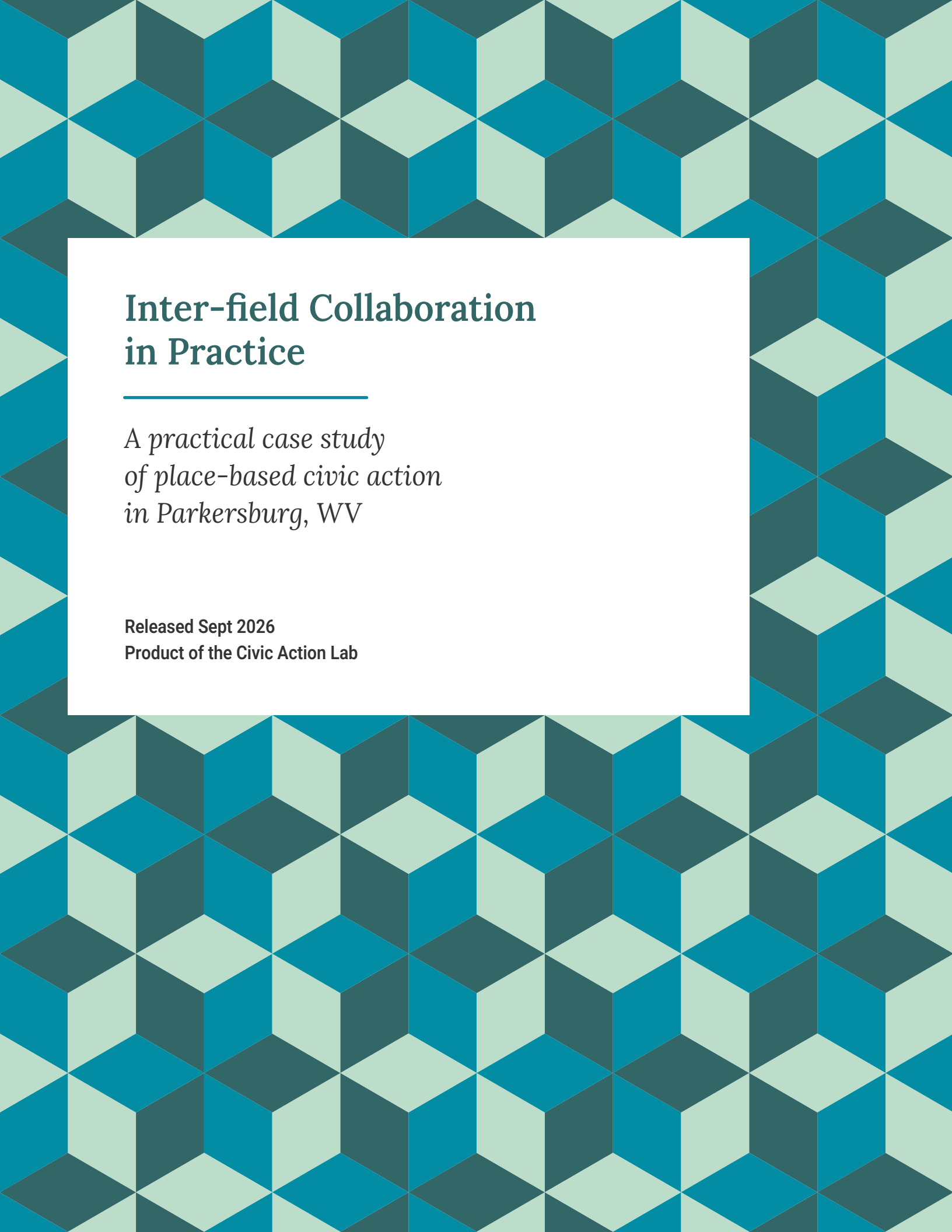




Inter-field Collaboration in Practice

*A practical case study
of place-based civic action
in Parkersburg, WV*

Released Sept 2026

Product of the Civic Action Lab

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COMPANION TOOLKIT

If you’re looking for concrete tools to use in your own place-based civic action work, check out the companion Toolkit, with practical how-to guides for the tools from bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy that were used in Parkersburg.



RECAP VIDEO

To hear the story of the Parkersburg project from the perspective of the local Steering Committee members, watch the [15-minute project recap video](#).





Acknowledgements

The stories, tools, and learnings shared here are the result of monumental effort invested by dozens of people since 2022, including the Civic Action Lab members and the Parkersburg Engagement Project Steering Committee members.

The project was made possible with support from SHIFT,, Freedom Together Foundation, New Pluralists, McKnight Foundation, and a civic entrepreneurship grant from the Trust for Civic Life.



Civic Action Lab

Get in touch to explore partnership.

shiftcommongood.org/action-lab

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NOTES ON LANGUAGE

Throughout the document, “we” refers to the Civic Action Lab members.

The “pilot” and “Parkersburg Engagement Project” are used interchangeably to refer to the place-based civic action effort that took place in Parkersburg, WV between 2024 and 2026.

Executive Summary

Aside from Dolly Parton being legendary, it seems that Americans can't agree on much these days. Many see the challenges facing our communities getting worse and blame the 'other.' People are fed up and are led to view those with different opinions or political affiliations as a source of the problem, rather than as potential collaborators in shaping a path forward.

When digging beneath the surface, one realizes there are a few things that seem to be held in common across the fractured segments of US society. We have a shared longing for rapid and effective action to move things in a better direction. More and more of us want to have a hand in shaping the conditions that affect our lives. We all want to belong to a safe community in which we and our loved ones can thrive.

And Americans are not sitting idly by: they're stepping up, whether it's organizations focused on bringing people together, funders investing in place-based problem-solving, or neighbors stepping up to take on an issue in front of their door. There is a growing wave of initiatives designed to empower and equip people to act together on shared challenges and experience their voices mattering in civic life. We call this work "place-based civic action."

This Case Study shares the story of residents successfully uniting to take action in the city of Parkersburg, WV from 2025 to 2026. Under the banner of the "Parkersburg Engagement Project," a Steering Committee of residents asked the people of Parkersburg what they saw as the biggest challenge facing the community. In this small city where addiction is visible on many street corners, the Committee was not surprised when the top response was "substance use."

Then they planned a deeply participatory process - hosting public deliberations in a church basement, listening sessions at recovery homes, and focus groups at McDonalds - to ask people what should be done to reduce the impacts of substance use on the Parkersburg community. More than 900 community members weighed in at least once throughout the process by completing a survey and/or attending the events.

HIGHLIGHTS

900+ community members engaged

SUBSTANCE USE selected as top issue

550+ solution ideas collected

Executive Summary

(continued)

This project was intentionally not just a listening exercise: with a \$50,000 fund to take action, it was designed to deliver concrete results, showing participants that their voices matter. And it's doing just that with a set of interventions now being implemented, including a media campaign to reduce stigma of those in recovery, a Council of addiction and recovery professionals to address gaps in services, and a Council of people in recovery working to prevent addiction.

The results of the Parkersburg Engagement Project were remarkable. In just a 12-month period, surveys of the community revealed that measurements of community cohesion and agency increased. More people reported that they trust and feel understood by those with different backgrounds and opinions, and that they believe their community can come together to solve problems.

But what made the Parkersburg Engagement Project unique was what was happening behind the scenes. The Civic Action Lab initiated the project to pilot its inter-field approach: intentionally combining the expertise from bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy.

When a typical challenge arose that might otherwise derail a team's momentum (like burnout of leaders and tension arising between team members), Lab members were at the ready with targeted support from their respective fields, and the project continued to pick up steam. Through the process, it became clear that, indeed, bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy each offer an invaluable contribution to place-based civic action work.

“

This was the first time that input from community members led to a concrete result. With the Civic Action Lab's support, we overcame the usual hurdles and could keep moving forward.”

– **Wendy Tuck**, Parkersburg City Council member and Steering Committee co-chair

HIGHLIGHTS

\$50,000 Solution Fund allocated toward plan based on participant input

+57% “People in my community respect others who do not share their values.”

+13% “When my community faces problems, I feel like we can work together to implement solutions.”

+29% “I feel understood by community members whose opinions and backgrounds differ from mine.”

The Civic Action Lab's Inter-field Approach

Conversations with more than 150 practitioners in 2021-2022 revealed that the fields of bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy each had a crucial piece of the puzzle, but kept falling short of what seemed required to support durable and inclusive civic action.

The Civic Action Lab launched in 2023 as a cohort of ten organizations from the bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy fields. We are convened around a shared belief that **by bringing together bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy, we can add up to more than the sum of our parts.**

RESOURCES

→ Check out the Lab's other publications: [Siloed Approaches with Synergistic Potential](#) and [An Inter-field Framework](#) for a deeper dive into our thinking about the intersection of these three fields.



BRIDGE

Bridging builds authentic relationships, mutual trust, and understanding of each other's perspectives, including between those who hold different identities or worldviews. Bridging exercises can also help participants uncover common ground and shared values.



ORGANIZE

Organizing builds a community's collective power to address shared problems by taking strategic action to advance their interests. Organizing efforts aim to improve the material reality of those participating and shift how power is arranged in a lasting way.



DECIDE

Participatory democracy engages the public in decision-making, creating new processes and structures so that everyday people can influence, and ideally make, decisions about issues that matter to them and affect their communities.

Why Parkersburg?

As a first priority after launching in 2023, we (the Lab members) decided to lead a place-based pilot project. We wanted to intentionally combine our strengths in support of a community taking on a local issue, to see if we could achieve more together than working in isolation.

We definitely didn't want to parachute in uninvited and so decided to initiate the pilot in a place where one of us already had relationships. After carefully reviewing four communities proposed by Lab members, we selected Parkersburg, WV.

Wendy Tuck, a Parkersburg City Council member affiliated with Lab member WV Can't Wait, had responded to their call for potential interest in such a project. Wendy is not a typical elected official. She knocks on the doors of each house in her district once a quarter to deliver a newsletter and ask what is on people's minds. Clearly, Wendy shared the Lab's value of engaging the public, and this tipped the scales for the Lab to select Parkersburg as the site for the pilot.



Wendy hosts open office hours twice a week at local restaurants, so that constituents can find her to ask questions, share ideas, or raise concerns.

PARKERSBURG, WV

~29,000 residents

48% of voters registered Republican, 22% Democrat, 30% unaffiliated

23% in poverty

21% with a bachelor's degree

Home to several cultural institutions including the Parkersburg Art Center and the Smoot Theater

Wood County (where Parkersburg is located) has **~280 addiction treatment beds, the highest number of any county in West Virginia**

From the Streets to the Steering Committee

A story of hope and recovery from Jason and Raeanna Earl

Things were going downhill, and Jason and Rae lost their kids to Child Protective Services. “We blamed each other, went our separate ways, and went out of control,” recalls Jason. Both separately ended up homeless and struggling with addiction. A year later, Rae was in the hospital, and Jason showed up at Rae’s bedside.

“At that point, we were done. Once you’re done, you’re going to do everything you can to not go back to that life again.” Rae’s cousin got them into a 33-day residential recovery program. “We were homeless when we went in and still homeless when we got out.”

But Jason and Rae were determined to take their lives in a different direction. “They told us only 2% stay sober, and we decided that we wanted to be in that 2%. We set up a camp down by the Ohio River; it was good weather by then, so it wasn’t too bad. We were walking back and forth to AA meetings- we went to as many as we could.”

Jason and Rae came to a meeting hosted by Circles Campaign for the Mid-Ohio Valley (Circles), a program designed to support people out of generational poverty, and kept coming back. Lisa Doyle-Parsons, the Executive Director of Circles, saw Jason and Rae’s drive and later helped get them into stable housing. “I call Lisa our angel, because she stuck us under her wing and guided us,” recalls Rae. “We were one year into our recovery when Lisa invited us to join the Steering Committee,” said Rae.

Jason and Rae graduated with their Associate’s degrees from West Virginia University of Parkersburg in May 2026 and are continuing on towards a Bachelor’s. Jason and Rae have taken on more and more leadership, and are now investing much of their infectious energy and positivity into the Lived Experience Council’s success.



“

The idea that I could be part of something bigger made me feel like my opinion was worth hearing. Everybody on the Committee was all so different. Being able to work as a team gave me hope that we can build bridges and change things.”

– **Raeanna Earl**, Steering Committee Member

Pilot design

The Civic Action Lab laid out the following parameters for our first place-based pilot project:

- Implement a civic engagement initiative leading to concrete action, using a phased approach.
- Engage as many residents as possible in the process, representing diverse demographics, political orientations, and perspectives.
- Incorporate skills from the fields of bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy.

We raised the budget for the pilot and carved out resources to support and document the pilot's success, including:

- \$50,000 Solution Fund, so that participants could see their input lead to concrete action.
- External Evaluator who developed a plan to measure impact.
- Videographer to document the process.

Beyond this, we intended to support a team of local residents to shape the details and lead the implementation.



PILOT PHASES

1. COME TOGETHER
2. IDENTIFY ISSUE
3. SELECT A SOLUTION
4. TAKE ACTION

Coming together



Cross-partisan from the launch

We see it as crucial to include political diversity in a team's composition, based on a belief that a project will be made stronger by incorporating divergent perspectives and that it will have more public legitimacy if people don't see it as coming from "one side," especially in today's polarized climate.

In this spirit, we asked Wendy (then one of two elected Democrats on the 9-member City Council) to find a Republican to co-lead the project with her. Wendy approached a few Republican City Council members, but none accepted her invitation.

Wendy then thought outside the City Council box and approached someone she was already collaborating with: Lisa Doyle-Parsons, Executive Director of Circles Campaign of the Mid-Ohio Valley (Circles). Lisa identifies as Republican and said yes to co-lead the pilot with Wendy. Additionally, Lisa agreed to have Circles serve as the local anchor for the pilot, and the Lab funded Circles to provide staff capacity for the pilot's implementation.

The ideological diversity in the pilot's leadership was less visible than the Lab hoped, since Lisa's political affiliation was not part of her public identity, like it was for Wendy as an elected official.



LEARNINGS

If you want someone's political affiliation to matter for the project's legitimacy, it needs to be in the public's awareness.

Consider the implications when a stakeholder declines to partner, since it may indicate resistance that needs to be intentionally navigated.

Pay attention to building buy-in with elected leaders from across the political spectrum from the early stages.



The inclusion of diverse views is a core value of the bridging field.

Coming together

Establishing Governance Structures

Wendy and Lisa convened a diverse group of Parkersburg residents to form a Steering Committee to lead the pilot, which they named the Parkersburg Engagement Project (PEP). The Committee was empowered to decide how PEP would be implemented and to bring the effort into reality.

Wendy and Lisa considered various factors (gender, race, income, and life experience) as they invited people to join the Committee.

The Committee adopted Consent-based Decision-making as the method they would use to make decisions together. They opted for a modified version of the method, planning to attempt consent three times and, if not reached, default to majority voting. Their intention behind this choice was to create opportunities to incorporate the concerns of the minority, while placing a limit on how much time would be spent doing so.

The formal, stipended role of Steering Committee membership likely increased the members' level of investment in and sense of responsibility for the project. However, the fixed nature of the Steering Committee lacked a pathway for additional community members to contribute to the project, beyond just showing up at an event.



HIGHLIGHTS

9-member Steering Committee

Each member received a \$1,000 stipend .

Met biweekly to monthly between January and December 2025.

LEARNINGS

Create a structure with a consistent leadership team accountable for strategic decisions, while at the same time having pathways for new participants to get involved.



Lab members from the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) suggested the model of a Steering Committee and did a demonstration of consent-based decision-making when we visited Parkersburg.

RESOURCES

➔ Steering Committee Tool (Toolkit pg. 24)

➔ Consent-based Decision-Making Tool (Toolkit pg. 26)

Coming together

Building Trust and Cohesion

Knowing that early relationship-building among the Steering Committee's diverse members would be key to the project's success, we offered to lead a bridging exercise at one of the first Steering Committee meetings.

The training was indeed well-timed, since some tension had already started simmering between two Steering Committee members who held divergent views on the issue of addiction. The exercise helped these two members see that they both wanted the best for the Parkersburg community and laid the groundwork for their ongoing collaboration. These early bridging exercises created a culture of connection, honesty, and trust that persisted throughout the project.

“

At first there was some tension in the group, but after those listening exercises, we were able to see that we all cared about the community and wanted the same thing in the end.”

– Jason Earl, Steering Committee Member



LEARNINGS

Include bridging exercises early on when assembling a new, heterogeneous group.



Lab members from Essential Partners and Braver Angels co-led a session on bridging and “Full Spectrum Listening” via Zoom, in which Committee members were invited to share personal stories and practice their listening skills.

RESOURCES

➔ Effective Listening Tool
(Toolkit pg. 6)

Identifying an Issue



Asking the community

The Steering Committee shared our desire to maximize residents' experience of agency and invited the public to weigh in via a survey to determine the project's focus.

The Steering Committee mailed the survey to every household in Parkersburg, shared an online version on social media, and canvassed people in public spaces. They proactively worked to reach those who might not otherwise respond, by bringing the survey to the WVU Parkersburg campus, recovery homes, and the day shelter.

"Substance Use" came back as the top result for the "topic that you feel most impacts the community." The Steering Committee used consent-based decision-making to formally select substance use as the issue, noting that housing was closely followed in the results.

A VISIBLE AND POLARIZED ISSUE

It's pretty much impossible to visit Parkersburg without noticing the presence of opioid-related drug activity. Many people in active addiction are living on the streets, and residents often find used needles in parks, playgrounds, and their own yards. Parkersburg has one of the highest concentrations of recovery homes in West Virginia. Maintaining sobriety after leaving a residential recovery program can be a formidable challenge, making the possibility of relapse very real.

Some are fed up. "Three strikes and you're out" became a refrain among many, meaning that someone should not be saved from an overdose using Narcan more than three times. Critical sentiments led to the City Council's decision in 2021 to establish a moratorium on new recovery beds in town.

Others see substance use in Parkersburg through a lens of hope. They see the robust community of people in recovery as an asset and source of resilience and inspiration.

HIGHLIGHTS

Mailed to ~22,000 households

621 responses: 60% online, 40% on paper (either from mailer or events)

LEARNINGS

Use targeted methods to reach segments of the population less likely to respond to mass outreach methods.

Agree on a decision-making process ahead of time to create more ease when it comes time to make the first decision as a group.

Picking a “Solution”



Collecting Solution Ideas

With the issue identified, the Steering Committee then led a highly participatory process to better understand the issue of substance use in Parkersburg and to invite members of the public to offer “solutions” - ideas of what could be done “to prevent or reduce substance use, better serve those in recovery, or mitigate the impacts on the community.”

The Steering Committee kicked off the public idea-collection process in late May with an event at which Wendy and Lisa led a Problem Tree exercise to invite attendees to consider the root causes and effects of substance use.

The Steering Committee also visited recovery homes to collect residents’ input, believing those closest to the challenge likely know best what is needed. They also planned a public eight-part “Solution Series,” with each event diving into a different aspect of substance use. Sessions started with an expert panel (including both professionals and people with lived experience of addiction) followed by break-outs in which participants brainstormed solution ideas.



RESULTS

336 people contributed ideas, including 90+ people in recovery

25 listening and ideation sessions

550+ ideas collected

LEARNINGS

Use the word “intervention” or “action” rather than “solution,” since it is unlikely that the resulting plan, even if well thought out, will fully “solve” the target issue, especially if there are factors beyond the local community’s control impacting the issue selected.

RESOURCES

➔ Problem Tree Tool
(Toolkit pg. 14)

Picking a “Solution”

Making sense of the community input

On seemingly endless flip charts and handwritten notes, the community members’ views and ideas had been judiciously captured. Now the Steering Committee faced the question: how could they narrow all this insight into a specific action plan they would implement?

Based on a time-intensive analysis of the input and some help from AI, the Steering Committee identified the most frequently mentioned ideas, including reduction of stigma of people in recovery from addiction and better connecting people to existing resources.

Deciding on a Plan

After more closely examining the most frequently mentioned ideas, Wendy and Lisa developed a draft Action Plan. The Steering Committee fully consented to the plan as proposed in December 2025, allocating the \$50,000 Solution Fund toward its implementation.

The plan included the following components:

- **LIVED EXPERIENCE COUNCIL** of people in recovery to offer peer-driven support, engage in community service, and educate youth about addiction.
- **MARKETING CAMPAIGN** aimed at publicizing available resources and reducing stigma of people in recovery.
- **ADDICTION AND RECOVERY PROVIDER'S COUNCIL** of professionals to improve the continuum of care among their offerings and engage in professional development.

LEARNINGS

If there is an intention to select a solution based on community preference, establish a clear process to document frequency of ideas being mentioned along the way, or a way to formally prioritize ideas at the end of events.



Lab members from the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP) offered several coaching sessions to the Steering Committee during this phase, helping them cluster ideas by topic area and organize them into a spreadsheet so they could assess patterns.

RESOURCES

→ Idea Analysis Tool
(Toolkit pg. 30)

Taking Action

LIVED EXPERIENCE COUNCIL

has become a regular group of 10 - 15 people who have met most weeks since February. Jason Earl was brought on as an AmeriCorps VISTA by Circles to lead the effort and describes the group as being a positive force not only for the Parkersburg community but also for each other's recovery.

Events to date have included:

- St. Patrick's Day Sober Celebration
- 7 events during National Volunteer Week
- Clean-up of an area with high drug activity
- Boys and Girls Club Shark Tank event

MARKETING CAMPAIGN

has included a tv commercial designed to encourage people to access existing resources to combat addiction, which has been aired on the local WTAP TV station.

The team also produced "Breaking the Stigma," a mini-documentary including interviews with people about their stories of addiction and recovery. The documentary was created in partnership with Parkersburg First Stigma Reduction Foundation.

ADDICTION AND RECOVERY PROVIDER'S COUNCIL

convened in April and has met monthly since then. With representatives from twelve different addiction and recovery service providers in Parkersburg, the group has begun identifying gaps and collaborating to explore potential improvements to existing services. In a recent meeting, people in recovery were invited to give feedback on the current design of Intensive Outpatient Programs.



Overcoming Obstacles

Sharing the Workload

When PEP transitioned into collecting solution ideas, Wendy and Lisa asked the Steering Committee members to come to the next meeting with dates and locations for community events they would each host. When the next meeting came around, none of the Committee members had a plan in place. Wendy and Lisa asked again, and at the next meeting, the result was the same: no other community events were planned beyond those the two co-leads had on the calendar.

Wendy and Lisa's frustration grew, and they raised the dilemma with the Lab. In response, a Lab member from WV Can't Wait agreed to come to Parkersburg and deliver a two-part training on shared leadership and task delegation. By the end of the second meeting, the Steering Committee had come up with the idea of the eight-part Solution Series and had listed out the tasks required to pull it off.

Committee members could clearly see what needed to be done and promptly started signing up for responsibilities that they felt excited and ready to take on. Remarkably, for the first time in the project, it wasn't just Wendy and Lisa at the microphone—other Committee members stepped up to MC the events, greet people at the door, and send thank-you emails.



LEARNINGS

Offer task delegation coaching early on in the project.



A lab member from WV Can't Wait supported the Steering Committee in assessing how the workload was concentrated and breaking down what needed to be done into doable tasks.

RESOURCES

→ RACI Task Delegation Tool (Toolkit pg. 18)

Overcoming Obstacles

Navigating Interpersonal Tension

In the course of planning and executing the Solution Series, some light tension emerged between Wendy and Lisa related to lack of clarity about who was responsible for which aspects of the work.

Brenda, the PEP Administrative Assistant, mentioned this in passing on a call about another topic to Laura Rigell, Civic Action Lab Convener. In response, Laura suggested that Brenda use a tool called “Interviewing for Trust and Understanding” that they had learned from the Lab member from [Essential Partners](#). Brenda then walked through the activity’s questions first with Wendy and Lisa separately. The list included questions like: “What would you like to understand better about the other’s perspective?” and “What questions do you wish they would ask you?”

In their next leadership meeting, Wendy and Lisa had a productive, honest discussion about how to better leverage their unique strengths in the project. They set a regular weekly meeting time to improve coordination. The tension quickly dissipated.

LEARNINGS

Offer tools ahead of time that can be helpful when tensions arise, rather than only introducing them in the moment the tension is already present.

Maintain frequent contact and open rapport to allow for honest sharing of challenges as they arise.

Acknowledge the importance of subtle victories; the absence of escalation (which may be hard to grasp or measure) is a valuable outcome.



When this tension arose, the Lab member from [Essential Partners](#) had recently done a training on their Interviewing for Trust and Understanding tool with the Steering Committee. Though intended for a different purpose (engaging more reluctant stakeholders), the questions ended up applying to an interpersonal tension that arose not long afterward.

RESOURCES

→ Interviewing for Trust and Understanding Tool (Toolkit pg. 10)

Results

Beyond enacting a meaningful set of interventions on the issue of substance use, the pilot showcased what can be achieved when combining bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy. It also measurably improved resident attitudes related to community cohesion and agency and contributed to a growing solution-oriented and civically-minded culture in Parkersburg.

Inter-field Synergy

Throughout the pilot, bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy practitioners from the Civic Action Lab made key contributions to the project's success. Though it is challenging to quantitatively measure the synergy unlocked by combining these three fields, observations of the Lab members' interventions illustrate how each field made an indispensable contribution to the project's progress and its success.

As some examples:

- Without the organizing acumen in task delegation, the project may not have reached as many residents and wouldn't have resulted in as much leadership development for the Steering Committee members who stepped up to take on more and more responsibilities over time.
- Without the bridging acumen to listen for what matters to the other person, the tension between Wendy and Lisa could have limited their ability to work as a united team leading the Steering Committee through the intensive process.
- Without the participatory governance acumen to process and prioritize community input, they might have developed an Action Plan that wasn't informed by the input gathered, missing the opportunity for community members' voices to impact concrete outcomes.

With all three skill sets at the table, the project continued building momentum, reached hundreds of community members, and produced a plan informed by robust community input, which is now being implemented.



BRIDGE



ORGANIZE



DECIDE

Results

Community Attitudes

In the initial survey used to pick the issue, we also included attitudinal questions to capture a baseline of Parkersburg residents' views. We asked the same questions again in a follow-up survey at the end of the project.

Remarkably, and despite quite polarizing and vitriolic political debates unfolding in parallel to PEP, markers of community cohesion and agency increased across the board between March 2025 and March 2026.

Ripple Effects

Steering Committee members observed many related shifts in the community since the start of the project. PEP participants were affected by what they heard from each other and, in some cases, even took the initiative to implement ideas that came out of the conversations.

- Service providers proactively responded to what they heard at the PEP events. For example, one provider created a new sober hangout space.
- PEP has been referenced as a model for quality community engagement, including in recent meetings in Parkersburg about how to improve law enforcement's response in mental health-related crises.
- Recovery and mental health-focused agencies, which previously saw each other as competitors, became more interested in each other's practices and ask each other more questions from a place of respect and curiosity than before.
- Through events hosted by the Lived Experience Council, participants have built new relationships within the recovery community. Some members have also been able to sponsor other members in the AA and NA programs.
- The term "civic engagement" has become more widely used among members of the public, including by those who were showing up and commenting at City Council meetings and by moms who started planning mock City Council meetings with their homeschool students.

+57%

"People in my community respect others who do not share their values."

+13%

"When my community faces problems, I feel like we can work together to implement solutions."

+29%

"I feel understood by community members whose opinions and backgrounds differ from mine."

Additional Elements for Success

Trust in the process

We very intentionally did not pre-define or place bounds around the issue and action to be taken in the pilot. The Steering Committee members share our conviction that PEP's totally open-ended nature was one of the project's most important defining qualities, and it instilled residents with a sense that their voices actually do matter.

The design choice of leaving the topic up to the community didn't come without its moments of concern and doubt:

- *“What if the solution they come up with is a book ban?”*
In one of the early planning meetings in Parkersburg in March 2024, a Lab member voiced concern about the project's totally open-ended nature. “What if the local team comes up with a plan that is totally counter to my organization's values?” Through a thoughtful discussion, the Lab members concluded that if the process brings diverse perspectives into meaningful exchange, the selected solution is unlikely to be one-sided or harmful to a segment of the community. The Lab opted to leave the topic entirely up to the local team and trust the process.
- *“We can't fund it unless we know the topic fits into one of our program areas.”*
Although the Lab was lucky enough to find several national funders willing to embrace and learn from the project's open-ended, bottom-up nature, other funders were less receptive. In particular, most Parkersburg-based funders were hesitant, voicing at the time that they could not fund a project before knowing the focus area. They offered to consider the project for potential support once the issue and solution were identified.
- *“I'm not interested in working on this topic.”*
One Steering Committee member withdrew after the issue of substance use was identified as the project's focus. Though this member did consent to the decision to focus PEP on substance use, the member voiced resistance to the idea that recovery was possible and stated that they were not interested in working on the topic.

A power-sharing cascade

From a family foundation to the Parkersburg Boys and Girls Club

From the SHIFT Trustees, to the Civic Action Lab, to the Steering Committee, to the teens in the Parkersburg Boys and Girls Club, actors who typically hold more power chose to step back, trust, and follow what others suggested as the path forward. If a national funder and non-profit partners embody an ethos of trust and shared power, that ethos is likely to be mirrored by local partners in how they relate to the community.

- SHIFT (the family foundation which created the space in which the Lab emerged) intentionally handed power to the practitioners who joined the Lab, allowing them to totally shape the Lab's form and function, and concretely handing them \$150,000 and total authority to decide how they would spend those funds in service of their shared exploration.
- The Lab designed the place-based pilot in an open-ended way, allowing the Steering Committee to pick the issue and solution, and allocated \$50,000 for a Solution Fund, which the Committee could decide how to allocate to implementing what came out of the process.
- The Steering Committee repeatedly based its decisions directly on what it heard from the public input it collected, both for the selected issue (substance use) and the Action Plan being implemented.
- The Lived Experience Council (a group started and supported as an element of the Action Plan) is committed to preventing youth from becoming addicted to opioids. They carved out \$500 from their budget to use for an activity designed by young people for young people. In a Shark Tank-style event, they invited teens from the Parkersburg Boys and Girls Club to pitch their ideas to each other, and "Cosmic Softball" (softball under black lights) won. The event will include a "Recovery Wall" with stories about the realities of addiction.

Additional Elements for Success

National partners not “on Top,” but “assertively on Tap”

The dynamics between us as the Lab and the local team were an ongoing point of spark-filled discussion. During our first visit to Parkersburg in March 2024, tension emerged between some Lab members about how we would relate to the Parkersburg-based partners. One argued that we should default to following the local partners’ lead, while another expressed hesitation, noting that there may be instances when that may not be best. By hearing each other (using Reflective Structured Dialogue and Dynamic Facilitation), we arrived at a shared commitment to follow the local partners’ lead.

After the initial back-and-forth about how to relate to local partners, we deliberately leaned back during the first months of the pilot. Then Wendy and Lisa expressed a desire for a clearer map for how to proceed. In response, we offered ideas for how they could approach the Solution Identification phase. As time went on, we took a more assertive approach, proactively offering suggestions when we believed a tool might help. These offers proved crucial, since the local team didn’t always know what kind of support they could ask us for.

Often, Wendy and Lisa took our suggestions, but sometimes they didn’t, which we warmly welcomed. Their “no’s” affirmed that we had built enough trust for them to be honest with us, and that we’d built a dynamic in which they could live into their autonomy to move the project forward as they saw best.

“

I think we had the best of both in the pilot: being grounded in the very real political and social climate of Parkersburg, while benefitting from the experience and skill of national organizations. We didn't have to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes you can't see what's in front of you, but from too far away, you can't see it either.”

– **Wendy Tuck**, Parkersburg City Council member and Steering Committee co-chair

LEARNINGS

Take time to build trust that the project is not being directed from the top-down, and then lean in with offers, taking “no’s” as a positive sign that the local team still feels that they have autonomy.

Proactively offer ideas and tools, once trust has been built. Local partners won’t know to ask for a particular type of support if they don’t know that it’s an option.

Set up nimble structures that allow for rapid turnaround to address challenges as they come up.

Intentional Engagement of Key Stakeholders

Local Government

One of our desired outcomes for the pilot was to “change local government processes, such that public participation is more meaningfully incorporated when addressing future public policy challenges.” This was admittedly an ambitious goal for 12 months, and it turned out to be even more challenging than we expected.

Coincidentally, just as PEP was getting going, public participation became a hot topic in Parkersburg City Council. After heated discussions about pay for public sanitation workers, the majority of the Parkersburg City Council voted in January 2025 to restrict public comments during Council meetings to agenda items only.

Over the coming months, many Parkersburg residents expressed discontent with this change and kept showing up at Council meetings to raise their concern about the new rule, even though it wasn't on the agenda. In response, five Council members walked out in the middle of one meeting, and at another the City Council president threatened that those speaking about items not on the agenda would be arrested. This controversy attracted media attention from across the state. A year later, in January 2026, after significant uproar and the election of a new City Council President, the Council voted to return the public's right to speak on any item they wished.

Intentional Engagement of Key Stakeholders

Local Government (continued)

Early in the pilot when the Council's public comment period was becoming a public issue, we saw an opportunity: it was clear that the standard format for public engagement (three minutes at the mic) wasn't working- neither for the Council members nor for the members of the public. It seemed the perfect chance to offer alternative models that could support more constructive exchange, and we had recently added a member to the Lab who could bring precisely that expertise: the National Civic League with their Better Public Meetings project. We worked with Wendy to plan a session inviting a few Council members to connect on public engagement. But when the time came, it was just us and Wendy in the room with a lot of unclaimed Subway sandwiches.

Over the next couple of months, Wendy did succeed in having five of the nine Council members participate in interviews with her to offer their perspective on civic engagement in Parkersburg. This was part of the baseline evaluation, and Wendy repeated the interviews at the end of the project, with four Council members agreeing to interview for a second time. The Steering Committee invited the Mayor and Council members to attend the Solution Series and the closing "Solution Reveal" event, but none accepted. Throughout PEP, the Mayor did not respond to any outreach, until the closing event when he called Lisa to apologize for being unable to attend.

LEARNINGS

Map out who has relationships with the elected officials and intentionally invite their engagement early on via trusted messengers.

Assess the current attitudes held by elected officials related to public participation and set goals with an awareness that changing attitudes and institutional processes takes time.

Consider piloting civic action projects in communities where the elected officials are eager to partner on the effort and interested in expanding public participation.

Intentional Engagement of Key Stakeholders

Residents with different views on the selected issue

After the Steering Committee selected substance use as the focus issue, Wendy and Lisa noted that most of the Committee members were sympathetic to those in addiction or recovery, and that the more critical perspective (while prevalent among the Parkersburg population) was under-represented among the Committee members. Wendy and Lisa attempted to recruit additional Steering Committee members who held this more critical perspective. However, these efforts were not successful, which Wendy and Lisa attribute partly to not having personal relationships with as many people holding that perspective.

The Steering Committee also made a specific effort to invite a more critical perspective by holding a Solution Series event focused on “Impacted Non-users,” with the goal of creating space for participants to speak freely about the real impacts on neighbors and community safety. On the whole, though, event attendees tended to be those who were in recovery, sympathetic to those in recovery, or working in the addiction and recovery space.

LEARNINGS

Once the focus issue is identified, pause and review whether the leadership team is also representative of the diversity of community perspectives related to that issue.

If a perspective is found to be missing, map out what segments of the population hold that perspective and where they gather. Consider asking trusted contacts to refer you to people in their networks who may hold that perspective.



An Expansive Vehicle and Vision

Throughout the Parkersburg Engagement Project, a recurring push and pull emerged between the organizing impulse to expand the number of actively engaged participants and the participatory democracy impulse to create formal governance structures and scale expectations based on currently available resources.

The Steering Committee did not include a pathway for incorporating newly interested community members - and there were a lot of them! An impressive total of 736 people provided their contact information and expressed interest in getting involved, including more than half of the respondents to both the pre- and post-community-wide surveys. Through an organizing lens, those sign-ups are an invaluable resource that must be tapped immediately, ideally contacted within a few days. However, the Steering Committee, with its fixed membership and 12-month mandate, did not have a built-in logic as to why or how it would further engage these sign-ups.

Another aspect of the governance structure with potentially mixed implications was the Solution Fund. This \$50,000 fund was included in the project budget to support the implementation of the selected “solution.” It was indeed meaningful to ensure that residents saw something concrete come out of the process. On the other hand, it meant that when the Steering Committee thought about the action plan, they focused on what could be accomplished with the fixed amount of available funding.

“

People want to make a difference; they just don't know how to. When they saw what we were working towards, it really got our community members active.”

– **Sara Smith**, Steering Committee Member

LEARNINGS

Offer trainings about power-building early on in the process so that leaders think beyond the people and dollars already available when considering the project's potential impact.

Create a clear structure that combines a diverse, consistent, compensated decision-making body with a team structure through which additional community members are invited and supported to voluntarily contribute.

Conclusion

The inter-field collaboration piloted in the Parkersburg Engagement Project shows that bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy each offer crucial contributions to a place-based civic action effort. Yet we believe the pilot only scratched the surface of the potential synergy that can be unlocked by combining the best of what each of our three fields has to offer.

With greater diversity of perspectives among leaders and participants, such a project could have more reach, durability, and transformative impact. With a more strategic approach to local government engagement, such a project could transform how the public is engaged through institutionalized participatory processes. With an expansive vehicle and vision of what is possible, such a project could move beyond a fixed number of leaders with a fixed budget to engage hundreds of residents working in sync and achieving major material and structural improvements.

Given the impacts we saw in Parkersburg and the potential in sight, we believe inter-field collaboration is ripe for more experimentation.

With this pilot, we dared to set aside our organizational egos and methodological purity. We accepted that we don't have all the answers on our own and opted into an open-ended collaboration. If you share our conviction that bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy are indispensable pieces of a larger whole, get in touch. We'd love to be in community with others to build on our learnings and keep refining the practice.

The Backstory

The beginning

SHIFT (a progressive-leaning family foundation) observed the fervor post-2016 in liberal circles about democracy being in crisis and asked: How can we best use our modest resources to respond to this moment? The Trustees shared a belief that democracy was far from perfect before Trump's election, and that the moment called for crossing the political divide, focusing on shared underlying needs, and testing new approaches.

Building on conversations with 150 organizations from across the pluralism and democracy ecosystem, SHIFT invited an unlikely combination of 21 of those practitioners to spend 2 days together in the hills of eastern Kentucky in the summer of 2021. Some were vaccinated, and some weren't. Some were from Appalachia, and others had flown across the country. Some were bridge builders, some were organizers, and some came from the participatory democracy space. All shared a desire to get out of our bubbles and consider how we could be even more effective in our work.

Glimpsing potential at the intersection of their work, on the final day participants called for SHIFT's support to continue exploring together, and the SHIFT Trustees said yes.

“

Usually when I'm invited to an event, I know many of the participants. With the SHIFT Convening, I said yes because I didn't know any of the other participants. It felt like an important moment to get out of my bubble and learn from those doing the work through a different lens which is imperative if we're going to reimagine the world around us."

– Erika Washington, Make It Work Nevada

HIGHLIGHTS

June 3-5, 2022

21 practitioners (from fields of bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy)

At Pine Mountain Settlement School (KY)

Funded by SHIFT (family foundation) and grant from New Pluralists

A UNIQUE MODEL OF COLLABORATIVE PHILANTHROPY

SHIFT has challenged the typical family foundation script:

Encouraging practitioners to collaborate, rather than compete with each other.

Empowering practitioners with full authority over how financial resources would be allocated, trusting that those doing the work know what is needed.

Compensating practitioners for their time.

Holding an open-ended orientation, without attachment to specific outcomes.

Serving as the project's fiscal home and funding operating expenses.

The Backstory

Launch of the lab

It didn't happen overnight that we went from the funder's yes to a clear plan for what it would look like to keep exploring together. We took some time to design a structure to support this unusual experiment of uncovering synergies between our typically siloed approaches.

The practitioners who wanted to keep engaging with each other and the SHIFT Trustees all weighed in with ideas. Out of this iterative process, we arrived at a shared concept: a cohort of organizations equipped with seed funding to do practical projects together and compensated for their time.

We launched as the "Action Lab" to emphasize our commitment to learning by doing. By the end of 2023, we had agreed on three lines of work, an initial allocation of our seed funding, and a plan to raise more funding:

- A Place-based Pilot: an applied experiment in collectively supporting a specific community to address a local issue, drawing on expertise from bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy.
- A Resource Hub to assemble tools from our three fields in an online repository at democracyresourcehub.org, later expanded to include capacity-building offerings via the [Democracy Resource Hub Learning Series](#).
- Funder Engagement to learn alongside additional funders, including by hosting a "Funder-Practitioner Lab" in 2025. Funders followed the place-based pilot in real time.



HIGHLIGHTS

Launched Mar 2023

10 members from 10 organizations

Part-time Lab Convener

Biweekly Zoom calls

\$150,000 in seed funding

\$5,000 stipend per person

THE LAB ITSELF AS A FRACTAL OF THE WORK IT WANTS TO ADVANCE

Ideological Diversity: The Civic Action Lab intentionally has partisan and ideological diversity among its members.

Connecting through Action: With "Action" in its name from the start, the Lab has consistently committed to building relationships and understanding across methodological differences by doing concrete work together.

Collective Decision-making: The Lab uses consent-based decision-making for significant choices, such as charting its strategic direction, allocating funds across the projects, and adding new members.