

# ADDRESSING SUBSTANCE USE IN RURAL AMERICA

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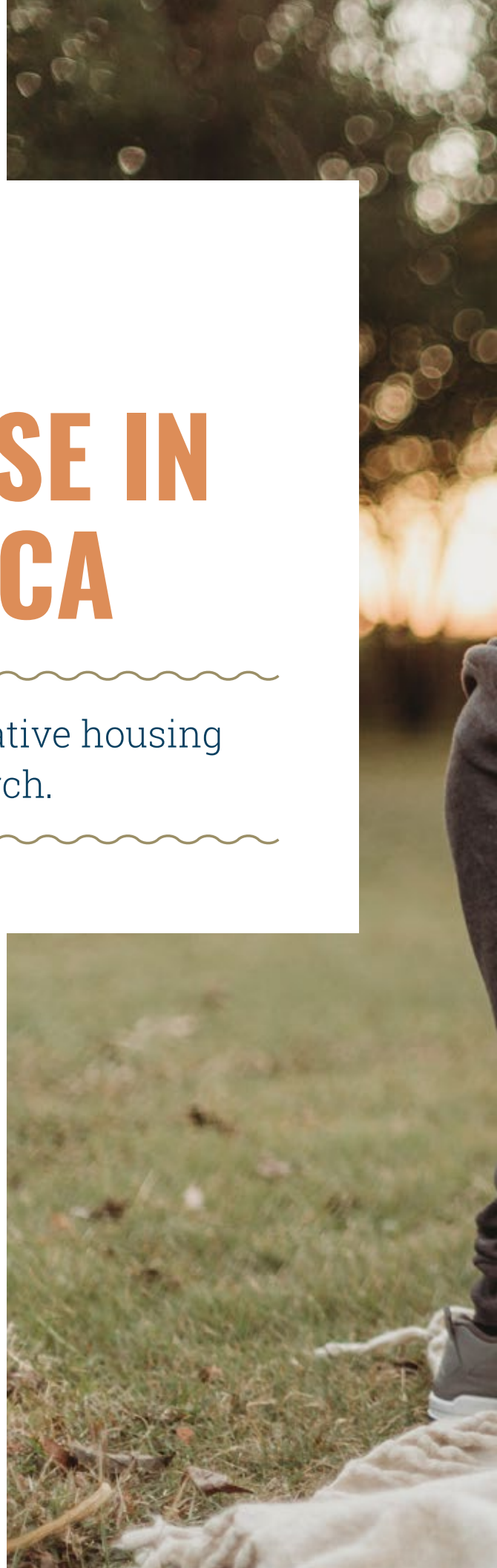
The Fletcher Group uses an innovative housing model and ground-breaking research.

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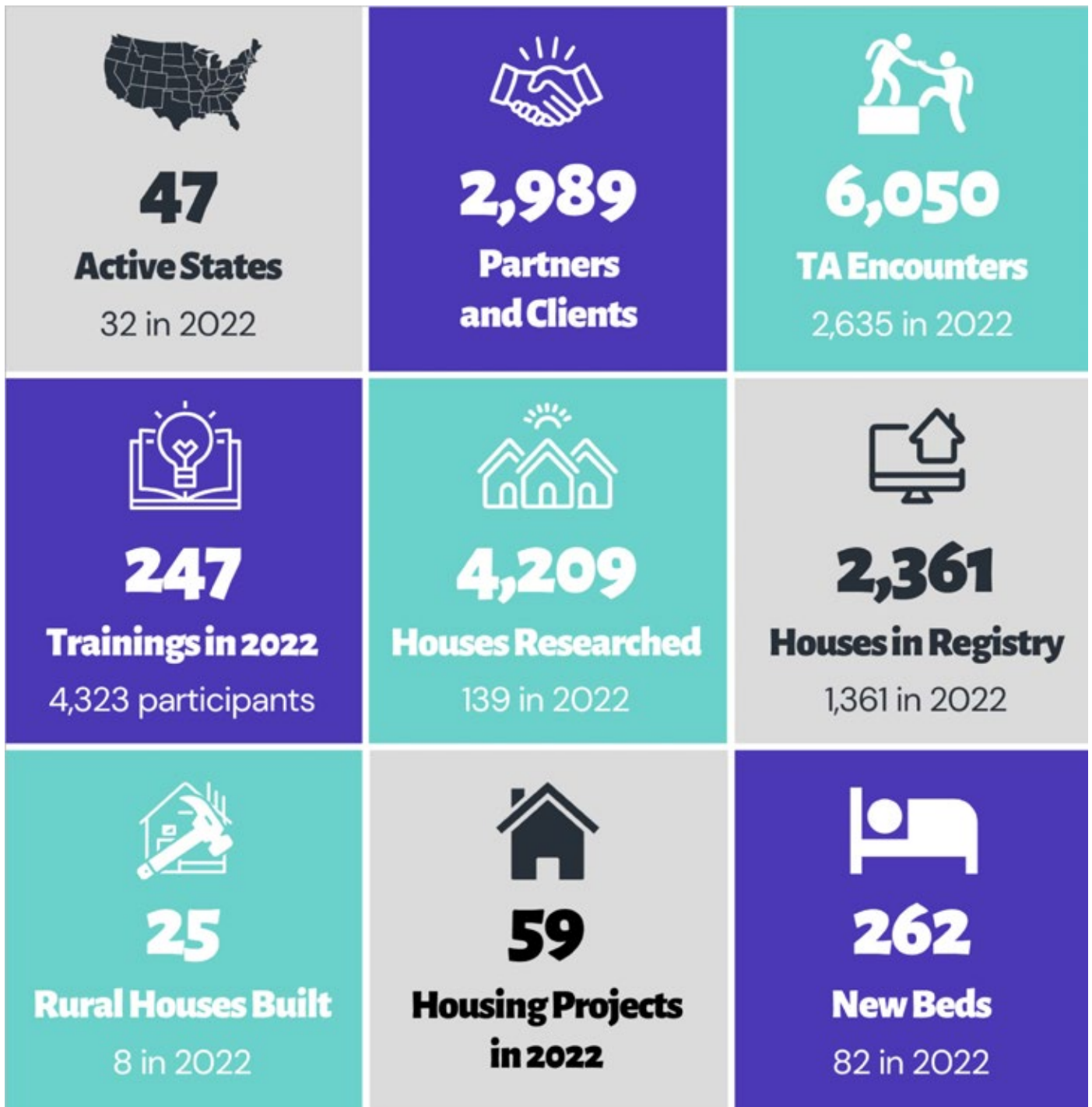
By Dave Johnson

With over 100,000 Americans dying of drug overdoses each year, the need for safe, effective recovery support services, including effective recovery housing, is greater than ever. That's especially true in rural communities where few resources are available to counter the higher rates of substance use disorders, morbidity, overdose, and mortality found there.

With a staff of 33 in 13 different states—20 percent having self-disclosed lived experience—the [Fletcher Group Rural Center of Excellence](#) (RCOE) is one of only three RCOEs in the nation. It is federally funded to help rural communities address their substance use challenges by providing technical assistance, training, and original research. The other two are the Center on Rural Addiction at the University of Vermont in Burlington and the University of Rochester Medicine Recovery Center of Excellence in Rochester, New York.







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Focused on rural counties with the highest rates of overdose mortality, the Fletcher Group promotes an innovative “recovery ecosystem” housing model first developed in Kentucky when Dr. Ernie Fletcher served there as governor. Leveraging federal, state, and local resources, the Recovery Kentucky program grew to include 18 facilities (nine for men and nine for women), helping thousands of rural Kentuckians rebuild their lives while saving millions in taxpayer dollars

## How the Model Works

The Fletcher Group uses a peer-led social recovery model that emphasizes personal accountability. Throughout a residency of up to two years, clients benefit from a complete continuum of evidence-based and trauma-informed care, including medications and other services and treatments administered by staff professionals. Coordinated with community resources—including workforce training, social enterprise, meaningful employment, housing, transportation, and education—a culture of care provides a platform for connecting mind with body so that individuals can develop the life skills needed for lasting sobriety, stability, and self-sufficiency.

“We started Recovery Kentucky to really change lives,” says Dr. Fletcher. “And we quickly realized that medically assisted treatment—treating drug addiction with medications—is not enough. As a physician, I know you have to address the social determinants of health in order to be successful.”

## Self-Sustaining

The Fletcher Group model uses so-called “braided funding”—the leveraging of funds and resources, including tax credits, that already exist within federal, state, and local agencies, faith-based entities, and the private sector—to enable new facilities housing 100 or more residents to be built without debt. Day-to-day operating costs, including those needed for building repair and upkeep, are met through per diems contracted with departments of corrections, as well as funding from Community Development Block Grants, Section 8 Housing, SNAP benefits, and other partnerships.

A recent example is a new \$14.5 million Women’s Center in Middlesboro, Kentucky that will provide 112 women with housing and a full continuum of support services, including education, career planning, family reunification, telehealth, and remote education.

It should be noted that the Fletcher Group does not own or manage any facilities on its own. Instead, it provides best-practice, evidence-based technical assistance to all comers, including those wishing to improve an existing facility and those seeking to build or re-purpose smaller programs and facilities. One example is a new SOS (Safe Off the Streets) House sponsored by Never Alone Recovery Support Services in Polson, Montana that serves rural residents, including Native Americans.

## Collaboration Is Key

The Fletcher Group’s ability to form partnerships from diverse and often underutilized programs is the key to reducing recidivism and rebuilding lives while maximizing taxpayer dollars. Examples include a partnership with SMART Recovery to evaluate the effectiveness of the SMART Recovery Life Skills curriculum in recovery homes and a partnership with Contingency Management (CM) to test in similar settings CM’s ability to

encourage greater participation in recovery activities through positive reinforcement.

The Fletcher Group is also working with recovery homes to assess the barriers that prevent recovery home residents from achieving the gainful, meaningful employment they need for long-term recovery. The Fletcher Group’s research efforts help develop and refine best practices while informing public policy. Data from a 2020 study of nearly 1,500 recovery home operators, for example, contributed to three important publications: “Impact of COVID-19 on Rural and Non-Rural Recovery Houses in the United States” in the *Journal of Rural Mental Health*; “The Financial Landscape of Recovery Housing in the United States” in the *Journal of Addictive Diseases*; and “Predictors of Recovery Housing Closure Risk During COVID-19” in the *Journal of Substance Use*. Other research subjects range from how messaging, specifically first-person testimonials, can reduce substance abuse disorder (SUD) stigma to how the level of trust between Recovery Housing residents and operators affects recovery resident retention.

## An Exciting New Tool for Recovery Allies Everywhere

Of particular note is the [Recovery Ecosystem Index Mapping Tool](#), the nation’s first-ever interactive data visualization tool to measure the county-by-county strength of recovery ecosystems across the United States. Developed through a partnership with researchers at East Tennessee State University and NORC at the University of Chicago, the new tool allows the user to get a detailed snapshot of the recovery ecosystem resources in his or her county by simply clicking on an online interactive map.

## RURAL VOICES

“This is a real game-changer for recovery allies all across the country,” says Dr. Fletcher. “Instant access to highly detailed information will help them work much more efficiently and effectively. That’s especially important because recovery ecosystems involve so many moving parts and rely so heavily on local resources. Recovery housing is the logical first step—that’s why we’re so dedicated to it—but many other resources and services must be in place as well. Having a quick, accurate, and detailed snapshot of what’s available—and what’s missing—will be a godsend, especially in the rural communities we serve.”

The index comprises 14 indicators that impact the strength of a recovery ecosystem, organized into three components: SUD Treatment, Continuum of SUD Support, and Infrastructure and Social Factors. The tool also allows users to create data overlays that show the association between the Recovery Ecosystem Index and factors such as overdose mortality rates and sociodemographic and economic factors, such as poverty rate, education, and race/ethnicity. Community organizations, policymakers, researchers, substance use treatment providers, and other decision-makers can explore county-level maps and create data dashboards that tell them precisely where additional resources are most needed to provide support for those in recovery. Insights derived from the tool can then be used to target resources and interventions that can enhance a community’s local recovery ecosystem.

### Additional Online Tools

In addition to [fletchergroup.org](http://fletchergroup.org), the Fletcher Group has created a second website, in conjunction with Get Help, Inc., at [recovery-housing.org](http://recovery-housing.org) that gives recovery home operators, clients, researchers, and policy makers the tools to promote quality standards and best practices while bringing new efficiency to facility and service management.

Those in need of a supportive living environment to recover from a substance use disorder can now find it through a new [Housing Registry](#). With just a few keystrokes, the Search Tool scans all available recovery houses within a geographic area and lets the user narrow the search using filters. Over 1,100 recovery homes are already listed, and more are being added.

And a new online [Learning Center](#) offers a robust course catalog tailored to the needs of rural recovery house residents, owners, and operators as well as the friends, family, and community members who support them. Taught by Fletcher Group subject matter experts and professional partners, over 50 courses in 15 categories are currently offered, including: how to create best-practice programs and facilities that embody national standards; how to create and maintain a positive, healthy, and nurturing environment; how to deliver high-quality services with full accountability and professionalism; and how to support individuals while building community.

The training is designed modularly around micro-learning principles so users can learn and grow at their own pace.

Dave Johnson is the Chief Executive Officer at the Fletcher Group. Much more can be learned about the Fletcher Group at [fletchergroup.org](http://fletchergroup.org). Those interested in immediate help can request it at [Fletcher Group Technical Assistance](#).





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