



Southeast Oklahoma partners seek to remove barriers to housing

by: Steven Shepelwich

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The LIFT Community Action Agency in Hugo, Oklahoma, and its local partners, comprise one of 11 groups taking part in the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia's 2024 Reinventing Our Communities (ROC) program.

Housing is an issue that has grabbed national headlines, with families facing rising costs, limited inventory, and increasing competition. While this is broadly true across the country, local markets may differ in significant ways. People of color and residents in rural areas often face even more restrictive housing markets.

Oklahoma's LIFT Community Action Agency (CAA), alongside local partners, will tackle this issue in the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia's fourth annual [Reinventing Our Communities](#) (ROC). The program strengthens regional economies by addressing race-based economic inequities in rural and small urban regions across the country.

This year, the national program offers two tracks. Communities can focus on strategies to promote equitable employment outcomes or access to rental housing. Each region will assemble a local cohort of around eight stakeholders representing different perspectives. Each cohort will develop a multiyear action plan.

"One of the Federal Reserve's goals is to strengthen regional economies," said Theresa Singleton, senior vice president of the Community Development and Regional Outreach Department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. "Communities that have safe and affordable housing options reach their full potential by attracting more workers, consumer spending, and economic growth."



Since the 1940s, circuses have spent winters in Hugo because of its mild climate.

LIFT CAA, with support from the Kansas City Fed, is leading one of the 11 cohorts located across nine states in this year's program. The Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco, and Richmond are each working with cohorts in their region. The cohorts will also be assisted by Equitable Cities Consulting, NeighborWorks America, and Race Forward. The cohorts will engage in webinars, coaching from national community development leaders, racial equity training, and peer learning.

The LIFT CAA cohort brings together organizations serving Hugo and the surrounding Choctaw County in southeast Oklahoma. The cohort members include, in addition to LIFT CAA, the City of Hugo, the chamber of commerce, a county commissioner, a community bank, a community center, and a local resident.



The circus elephant guards the home of the Hugo Chamber of Commerce.

During the 14-month program, the partners will work to:

- address the structural barriers that limit access to quality, safe, and affordable rental housing;

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<https://www.kansascityfed.org/community/community-connections/southeast-oklahoma-partners-seek-to-remove-barriers-to-housing/>

- partner with local housing organizations to ensure that housing programs and tenant-based supports mitigate rental housing challenges; and
- explore potential financing options and interventions that can increase housing opportunities within the community.

“LIFT CAA and our entire cohort is looking forward to examining and addressing local issues around racial equity and inclusive rental housing,” Becky Reynolds Porter said. She is executive director for LIFT CAA. “We believe that working collaboratively, we will not only learn valuable lessons, but more importantly, we will be able to develop strategies towards solutions. Our goal is to ensure everyone's right to safe, decent and affordable housing.”

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Steve Shepelwich is a lead community development advisor for the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City in the Oklahoma City Branch Office. Shepelwich's work connects workers with jobs, improves the quality of lower-wage jobs, and helps institutions leverage the Community Reinvestment Act to support workforce development programs. He is currently partnering with the Atlanta Fed on the role of [public benefits](#) in supporting positive employment outcomes. Shepelwich began his community development career in the Peace Corps in Kenya as a small business advisor, then worked with other organizations in the region for six years. Before joining the Kansas City Fed in 2004, he worked for a Washington, D.C. consulting group assisting CDFIs, asset-building and economic development organizations. A Texas native, Shepelwich studied marketing as an undergrad at Texas A&M. A six-month internship with a rural development program in India sparked his interest in community development. Shepelwich received his master's degree from Michigan State University and attended the Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin. Shepelwich is active with Goodwill Industries and Rotary, part of a community disaster response team, and volunteers with Wildcare Foundation, Oklahoma's largest wildlife rehabilitation program. Shepelwich lives in Norman, Oklahoma, with his wife and two children. Highlights of his work include: ["Investing in America's Workforce."](#) Shepelwich hosted roundtables, the themes of which informed a national workforce development conference. [Engaging Workforce Development: A Framework for Meeting CRA Obligations](#), produced in conjunction with the Dallas Fed. [Small Business of Color Recovery Guide](#) to assist communities develop equitable development strategies. **About the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City** The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City is one of 12 regional Reserve Banks that, along with the Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., make up our nation's central bank. We work in the public's interest by supporting economic and financial stability. The Kansas City Fed's territory includes Colorado, Kansas, western Missouri, Nebraska, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and Wyoming. Our headquarters is in Kansas City, with branch offices in Denver, Omaha and Oklahoma City. The Kansas City Fed Community Development Department promotes economic development and public understanding that leads to progress for lower-income individuals and communities. Our focus areas include community development investments, digital inclusion, small business / entrepreneurship, and workforce development.