

THE RURAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PARTNERSHIP:

Leading on Regionalization

Building resiliency through small utility and rural community collaboration

Regional Collaboration. Partnership. Regionalization.

They all mean “working together,” usually in the context of water and/or wastewater utilities. At RCAP, we use the term “regionalization” broadly to capture all types of small utility collaborations and partnerships.



RCAP's Role

RCAP often assumes the role of a neutral third-party facilitator, guiding communities through the often complex steps of the regionalization process and providing them with resources and support services so that they can make informed decisions about their future.

Why consider regionalization?

- **Solve common challenges** like access to affordable supplies, sharing the cost of certified operators, achieving and maintaining compliance or making rates more reasonable and affordable, especially in low-income communities and those with small customer bases.
- **Build resiliency** in the face of both predicted and unpredicted changes and events, such as changing population and demographic trends, natural disasters and other climate impacts and emergencies.
- **Create a culture of collaboration** (rather than competition) that enables utilities to lean on or support others, leading to **better outcomes for all**.

RCAP has facilitated hundreds of regionalization projects across the country, helping to spur collaboration, economies of scale and more sustainable solutions for small, rural and tribal communities.

Rural community leaders, operators and managers of small water and wastewater systems balance a variety of challenges on a daily basis. They may be dealing with overbuilt or underbuilt systems while also deciding on rate structures, affordability, and managing their finances. They may be facing operator retirements, regulatory changes, and, especially in light of COVID-19, economic shocks and public health emergencies. Partnering with others may be a good solution to overcome some of these challenges.

Types and Examples of Regionalization

| Informal Cooperation | Contractual Assistance | Shared Governance | Ownership Transfer |
|--|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sharing equipment• Sharing bulk supply purchases, such as chemicals• Mutual aid agreements | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contracting operations, billing and/or management• Outsourcing engineering services• Purchasing water /receiving and treating wastewater | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Joint Powers Agencies (JPAs)• Sharing system management and/or operators• Sharing source water | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquisition & physical interconnection or satellite management• Becoming a larger system or new entity made up of more than one individual system |

For more information:

If you are interested in learning more about how RCAP can help small utilities collaborate, please contact Sarah Buck, RCAP Senior Director of Programs: sbuck@rcap.org; 978-894-4123.

Increasing Transfer of Responsibility

RCAP works hard to help communities understand that regionalization is a spectrum. Any type of partnership from the most informal (such as mutual aid in case of emergency or sharing heavy equipment) to the most formal (such as the physical connection of pipes or managerial consolidation) may have some benefit to the communities involved, and is worth considering.

Collaboration in the Field: Stories from Pennsylvania

Below are some examples of regionalization in Pennsylvania, written by Derik Dressler, Regional Collaboration Specialist, RCAP Solutions

In a small municipal water authority in Pennsylvania, serving 130 residents, the new operator had no previous operating experience and needed significant guidance to proficiently operate the system. In working with this system, RCAP found the operator the help needed from a neighboring system's operator. On a routine basis, the operators would meet to discuss new and ongoing issues with each of their systems. This partnership eventually led to an ongoing working relationship that has proved to be very beneficial to the less experienced operator.

In another part of Pennsylvania, a small non-transient non-community rural water system needed a certified operator for the small filter plant that served their customers to comply with regulations. The owners of the system were burdened by this task and did not know how to make this happen. RCAP provided a list of operators in the area that were willing to operate the system and assisted in contacting the certified operators identified. Within a few weeks, the system obtained the services from one of the listed certified operators, which alleviated the non-compliance of the system for not having a certified operator.

[>>> Read more here.](#)



For more information on regionalization, please visit our [page here.](#)

Additionally, we have other partner resources on regionalization on our [Managerial and Financial Hub.](#)

Regionalization Spotlight: Collaboration Out of Crises

RCAP believes in helping communities work together, taking a local approach grounded in what makes sense for each community. Regionalization is one of many ways RCAP can assist small, rural or tribal communities. When communities feel it is an appropriate strategy, regionalization can have powerful positive impacts.

COVID-19 has pushed a number of systems to partner in various ways.

It's a strategy that helps communities become more resilient and sustainable as times change and challenges mount.

Systems don't have to go it alone

In [previous research](#), RCAP heard from community and utility leaders that a crisis can spur regionalization efforts. RCAP also learned that to best move regionalization efforts forward, facilitation by an unbiased third-party, such as a technical assistance provider, is often essential. RCAP plays this role for many small, rural and tribal communities.

In May 2021, RCAP released a second research report, "[Regionalization: RCAP's Recommendations for Water and Wastewater Policy](#)," which focuses on local, state, and federal policies that encourage and those that hinder regional solutions and includes recommendations at all levels of government to better support regional solutions moving forward. The report highlights 22 recommendations from RCAP that should be integrated into policy by decision makers to better enable regional solutions.

About RCAP: The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) is a national network of non-profit partners working to ensure that small, rural and tribal communities have access to resources, tools and technical assistance that create capacity and opportunity for increased rural prosperity. RCAP and its six regional partners have more than 300 team members operating on the ground building capacity in rural and tribal communities in every state and the US Territories across the country. Every year, RCAP reaches millions of rural residents through water/wastewater, economic development, regionalization, and other technical assistance projects and trainings. RCAP's work has an outsized impact in disadvantaged communities, with a focus on helping those who need it most. In general, about one-third of residents in the communities supported are low-income, and/or Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC).