

Focus Areas

- Small Business Lending
- Residential Lending
- Economic Development

TA CONSULTANTS:

Kim Brumber, Conava Consulting

PROGRAM PERIOD:

February 22, 2024
—February 28, 2025



LIFT Community Action Agency (LIFT CAA)

HUGO, OK / LIFTCA.ORG



Empowering Rural Communities Through: Lending Expansion and CDFI Certification

Background

Based in southeastern Oklahoma, LIFT Community Action Agency (LIFT CAA) provides housing and economic development services to support under-resourced communities across the region. During the Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) grant period, LIFT CAA supported its partner, the Southeast Oklahoma Community Development Corporation (SOCDC), in achieving Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) certification in September 2024. This milestone unlocks new funding opportunities for SOCDC to expand small business and homeownership lending across rural areas. With technical assistance, LIFT CAA helped lay the groundwork for this transition by strengthening SOCDC's policies, governance capacity and readiness to launch new financial products, including a Credit Builder Loan and a Down Payment Assistance Loan.

The Challenge

As LIFT CAA and SOCDC sought to deepen their role as financial service providers in rural Oklahoma, they recognized a need to strengthen internal processes and leadership capacity to meet the demands of CDFI certification and scale their

"I truly cannot say enough good things about Kim. She provided knowledgeable, unwavering support to our organization, and we simply would not be where we are today without her. Our policies wouldn't be where they are, and our understanding of what it means to be a CDFI has grown tremendously because of her guidance."

— MACY SELF, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, LIFT CAA

lending operations. While the organizations were committed to expanding access to capital for residents, they faced key barriers including limited staffing capacity, outdated operational systems and the need for greater board engagement around lending risk and capitalization strategies.

Through the RCDI program, LIFT CAA partnered with a technical assistance consultant to address these challenges. The work focused on building stronger internal systems, refining loan policies and evaluation processes, and raising capital. In addition, a focus on developing staff knowledge and expanding

board readiness to support new loan products helped pave the way for a clearer strategy for capitalization.

Within this process several challenges were identified: resistance to change from both staff and board members, balancing limited time and staffing resources, and developing tools to support more confident decision-making.

RCDI Support & Technical Assistance

With support from consultant Kim Brumber, LIFT CAA received hands-on technical assistance to strengthen SOCDC's internal infrastructure and lending strategy. The engagement began with reviewing and revising lending policies, including collections procedures, loan servicing protocols and creating a Loan Risk Rating Matrix to enhance underwriting processes. These documents significantly expanded the organization's policy manual and laid the foundation for future loan operations.

Consultants also worked with LIFT CAA to draft a capitalization plan designed not only as a funding strategy but as a teaching tool to increase the board's understanding of CDFI finance. Direct coaching helped clarify staff roles, especially for newly hired team members with traditional banking backgrounds transitioning into CDFI work. Additional support was provided to improve board engagement, develop internal leadership and introduce a phased strategy for implementing new products, specifically a Credit Builder Loan and a Down Payment Assistance Loan tailored to community needs.

As a result of this work, SOCDC achieved CDFI certification in September 2024 — a key milestone that

positions the organization to access new funding streams and expand its lending impact. While the organization faced internal capacity constraints and competing staff demands, the consultant's structured approach, practical tools and clear guidance allowed LIFT CAA to make significant progress. Processes have become more systematic and efficient, providing greater confidence to the organization around lending practices and future funding pursuits. The RCDI-supported work accelerated the organization's growth timeline by an estimated 18 to 24 months.

Key Achievements

- Developed a capitalization plan to attract investment for new lending programs.
- Strengthened board engagement and financial education to support long-term sustainability.
- Positioned the organization to apply for CDFI Financial Assistance funding to scale operations.
- Applied and received funding from USDA Rural Development Rural Microenterprise Assistance Program to serve rural small business owners.





LESSONS LEARNED & BEST PRACTICES

- 1 **Technical assistance that blends document development with direct coaching can dramatically increase staff confidence and readiness.**
- 2 **Designing tools like a capitalization plan as an educational resource can improve board understanding and build confidence in fundraising and borrowing decisions.**
- 3 **Recruiting staff with traditional banking experience is valuable but must be supported with mentorship to adapt to CDFI-specific practices.**
- 4 **Introducing policies and loan products through a phased strategy may better support board decision-making and buy-in.**
- 5 **Investing in internal leadership development and administrative support will be key to scaling new financial products effectively.**

WHAT'S NEXT?

➔ LIFT CAA and SOCDC will continue finalizing board approvals for their revised loan policies and move toward launching their Credit Builder and Down Payment Assistance Loan programs. The organization plans to implement the draft capitalization plan and apply for CDFI Financial Assistance funding to support growth. Additional next steps include onboarding a loan processor to expand internal capacity, exploring more user-friendly loan management software and strengthening board recruitment efforts with a focus on CDFI knowledge. Lessons from this engagement are also being considered for peer learning opportunities, with the potential for LIFT CAA to serve as a model for other emerging CDFIs across the NeighborWorks network.