs highlighting the region's unique challenges and providing actionable recommendations for future policy.

There are no "one-size-fits-all" advocacy strategies that allow us to develop evidence-based recommendations. These strategies have been developed to match FCH's power, positioning, and funding. However, these strategies still have limitations. FCH will need to stay abreast of the new, rapidly changing, and perhaps unchartered federal policy environment in which housing and health care challenges for rural residents may not be prioritized or, worse, existing favorable policies may be dismantled.

FCH is a strong leader and advocate in its community. Through the implementation of targeted advocacy strategies, FCH has the potential to elevate the profile of the region, recruit additional investment from state and federal policies, strategically partner with philanthropic or other organizations to make a larger impact and influence the implementation of favorable local and state policies to support the overall well-being of rural residents.