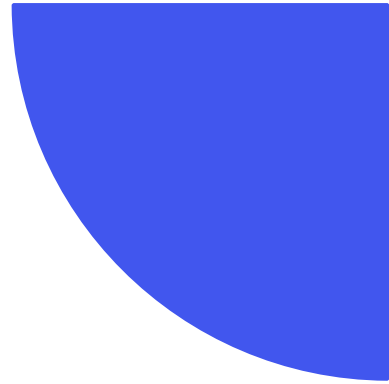
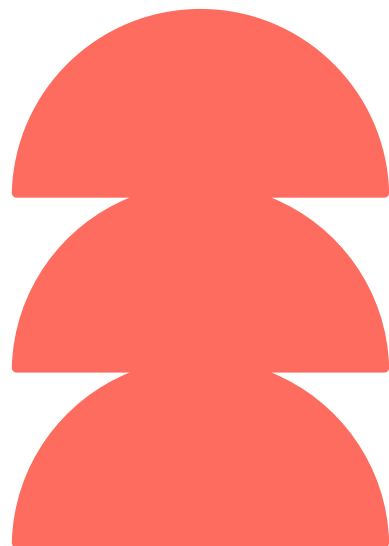




**better
together**



2025 Annual Report



Executive Summary

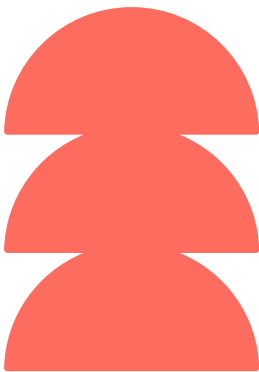
Better Together launched into a year of activity in 2025 as its first full year as a nonprofit organization, and under the leadership of a new Associate Project Director. In addition to offering meaningful programming that builds the capacity of local organizations, Better Together has engaged in exploration of sustainability strategies for the organization. For the first time, Better Together gave out community grants that focused on building collaboration among groups in Nacogdoches County.



Main outcomes:

- 78 community members from nonprofit and other sectors attended 4 free workshops, building the internal capacity of participating organizations
- At the Collaboration Summit, 96 participants gained community connections, built critical skills, and received guidance to support strong grant proposals
- 10 Collaboration Grant projects were funded, providing direct benefits to the community while also deepening collaboration and connection among organizations
- Futures in Focus served 738 students and involved 20 vendors representing regional employers and education or training providers, bringing students into contact with careers that are high-paying and in high demand in the region, and the pathways into those careers.
- The Mental Health and Criminal Justice Roundtable convened over 30 key stakeholders, marking a historic landmark of collaborative efforts to address longstanding challenges

Financial Overview



2025 At A Glance		
Personnel (Project Director, Principal Investigator, Administrative Assistant)	\$86,325	42%
Other Operations	\$8,264	4%
Collaboration-building efforts	\$103,317	50%
Youth Development	\$4,904	2%
Education Series	\$3,806	2%
TOTAL	\$206,616	



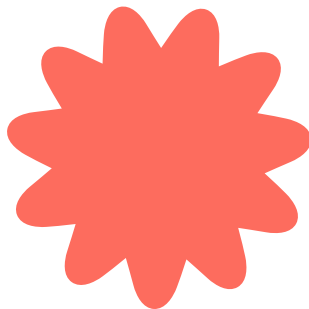
Board of Directors

Current Members:

- Lauren Ivy-Sieja, DSW, LCSW-S - Chair
- Michelle Key, PFNP - Secretary
- Carlos Palomo - Treasurer
- Jordan Bridges
- Anna Donihoo
- Tracie Estepp
- Caroline Garner
- Maura Messer
- Ella Nobles
- Terrence Reeves
- Amelia Ruiz-Fischer
- Mario Torres
- Erin Windham

Following recruitment and outreach efforts, Maura Messer, who owns a private mental health practice, and Ella Nobles, Director of the Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital Foundation, joined the board and have made meaningful contributions.

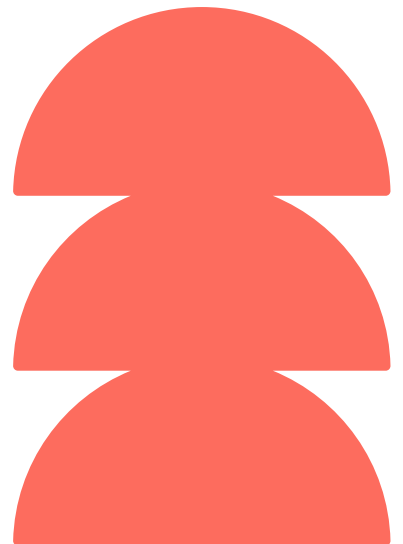
The Board of Directors met 8 times in 2025, and two ad hoc subcommittees operated within the Board in 2025: the Mental Health Crisis Committee and the Collaboration Grant Committee.



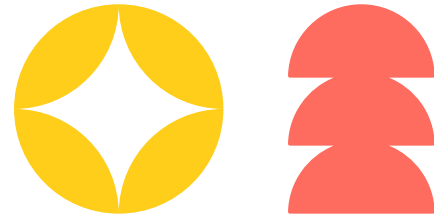
Staff

Catie Munguia was hired in May 2025 as the new Associate Project Director. Catie was born and raised in Nacogdoches, and this year finished a Doctorate in Social Work from Stephen F. Austin State University. Catie is bilingual in Spanish and English, and brings with her rich experience as a school social worker, mental health therapist, nonprofit administrator, and various other roles.

Catie has launched Better Together into a dynamic year of growth and momentum, strengthening the organization from the inside out. Internally, she established strong operational policies and initiated a comprehensive strategic planning process. Externally, she led the development of key community initiatives, including the Collaboration Grants, Education Series, and the Mental Health & Criminal Justice Roundtable, positioning Better Together as a catalyst for meaningful community impact.



Collaboration Summit



Based on the findings from Better Together's appreciative inquiry efforts from 2018-2021, one of the key needs related to mental health and wellness in Nacogdoches County is for organizations to increase collaborative efforts. In 2025, Better Together made fostering collaboration our main priority.



The Collaboration Summit took place on September 23, 2025, and aimed to foster collaboration among leaders and innovators in Nacogdoches County, while also equipping them to prepare strong proposals for Better Together's Request for Proposals, which launched

at the Summit. The agenda included a keynote presentation by the founders of The Village Nac, breakout sessions facilitated faculty and staff from SFA, Texas A&M School of Public Policy, and Baylor's Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, an elevator pitch session facilitated by the director of SFA's Center for Entrepreneurship, and a presentation on Better Together's RFP by BT's Associate Project Director. Ten door prizes of \$100 each were given out in a drawing at the closing of the event.

Of the 56 organizations represented at the Summit, 17 of those organizations formed part of the collaborations that submitted proposals through the Collaboration Grant Request for Proposals. 7 of the 10 proposals that were selected had representatives in attendance at the Collaboration Summit, demonstrating that the Summit succeeded in preparing community members to create strong grant proposals. Summit attendees rated 9.2 out of a scale of 1-10 regarding the helpfulness of the summit in preparing them to write a grant proposal. The Summit also increased connectedness among organizations in attendance, with 97% of attendees indicating that they made a new connection at the Summit with which they intended to follow up in the future.

Total Participants: 96

Attendees: 64

Presenters: 9

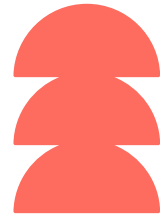
BT Staff & Board: 8

SFA Student Volunteers: 15

#of organizations : 56



Collaboration Grants



Request for Proposals

The Better Together Request for Proposals launched September 23 and closed October 20, 2025. With a focus on leveraging collaborative efforts to improve mental health and wellness for residents of Nacogdoches

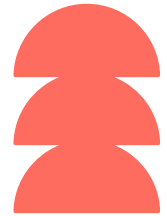
County, this RFP stimulated innovative and collaborative ideas across sectors and organizations, resulting in 19 proposals. 10 proposals were selected: 5 were approved at the full amount requested, and 5 were approved with modifications. Initiative amounts ranged from \$1,000 to \$20,000. 7 of the 10 approved proposals were from organizations that attended the Collaboration Summit.

All of the funded projects enhance mental health and wellness in Nacogdoches County in innovative ways, from providing heaters, food, and resources to vulnerable elderly residents, to building family-friendly work stations in both the university and city libraries equipped with community resource lists, to training arts instructors in group facilitation skills to help them use their arts classes to build community and connection. The intended impact of the Collaboration Grants is twofold:

- 1)** Increase the depth and breadth of collaboration among groups and organizations in Nacogdoches County to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of their services
- 2)** Generate innovative, locally-rooted solutions to improve mental health and wellness for the residents of Nacogdoches County.

Each approved initiative, upon signing a contract with Better Together, agreed to an Evaluation Plan to evaluate the impact of the initiative on the intended outcomes. In addition, Better Together staff is working with the Hogg Foundation Evaluation Team to complete an in-depth study of the impacts of the Collaboration Grants on the degree of collaborative efforts among recipient organizations beyond the funded initiatives themselves. Initial feedback indicates that by merely opening the request for collaborative proposals, organizations began to collaborate in ways they were not previously. Some awardees have indicated that this collaboration has opened the door to further collaborations beyond the funded initiative. Awardees have also indicated that this experience empowered them to prepare grant proposals to submit for other funding opportunities. The community response to the funded projects has been overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic.

Collaboration Grants



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Announcing our

Collaborative Grant Awardees

PROJECT TITLE

COLLABORATORS

**Family, Community, and Health in
Nacogdoches County**

Tx A&M AgriLife Extension Service,
Fredonia Early Childhood Center,
Nac Master Gardeners

**Opening the Doors
to HOPE**

Nacogdoches HOPE,
Fredonia Hill Open Door

**Homes of Hope: Building Stability, Wellness,
and Connection in Nacogdoches County**

Habitat for Humanity of Deep East
TX, Neighborhood Strong

**Collaborating on integrated, synergistic
services for the wellbeing of marginalized,
multidimensional poor Nacogdochans**

21/7 Association, Community
Improvement Program, NAACP
Nacogdoches

**Rental Assistance - Alleviating Poverty and
Impacting Mental Health in Single Mothers**

Christian Women's Job Corps,
Fredonia Hill Open Door

**NAC Kids Scholarship
Initiative**

Nacogdoches Arts Collaborative,
NacISD Fine Arts

**Breaking Barriers: A Community
Rising Together**

Life Line Housing
New Beginnings (Abeline)

No Child Left Behind

Stonewall Baptist Church, Cheryl
White, Stonewall Nacogdoches
Community Center

**Building Family-Friendly Study and Workspaces:
Supporting Parents' and Caregivers' Academic
and Professional Success**

Family Friendly SFA Initiative,
Nacogdoches Public Library

NAC Together

Reach That LLC, Grant Howarth,
Nacogdoches Arts Collaborative



Mental Health & Criminal Justice

One area of Better Together's collaboration-building efforts has been around the intersection of mental health and criminal justice. Starting in 2023, Better Together staff and board members held 28 stakeholder interviews focused on identifying possible solutions to top challenges in this area. In 2025, Better Together compiled the solutions identified in those interviews into a survey that was sent back out to stakeholders asking them to identify priorities for action.

In November 2025, Better Together convened a Roundtable of local representatives from law enforcement, the court system, the local mental health authority, behavioral health practitioners, and others to review the survey findings and create an action plan. Attendees expressed to Better Together staff that convening such a group was long over-due, and they applauded the solution-focused nature of the gathering. Attendees requested to continue to meet quarterly. Progress is already being made on the action items identified at this event. Below is a sample of some of the items from the action plan:

- *Develop trainings for physicians to build their skills and confidence in screening and treating mental health conditions*
- *Re-launch mental health court, explore funding possibilities*
- *Develop a list of physicians with particular expertise / willingness to treat mental health conditions such as ADHD, Depression, Anxiety*
- *Explore opportunities to further connect the LMHA and the Jail*



Youth Development

Creating opportunities for youth to develop positive social and economic skills has been a priority for Better Together. Since 2023, Better Together has convened other organizations to collaboratively host a hands-on career exploration fair for young people in Nacogdoches County to help make a connection between high-paying high-demand jobs in the area, and the choices young people can start making as early as high school to pursue those careers.

In 2025, for the first time SFA joined on as the official host, along with Workforce Solutions and Better Together, to offer ***Futures In Focus*** in October 2025. 8th graders from all Nacogdoches County schools and several outside the county were invited to participate in the event, which explored career pathways from all along the educational spectrum: jobs that students can seek immediately after high school, jobs that require some technical training, jobs that require a university degree, and even careers that offer opportunities at different educational levels.

738 students participated in Futures in Focus from 8 schools and some homeschooled students. 20 vendors (regional employers as well as SFA and community college / junior college representatives) participated in Futures in Focus, offering 33 interactive stations. Some of the favorite stations included a welding simulation with the SFA College of Forestry and Agriculture, paper rocket launching with Lockheed Martin, and virtual reality headsets which were used for students to virtually explore a variety of careers.



Education Series

Better Together and Nacogdoches Area United Way partnered to offer four quarterly Education Series workshops at no cost to attendees. Most attendees were staff, executive leaders, and board members of local nonprofit organizations.

Q1: Navigating Crisis and Rebuilding Trust: Best Practices and Lessons in Nonprofit Leadership and Sustainability

of attendees: 15

Presenter: Habitat for Humanity of DETX Board Members

Q2: Get a GRIP: Introduction to Grant Writing Seminar

of attendees: 21

Presenters: Pam Anderson, Compacity Consulting

Q3: Marketing and Fundraising for Nonprofits

of attendees: 22

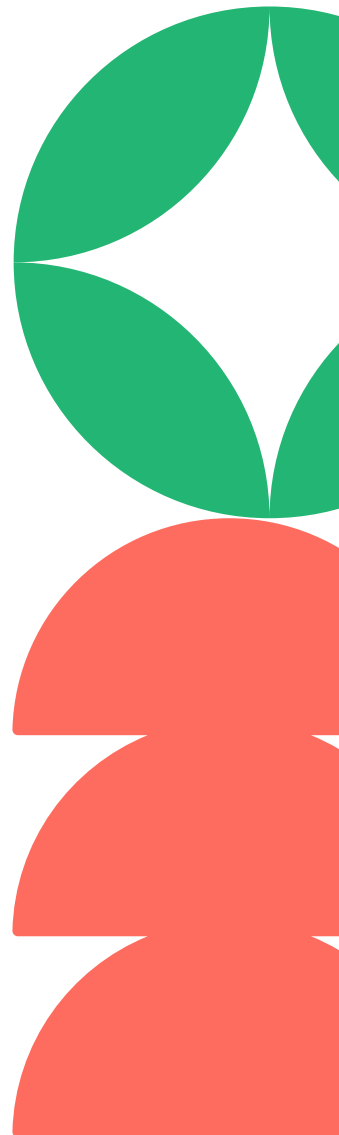
Presenter: Kenny Sigler and Brandon Crist (Sigler & Crist)

Q4: Planning with Purpose: A Simple Guide for Nonprofits

of attendees: 20

Presenter: Kenny Sigler (Sigler & Co.)

By bringing in content-area experts who worked with Better Together staff to develop workshops catered to the specific needs and context of Nacogdoches County organizations, the Education Series contributed to building the capacity of local organizations and addressed the resource gap that otherwise puts rural community nonprofits at a disadvantage.



Looking Ahead

2026 will mark the end of the Hogg Foundation Wellness in Rural Communities Grant, although funds from the grant will continue to support the work of Better Together for a year or more past the end of the grant cycle. With the closing of the grant cycle, Better Together will complete its transition to independence from Stephen F. Austin State University's School of Social Work, which served as the incubator for this project since it began in 2018. Building on the meaningful successes of 2025 and the years prior, and rooted in the power of the voice of the community, Better Together will move forward into a new chapter.

Better Together is excited to invite community members, organizations, donors, foundations, businesses, and more to partner with us as we build a Nacogdoches County community that is truly Better Together – one where collaboration unlocks innovation to meet the wellness needs of all in our community.

The Collaboration Grants, which began in 2025, will continue into the summer of 2026. The initiatives supported by the Mental Health & Criminal Justice Roundtable will be a priority area for Better Together, as Better Together continues to serve as a backbone organization for this collaborative effort. 2026 will begin with strategic planning, which will include input from the Board of Directors, staff, and the community. The needs and priorities identified in this process will shape strategies moving forward.





Conclusion & Contact

Better Together remains committed to improving the mental health, health, wellness, and well-being of all residents of Nacogdoches County by increasing the capacity of and collaboration within the community, agencies, and people.



Project Director:

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 Better Together Nacogdoches
 @BetterTogetherNac



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