



IDEAS SUMMIT

Overview + Emerging Themes

Welcome!

It's with excitement that I welcome you to this rare gathering of people who are shaping the future of rural leadership.

A lot of research exists that shows why rural leadership is important. Never before has there been an event that focuses on defining and implementing excellence on a national scale—until now.

As stewards of America's food, energy, and clean water, and other natural resources, rural communities are known for their ingenuity, tenacity, and self sufficiency. Rural leaders help their community grasp opportunities. But rural communities are also facing many big challenges. With widening inequities, aging infrastructure, and climate disasters on the rise, today's rural leadership is arguably more needed than ever before.

This Summit is a gathering of RuraLead initiative partners and 30 RuraLead Field Builders—a set of rural leadership development experts and inspiring leaders who are building resilient, equitable communities. On March 23, we are joined by rural leaders, practitioners, and funders from throughout the nation.

This event is part of a larger initiative where we aim to understand the current state of rural leadership development around the nation, and chart a path forward. Following this Summit, and with additional input, we will put forth actionable recommendations for how to create an ecosystem that provides resources and support to rural leaders. It is our hope that, in turn, they and their communities can thrive.

On behalf of the RuraLead partners, I am so thrilled to work alongside you on this important initiative.

Heidi Khokhar
Executive Director
Rural Development Initiatives
RuraLead Initiative Lead

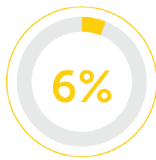
CONTEXT: RURAL IS ...



of land in the
United States

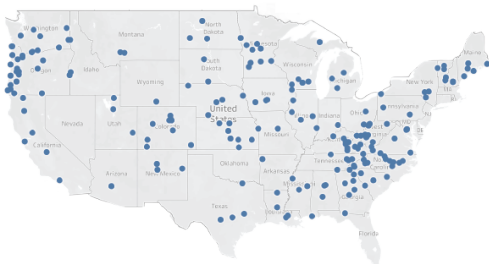


of the nation's
population



of philanthropic
investments

GET ON THE MAP!



380

rural leadership development efforts
from 262 organizations—and counting

41%

report funding is an ongoing challenge

RURAL IDEAS SUMMIT

DAY 1: MEETING OUR OPPORTUNITY

Field Builders explored community-action themes and identified priorities.

DAY 2: DIGGING INTO CHALLENGES

The Field Builders delved into priority areas—and questions—while sharing success stories.

DAY 3: ADVANCING THE FIELD

An open session with practitioners and resource providers exploring how to strengthen rural leadership collaboratively.

DAY 4: TURNING LEARNING INTO ACTION

Field Builders synthesize learning and move towards actionable recommendations.

YOU ARE HERE



Initiative Overview

REGIONAL LEARNING JOURNEYS

RuraLead convened regional meetings in

Appalachia

The South

The Midwest

The Northwest

An Indigenous peoples' conversation is underway.

INTERVIEWS

RuraLead's partner organizations—Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, Brushy Fork Leadership Institute at Berea College, Evolutionary Leadership, Heartland Center for Leadership Development, Hope Nation, MDC, PhilanthropywoRx, Roanhorse Consulting, and Rural Development Initiatives—conducted dozens of interviews with leaders, leadership development practitioners, funders, and other stakeholders to understand the current landscape of rural leadership.

SHARE LEARNING

We will share a framework for rural leadership development widely among practitioners and resource providers.

Purpose of the Summit

The purpose of the RuraLead Ideas Summit is to bring together respected practitioners, community leaders, resource providers, and new voices committed to the development of rural leaders across the United States. Our work is to make meaning of our exploration to date and add to the initiative's findings. We will also articulate a framework for rural leadership development in America.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

By the end of the four-part RuraLead Ideas Summit we will have:

- A strengthened network of relationships among summit participants committed to rural leadership development in America
- An affirmation of our commitment to building equity into rural leadership development
- A shared understanding of the initiative's preliminary findings on what constitutes good rural leadership and what can strengthen it
- A shared understanding of what works when it comes to successful leadership development
- Deeper insight about what communities and leadership development practitioners can do to successfully expand and strengthen leadership in rural and rural Native communities.
- A set of clear, specific recommendations for action that philanthropy and other resource providers can take to strengthen rural leadership development
- Time to appreciate one another, laugh together and enjoy each other's company

It is our privilege to learn alongside you as a RuraLead Field Builder.

Janet Topolsky

Executive Director

Aspen Institute

Community Strategies Group

Gibrán Rivera

Facilitator

Evolutionary Leadership, LLC

RuraLead Ideas Summit Facilitators

RuraLead Partners

RURALEAD.ORG

Rural Development Initiatives (Lead Partner)

Roanhorse Consulting

PhilanthropywoRx

MDC

Hope Nation

Heartland Center for Leadership Development

Brushy Fork Leadership Institute

Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

Evolutionary Leadership, LLC

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Terminology

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “RURAL”?

There are many public and private agencies that define “rural.” For our purposes, a rural community is any place outside of a metropolitan area.

Rural communities, largely speaking, face more challenges than affluent urban centers. Poverty, access to health, and having basic needs met have been a challenge for a long time, and is exacerbated when a pandemic, hurricane, wildfire, economic downturn, or other disasters strike.

A NOTE ABOUT “RURAL,” “TRIBAL,” AND “NATIVE”

While we make mention of rural, tribal, and Native communities, we do not use the terms interchangeably.

Rural communities can include integrated or adjacent Native or tribal communities. Tribal communities can exist in rural as well as urban areas. That said, tribal leadership, when it’s rural, is distinct from rural leadership. Furthermore, there are Native communities in rural areas that are not tribes. There may also be Native leaders who do not live or work on their tribal land.

For clarity, we will refer primarily to rural communities, and call out Native or tribal leadership when the context is appropriate.

Equity Statement

What is equity? In the simplest terms, it means fairness, which is not necessarily the same thing as equality.

It’s not about everybody getting the same thing, it’s about everybody getting what they need in order to access opportunity to improve their situation.

Not everyone has a fair and just opportunity to receive an excellent education, make a living, or to live their best life. This can be said for people in rural areas whose families once made a good living in agriculture, resource extraction,

manufacturing, or other industries. When a way of living ends, especially for a whole area, then there isn't money for good schools, health care, or other basic services. There has been a divestment in rural America writ large.

EQUITY WITHIN COMMUNITY

The land, wealth, and opportunity upon which so many thrive also bear the burden of history. Equity means contending with the wrongs that must be made right.

When people cannot access opportunity because of historical oppression, generational poverty, because of race, age, sexual or gender identity, or a disability, then the whole community is not living up to its promise. When structural racism or other forms of discrimination exist, then the talents, skills, and hard work of many individuals do not reach their potential. This hurts everyone.

Opportunity drives equity. Conversely, without equity, whole communities suffer. Effective rural leaders recognize this paradox. They understand that power dynamics must shift in order for communities to thrive. That's why this initiative was created with representation of people of color, people of different ages, and identities among the leaders we spoke with. And that's why equity must be a fundamental part of any leadership development work.

TOWARDS INCLUSION

We heard many stories about how people became leaders. Overcoming adversity is part of our common narrative. Adversity looks like lack of economic opportunity, discrimination because of race, lack of representation in chosen fields, etc. When no options were available, leaders stepped up because they recognized they had a voice. With voice comes agency.

It is evident that historically underrepresented groups are critical to growth. It is the very people who are discriminated against who understand where the problems lie. The vantage of their lived experience reveals better solutions. We argue that leadership must include people who have been discriminated against, otherwise, the same problems that have kept communities down will persist.

Emerging Themes + Proposed Actions

Throughout this initiative—our regional learning journeys and the dozens of interviews with rural leaders, leadership development practitioners, and funders—RuraLead explored these questions:

FRAMING QUESTIONS

1. What are the qualities of good leaders?
2. What difference does good leadership make in rural places? What does it look like in communities?
3. In what formal and informal ways do people become leaders in rural communities?
4. How do we shift power dynamics to support equity, opportunity, and vitality in—and with—rural communities?
5. What would it take to strengthen leadership development so that it helps increase widely prosperity and well-being in rural communities?

We present initial lessons (for questions 1-3) and proposed actions (for questions 4-5), along with supportive quotes. Though the initiative did not specifically set out to understand the funding challenge, we also learned many helpful lessons from our conversations with rural-based funders and practitioners.

Let's dig in.

1. What are the qualities of good rural leaders?

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

Good rural leaders are rooted in the community.

“First, leaders need to be stakeholders. They need to have roots in the community. They don’t come from outside the community. They come from within the community.”

“Effective leaders are representative of the people they are leading.”

“There’s this network of things that happen in rural communities that don’t happen in the same way in a lot of urban communities. Understanding that deep capacity that rural communities have, that sense of community engagement and caring and relationship, that’s a real asset.”

“Most rural leaders don’t think of themselves as leaders. They see themselves as good community members.”

Good rural leaders listen first, listen humbly, listen deeply.

“Leadership is learnership.”

“In the end, no one knows what’s best for anyone besides the person that’s going through it. So how can we be good leaders if we’re not trying to understand the people that we’re trying to help and be there for?”

“Effective leadership values all people and opinions and the contributions they can make to addressing issues.”

“Traditional Lakota leaders always walked behind the people that they were leading, to get a perspective of the community they were serving and the issues they were confronting.”

“You really have to come with an ability for authentic communication and empathy, to be able to see the needs that are in the community.”

Good rural leaders work for the community.

“Good leaders in our communities are people who can see the big picture and the local impact and can sort out their personal biases from what’s best for all those stakeholders.”

“Rural leaders are self-aware; they know when to step up and when to step back. It requires ‘lifetime self-reflection.’”

“Being able to really hold the interest of those you’re serving above that of your own. That’s how we evaluate good leadership—it speaks to integrity.”

“My grandfather told me that Crazy Horse would not eat or drink water before everyone else was served. It’s that kind of service orientation and humility that provided us with effective leadership and still does really.”

Good leaders communicate in ways that everyone can hear.

“In a rural community you have to be able to talk to everybody about what you want to do in a way that they can hear.”

“Good leaders need to be able to communicate their vision, get buy-in from a variety of stakeholders, and not be worried about who gets the credit.”

Good rural leaders act and take risks amidst uncertainty.

“I don’t ask others to take risks I’m not willing to take myself.”

“Leaders have an openness to being different and trying new things if the old ways do not serve the community.”

“I heard recently somebody defined leadership as accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve a shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty. That last part is fundamental. When leadership is really needed is when the path forward is uncertain.”

Good leaders have strong and authentic relationships both in and outside their communities.

“Community leaders, particularly in rural areas, are people that are committed to partnering with others.”

“Leadership doesn’t happen in a vacuum and it’s important to have connections from within and from without the community.”

“One of the most important aspects of leadership is making sure you know all of the players in the work that you’re doing.”

“They’re involved in one or multiple organizations, they network, people in their community know who they are. And they’re typically the people that get reached out to when there’s a challenge that needs to be solved.”

“Leadership is relational, not transactional.”

Good rural leaders emerge from building relationships and trust.

“Leadership is really about building relationships and understanding and pulling together diverse voices and pulling together strengths and experience and skills, so that we can share those things to make our communities better. When you strip everything away, that’s what it comes down to.”

“You can’t get to know people in communities in three years. They won’t trust you to make these changes you’re suggesting until you’ve built those relationships—and that’s going to take a while.”

“Trust is important anywhere, but even more so in rural communities. Part of that is respect, that people know their communities, its needs, and have solutions and that people don’t need to come in and save them.”

Good rural leaders motivate collaborative community action.

“Progress is a collective action. Leaders understand that and they work to create it

through engaging others in achieving common goals and outcomes.”

“Perpetuating this idea of an individual hero that’s going to save the day is problematic because it strips everyone else of agency. Leaders understand conditions that enable community members to have agency and to be able to work together to advance a new future.”

“It’s absolutely about partnership building. It’s about bringing them together around the common vision and doing the hard strategy work...building a coalition strongly from the beginning and not falling into the trap of being the one who does it all.”

“Rural leaders know there are no permanent allies, there are no permanent enemies. We always say that rural makes strange bedfellows—you never know who is going to collaborate to get #@%\$ done.”

Good rural leaders are strategic thinkers and tactical implementers.

“Rural leaders must be a jack of all trades and a master of all trades because of the lack of number of leaders.”

“A good leader has vision, they can see that path to success, and they understand strategy and implementation, and how to engage others to make it happen.”

Good leaders are focused on changemaking and know that real change takes time.

“In rural America, leadership is really about endurance. You can’t expect much change in three years. It’s gotta be a career.”

“In order to create social change, the people we invest in have to be supported in all possible ways, and we have to believe that five years down the road a policy or structural change will happen because of their work. With leadership work, we can’t easily measure how our direct investment caused the changes.”

“It’s hard for people to be patient when they’re in leadership roles, because they want to see change happen and make things better right away. Real long term change can take time.”

“Good rural leaders value all people. Inclusivity and equity are guiding principles.”

2. What difference does good leadership make in rural places? What does it look like in communities?

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

Resources are leveraged to go further.

"Rural leaders are creative and resourceful and have to figure it out. Rural people need to wear more hats. Resources go further."

"Basic community needs are met. [Conversely,] needs are not being met in some places even when there are adequate resources, due to lack of a strong leadership."

"In the end, rural leaders are insanely resourceful. They're problem solvers because there are fewer resources."

"Everybody wins when leaders get better."

"Research indicates that anything a community does, deliberately, to strengthen leadership will pay off in better outcomes for individuals, organizations and the community as a whole."

An entrepreneurial mindset helps a community become more resilient.

"What is required of an entrepreneur is very similar to what you see in a leader. There's a mindset that's the same for both at a really core level. What we're really talking about is curiosity, a growth mindset, a willingness to step out of your comfort zone and know how to manage risk and unfamiliar territory."

"Listen deeply to the needs of the community and respond to those needs with your

product and service. Harness the force of the free market and the consumer economy, to keep it self-sustaining. The deeper you get into it, the deeper your roots become in the community that you're serving."

"Leaders or communities that have trained leaders in an entrepreneurial model seem to have better outcomes."

Equitable solutions are developed because underrepresented voices influence design.

"There are approaches to including diverse voices, regardless of what the actual demographics of any given community looks like."

"In order for the economy to thrive, social contexts must allow for equal access to opportunity."

"I work with the Hispanic, Latinx communities and a lot of the time, when people are working with this community, or even just in general communities of color, we always seem to think we know what's best for them. 'Oh, I think they need this. Oh, I think they need that.' Just ask them, because otherwise, we're not going to be providing stuff that they want to see or they need to learn."

Communities give rise to successful efforts and new ideas.

"Good leadership can really make or break a program, and some programs that should have failed were actually able to succeed due to strong leadership."

"Rural is on the forefront of so many of our current issues: climate change, pandemic response, childcare, infrastructure, etc. How a community approaches challenges and solutions tells you a lot about their leadership."

Communities are moving forward from a position of strength, leveraging their assets.

"Good leadership avoids the negative, disenfranchised narrative that suggests no assets exist, even if assets are in place but look different than assets in other places."

"So often the headlines or attention is on the negative things and we need to tell the positive story. Shed that kind of light on the region, because there is so much good that's happening in the region, and so much more good that could happen with more investment."

3. In what formal or informal ways do people become leaders in rural communities?

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

Rural leaders often arise out of need.

"Rural leadership often stems from a need to fix a particular problem, and no one else is stepping up to do so."

"Leaders arise to respond to struggles that impact their lives."

"The folks that bubble up to be leaders in their communities might arise from necessity."

"Rural leaders are often not developed formally. Sometimes leadership grows out of a need for greater equity."

Rural leaders often arise from invitation and affirmation.

"My own leadership story really begins with being invited to take on roles and responsibilities in the community... When you're invited, you understand people recognize something that you can contribute. People don't often think of themselves as leaders, and they need that outside recognition to provide them with the confidence to get involved."

"It's finding those people, identifying them, wrapping around them. And saying, first of all, you may not realize this, but you're a leader, too."

Rural leaders don't always identify with the word "leader."

"Use accessible framing, especially for groups that haven't traditionally been in power. If you

offer someone the opportunity to have support in getting done the thing they want to get done, people who don't see themselves as leaders are more likely to participate if it is for something."

"People are very community-minded and want to help each other. But leadership? I think sometimes when you use that word, it puts up a little blockade. I don't want to be a leader, but I do want to help my community."

"Calling it 'professional development' vs. 'leadership development' made it feel more accessible."

The path to rural leadership is not always clear.

"There's no one right way and no perfect formula for leadership, you need to be willing to get messy and practice."

"When we want to improve in leadership, it takes more than reading a book. It's just not that clear cut."

"Leaders grow by trial and error; in terms of making mistakes, sometimes you have to step out and do things, being able to accept and deal with conflict...in a way in which you can overcome challenges."

Rural leadership often starts informally, but needs nurture and cultivation.

"Every human being has all they need to be a leader. But those seeds have to be watered and weeded and cultivated."

"Leaders evolve toward being comfortable in their leadership styles, developing this as they are older, usually, and leadership development programs can help accelerate this process."

Building rural capacity builds leadership.

"The main two ways, besides funding, that [we support] rural leadership is through skill building and trainings. We try to coordinate trainings for our grantees based on things they say they want."

"We had folks that work dealing with water issues, folks that were dealing with

"I don't consider myself a leader. It feels really uncomfortable. There's something about a westernized system of leadership that I don't feel comfortable associating myself with."

health issues. We decided that if we split [training], it would be easier to be able to build capacity for those leaders that are focused on those issues; to be able to bring them to the table.”

Connecting rural leaders to each other aids in learning and empowerment.

“Leaders learn from each other. In isolated rural communities, leaders of color, queer leaders, and others who may be marginalized can benefit from connecting with others who share their experience within their places.”

“It’s empowerment. Oftentimes, people might feel alone, or ‘I’m the only one going through this.’ For rural leaders and folks from tribal areas to be able to share their stories, and especially their leadership journey... empowers and encourages other leaders in rural areas. It’s a lifeline to have this other group of leaders.”

Rural leaders bring new leaders to the table and learn from them.

“When you get past your own silo and encourage others to break out of their silos, then your tribe gets bigger.”

“The importance of building a team that expands beyond the “usual suspects” in community and leadership development work. Peer learning should be a core component of leadership development efforts.”

“I just feel like real social movements cannot be dictated by grants, cannot be cultivated in conferences. It’s real relationships.”

There are barriers to rural leadership development.

“Many rural people have to travel to urban areas to develop leadership skills, and when rural leadership trainings are offered in rural places, people are often surprised to discover them.”

“[Leadership] programs are a ‘stepping stone.’ What you may think is a basic skill set oftentimes is missing. Not because of the lack of involvement or lack of desire to be involved, but oftentimes because of lack of access.”

“[We need to] find a way to broaden who we’re serving, so that we’re not doubling down on status quo, and just reinforcing the same stereotypes of who gets to decide and who gets to participate.”

Mentorship and engagement should start young. Encourage youth leadership.

“There are children who were raised in this environment that were dragged along to some of these marches and the rallies and the community meetings. They grew up in it. I see a lot of leaders that are developed out of being raised in movements.”

“When you engage youth in those community roles and offer them real leadership responsibilities, while they’re still young, and in the community before they go off to college or explore the world, what you’ll see is they will often return. Because they’ve felt that sense of belonging and recognition, and then they feel they have something to contribute, and that they can be a part of the community decision making.”

“It all comes from experience how we grew up, the mentors that we had that taught us how to start becoming better leaders.”

Those who have experience overcoming adversity should be empowered and developed as leaders.

“Connecting lived experience with leadership is a strength and a skill.”

“Who would know better about how to, let’s say, help migrant farmworkers than someone that is a member of that community?”

“We try to empower our local leaders that they do have the lived experience—that they know their communities better than anyone.”

**“Use a
‘youth-led,
elder-guided’
model.”**

4. How do we shift power dynamics to support equity, opportunity, and vitality in—and with—rural communities?

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Develop rural-focused approaches to diversity, inclusion, equity and justice.

“Equity and inclusion are central to successful, long-term strategies to increase widely shared prosperity and well-being; therefore, it is important to develop an understanding of how systemic racism shows up in rural places.”

“Well intentioned white people that were involved just didn’t know how to step back and create space for people with knowledge and experience, which is, as we know, how movements and change happen by really deeply listening and learning from impacted communities, whatever those communities may be.”

“How do you talk about equity in places that aren’t very diverse? And how do you build leadership development in places where there aren’t many new folks coming in? How do you talk to a sea of people who’ve been here forever, and don’t see anyone [else]? How do you get them to talk about equity? That is what keeps me up at night.”

“Framing around power building is a little bit different...because what we’re talking about is dismantling systems that have not been responsive to folks and then rebuilding.”

"I don't like to think of my work as empowering people. I like to think of my work as freeing up energy and communities for people to do the things that matter to them, to help make their communities more vibrant and the strong futures that people want."

All leadership development should have an equity lens.

"We know that democracy, in all of its complexities, is not always fair and inclusive ... when the systems of oppression are at work. People of color across this country are still being suppressed in many ways to gain access to vote. And so if we're talking about who has power, we need to make sure that folks have access to gain power. That's safeguarding our democracy, safeguarding the right to vote, safeguarding ways for people to advocate for policies and to bring about policy changes."

"Let us understand our neighbor's lived experiences and then build capacity around that."

"Equitable leadership must be community led. We have to address why some people are left outside the circles of leadership."

Strengthen learning and peer support around rural equity-centered work.

"Support traditional rural leadership development practitioners in deepening their understanding of equity and racial equity."

"We can accomplish more if we support each other in that equity work, because it is hard, and we will get push back."

"The network for us as practitioners matters a lot."

"[We] can support rural leadership by opening opportunities for national participation for rural leaders, so that they can be exposed to innovation that can inform leadership practices."

"Make more visible Native resource people to others engaged in rural leadership development (onus NOT on Native leaders but rather on the rest of us)."

"We have to enter into the conversation about equity differently (in rural)."

"How do you support rural leadership efforts or organizations? Creating safe, peer spaces to co-think."

Recognize that rural does not transition power well. Deliberately promote and support leadership transitions.

"I find that there are 20 folks who are on the boards of every organization in our region. They're the same 20 folks who were here 20 years ago. That is really challenging when I think about what's impacting the growth and strategy of our region."

"People aren't leaving their jobs. Even when they do, sometimes there's an idea of who the next group of leaders should be, and that it should look a lot like the previous ones."

"I think a lot of times in our rural and tribal communities, eldership is so highly revered that oftentimes we fear youthful energy."

"In my experience, local community boards and committees are the best on-ramp to engaging enthusiastic residents to becoming leaders. If seasoned leaders can successfully recruit youth, new community members, and diverse populations to serve as part of these formal groups, they become recognized as leaders and are invited to participate in other ways."

Increase the diversity of leaders being developed.

"Younger folks are typically not listened to, and if you're an immigrant, or you're a minority, then that adds multiple layers of complexity that the rural community needs to embrace."

"There is a legacy of people leading from marginalized communities/populations, but there hasn't always been attention to it."

"People in her community knew her and trusted her. But she 'didn't look the part.' Other organizers said she was going to require too much time and energy. But she didn't. She killed it and inspired me to do better."

"The reality is, there's a whole group of young professionals who are just waiting for their chance, and they'll wait 30 years for their chance."

"How do we really support smart, dynamic, young leaders, because we have a few of them, and I worry about them a lot, I worry that they'll leave, I worry that they'll quickly get burnout."

“One of the biggest things that we can do in positions of power is figuring out how to surface and then defer to those voices. Let them chart the course of community that may not reflect how we view our community.”

Amplify rural voices in policy advocacy.

“Rural needs a seat at the table in statewide decision-making. There are many other funding tables where decisions are happening where, if rural had a presence, if rural had a seat at the table, maybe that suite of decisions would be different because you had some sort of representation. But it’s not there.”

“I meet with legislators once or twice a year, and I’m always just very surprised at how little they know about our nonprofit communities in their districts, and so we try to educate around those issues, which is also a partnership that we have with our advocacy nonprofits who are really pushing an advocacy agenda.”

“One of the biggest things that we can do in positions of power is figuring out how to surface and then defer to those voices. Let them chart the course of community that may not reflect how we view our community.”

Develop a national rural agenda

“There is a need for alignment and cohesion of a national rural agenda.”

“On the economic power side, as a country...we don’t really have a good theory of what’s supposed to happen in rural areas. What is your theory about places where trade agreements have taken away steel or other types of manufacturing industries? We don’t have a good theory about what is supposed to happen in farming where agro businesses are taking over, where industrial farming is taking over. That’s the challenge... In rural, I don’t find that we are very clear. This is the economic campaign that we are going to support that is going to change the lives of millions of workers, individuals, farmers, etc. in rural areas. So we are funding a little bit on the blind side, because it’s important, but without a theory.”

**“Learning from
Indigenous
leadership:
that it’s not
about “me.”
It’s about “we.”
I think that’s
the heart and
spirit.”**

5. What would it take to strengthen leadership development so that it helps increase widely shared prosperity and well-being in rural communities?

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Invest in local leadership development until there is a critical mass in community.

"We've talked about just how do you measure how many participants of these programs would you need to have in a given community in order to get to a point where you're there's sort of a tipping point? I don't think we have an answer for that yet."

"We're really looking at nonprofits who are serving the most marginalized communities within rural and trying to build leadership in those organizations and those people so that they can then build leadership in others."

"What we really need is a critical mass of people who have a similar set of values to some degree, where it's really about optimism, belief in the possibility of the region, a shared language and skill set they've used."

"If you rally enough people it doesn't matter who's 'in charge.' [The people in charge] listen because the critical mass of folks moving in one direction is really hard to stop."

Support leadership acting on issues important to rural population and vitality growth.

"I think we have to take the theoretical concept of leadership and make it practical ... How does it connect to the issues that are important to them right now."

"You can't talk about rural vitality without talking about economic development."

"You could really think a whole lot differently about economic development in [rural places] if there was broadband. It certainly isn't the only thing – if you don't have hospitals, schools, colleges, then how do you make sure that the workforce is ready and healthy and able to do what they need to."

"Childcare! It's bad enough in the urban areas, but in rural places, it's really family, friend and neighbor care, there's not a lot of childcare and again, how do parents go to work? How are kids ready for school if there's no childcare? Those big issues, getting some resources available and not the kind of resources that one foundation can provide. Real public investments are needed."

Advance systems-level approaches for rural.

"Programs are currently focusing on the concept of 'courageous' leadership, the pieces that need to be in place to have people make hard decisions."

"To advance social and economic justice work, there have to be three pathways of change: inclusive economic opportunity, an active democracy and civic engagement opportunities, and supportive policies and institutions that are led and controlled by directly affected folks... It takes resources and funding within those three big pathways, and general operating support that's nimble and responsive to the work on the ground."

"Without shifting wealth, it will be hard to shift the power in rural communities that will lead to honest, authentic, trusted leadership."

"Intentional ecosystem building requires that people are doing it together, that a whole bunch of things are happening at once... It can be daunting, but if you just build one part of it, it's just a program, not an ecosystem."

Build capacity to uplift rural success stories, and our rural history.

"Storytelling is a form of leadership that helps to get things done. For leaders and storytellers to be able to lift up the stories so people won't be so disconnected from the past that isn't so far behind us. I think the same is true for rural communities. You might not

know their plight, because all you hear are the stereotypical things, or you don't even listen... It's easy to not tell the story of people if you never hear the story from their voice."

"Bringing up examples and listening [to stories of leadership] brings hope to a rural leader."

"Teach your community leaders that they need to talk about the work and build their communications strategy on how they're actually telling their stories. It's not necessarily showing all the good things, but you want to show the struggles that you've been through, because peer learning is important."

Support peer learning networks and trusted rural information sources.

"When you bring nontraditional leaders into the picture who have lived experience of a problem...they don't know there are other places where people have handled it differently, or the rules are different. [It's] so important to get out, to be able to see other models. It's getting the inspiration and the courage that is needed to try to do something by seeing that it's possible."

"I struggle to stay connected to everything that's happening. I say that I get to go about a centimeter deep and 10 miles wide... Probably the most important role I often play is being a hub of information. Connection is probably one of the most important things that I do. Sharing that learning, sharing that experience, not reinventing the wheel."

Build rural leadership intentionally and build it into all rural initiatives.

"Leadership manifests itself in a lot of different places than the organization that you may be funding. You take a risk with a grant on an organization or program that may or may not take root. But the leadership may stay in place, even if the program doesn't, and that has to be viewed as a reasonable, valuable outcome."

"Embed leadership development in all rural planning efforts (health, education, or economic development)."

"Leadership is lonely but nobody's in it alone. Good leadership needs connection. Peer learning is important."

“Funders integrate leadership development and capacity building explicitly into rural grant making.”

“Think about ways to align existing funding to support the compensation of [rural] leaders.”

“Organizations and philanthropy need to measure process, not outcomes, when it comes to leadership development. Sustainability of process is a success.”

Support the wellbeing and the spirit of rural leaders.

“Rural leaders need to tend to their own quality of life and positivity because they often are dealing with long-term, systemic issues.”

“I don’t like to let myself become disheartened, but I was awakened a little bit by my leadership fatigue.”

“If I discovered anything with regard to this whole notion of leading, it is maybe that I’ve been far too serious...we’ll all do far better in this work if we remember to make it fun.”

“Fund the space for rural leaders to breathe and imagine.”

“I was able to do more with zero budget 10 years ago that I’m able to do now, and I don’t know why...I guess it’s just the energy, the focus. But it’s amazing. Those are the times that I remember the most: no job, no funding, just pure passion. That’s beautiful, but it burns you out.”

Elevate rural leaders into formal leadership roles and positions of power.

“The way we choose to develop leaders is not only to recognize, but to elevate them in their voice and their ability to have influence and their ability to represent [on issues that affect everyone, not just rural people].”

“I think we are going to have four Native folks in our state legislature coming up, which is awesome - and crazy that that is just now a reality.”

“National practitioners and funders need to seek ways to make opportunities like fellowships accessible to rural leaders--particularly those of low-income.”

“Rural leaders need to be at par with other leaders. You can’t just say you’re a ‘rural’ leader. You stand shoulder to shoulder with every other leader.”

Ten Ideas to Improve Rural Funding

Funding was, by far, the biggest barrier to success for many of our rural leadership development practitioners. Though the initiative did not specifically set out to understand the funding challenge, we learned many helpful lessons from our conversations with rural-based funders and practitioners.

1. Develop a clear and widely understood case for funding rural.

“Businesses fund leadership development because it is proven to be profitable. There is a need for research to support that this is also the case for community leadership.”

“Considering the fact that many rural communities are at the frontlines of impacts of climate chaos and the globalization of various economic sectors, including agriculture and food systems, and grappling with their own very unique challenges around population demographic changes in the country... The need is real.”

“A very small percentage goes to rural communities. I know the ROI may not be as attractive, but the assumptions are that they are quasi dormant...rural communities have the creativity, and the leaders. They’re just not given the same opportunity.”

“We are lucky that we have some great rural funders, but we need more... not just for three or five years.”

2. Support rural data collection and evaluation metrics specialized for rural.

“When you’re looking for diversity, understanding and having access to data that shows you who is in your community to begin with can really help inform that strategy. Data, and access to data, is really important.”

"We want to quantify impact for those board meetings that keep coming up. It's hard to sell that message of leadership takes time. Change takes time. Give us time."

"We connect the community to resources...including data research, industry insights, connections to collaborators, investors, researchers, and any affiliates and new markets."

3. Intentionally fund rural.

"We're very intentional about funding in rural. So we'll actually establish a baseline funding and then we will increase that base allocation based on the percentage of poverty in the communities, not percentage of population."

"A lot of non-rural based funders use the argument that the numbers just aren't there, they're not going to be able to reach as many people and make as much of an impact. But with 20% of the population in rural communities, that's just not true."

4. Fund aggregated projects and work with rural intermediaries.

"Find a partner in the work that you want to do in these states, and work through them because they have the relationships; they are often quite trusted in communities."

"An argument for getting more foundations out of our urban bubble, would be to look at rural and tribal communities as a whole, and not just one county, or one tribe, or one part of the state... There is an impact when you consider the whole."

"The biggest challenge is aggregating sufficient activities, so that the numbers make sense on paper. Rural places are smaller [not] less important or relevant. It is easy to fall victim to a structural bias around the pursuit of impact driven by numbers."

"We use geomapping to say where there are holes, where there is capacity, and how can we actually create hubs or presence from established areas to underserved areas. So it's sort of an equity redistribution of those already publicly funded institutions." [Regional funder, on work with critical mass of resources and communities.]

5. Seek rural expertise. Hire rural staff and look to rural advisers.

"You have to hire some expertise with rural background. In some cases, the divide between [rural/urban] values is not that great. However, the divide in how we interpret, how we express those values is great."

"We actually have in our bylaws that our board must be 50% plus representative of BIPOC, community members, and specifically, to really make a concerted effort for those board members to be impacted community members."

"I was an embedded funder. I lived and funded in my community, and I had an annual budget for my community. I could make grants as small as I needed to."

"We have moved into a regional council model, where we're looking at them [former grant panels] for more than just their input on grant applications, but really trying to get a sense of what are the community issues that arise."

6. Fund with others and help find leverage for rural.

"Philanthropic dollars are not going to be enough to solve the serious housing issues. The philanthropic dollars are not going to be enough to deal with infrastructure support. But they can be the leverage dollars, they can be the grease."

"We get connected to a lot of foundations, national and local, that do terrific work, but not a lot of foundations that do rural work. It would be wonderful to have both the resources and the relationships and connections."

"I think community foundations are great partners for larger foundations, because there is a common language there on the administrative side, but they have the local expertise and credibility that larger foundations may not have."

"COVID has resulted in collaborations between foundations: Can this be a model of philanthropy going forward?"

7. Partner with rural communities. Sustain funding over the time it takes to really make change.

"If you want systemic change.... rural leaders need partners to help try things, and help with the sustainability piece. We cannot expect sustainability if we are not going to help figure out how to make it sustainable."

"I hope that the verbiage around commitment to equity, and looking at the world through an equity lens is not just talk. That we help communities move to action."

"Equity necessitates that funders invest in all people regardless of outcome. Shifting investments to reflect equity may take time for outcomes to emerge. Funders should not consider these efforts failures in five years."

"We published a case study where the things that they're benefiting from now were decisions and interventions from 1999, 2000, 2001. They didn't see the immediate benefit in the mid 2000s, but they are now."

"Don't helicopter in with your shiny objects; you can't build trust that way. They assume you will leave- they're probably right."

"Rural organizations can't run a program on 10% funding. You should un-restrict your funding and give multi-year funding."

8. Fund collaboration across geography, issues and ideology.

"Don't try to boil the ocean. Don't try to solve every single issue at once. Instead, and this is one of my core arguments: Invest in frameworks that allow local leaders with the proper support to do the work that they know is already necessary."

"A funder might have an objective or have a pretty narrow way to make grants. In rural areas, so many things will fall outside of those boxes. [It takes] long term relationships, so that we can know how to help organizations and communities over time as the context changes, as their organizations and needs change."

"Collaboration among leaders--even those with different opinions, styles, and approaches--is important to making change."

"Silos between urban and rural and even among parts of rural by place, issue, or sector, are detrimental to effective leadership. Removing some silos from rural and urban can help from creating false divides when addressing issues of equity."

9. Trust rural leaders and organizations to determine the best use of resources in their context.

"When I go to Starbucks, I don't say, 'Here's my \$4: You can use this on the cost of the cup, the

lid, the barista.' No, we don't do that in most interactions, and yet we do that to nonprofits. It's pretty patronizing. Our trustees get that if we do our work on the front end, we can trust our organizations to use the funds on the back end."

"As people coming in from the outside, we need to listen. The need to understand the history of a place, demographics and geography - understand people's experience to know how to best work with them. Especially true for communities of color."

"Rural people are often accused of being afraid of change when they have faced more change than many other people have. They just want change that is not imposed on them from outside."

"Funders should invest flexible, responsive general operating support for leadership development and for efforts that are run by those who are directly impacted by challenges and systems. General capacity support grants are about trust."

"As the mega funder, you can make tiny shifts or changes that have a huge impact. So transparency, honesty, inquisitiveness, practice asking really great questions ... listening for opportunities for you to make a difference in places you want to serve."

10. Adjust application and reporting practices for rural and BIPOC places and organizations.

"Anything under \$25,000 we consider a small grant. It requires no application and no reporting. The money comes within two weeks. There was no pressure to give big grants."

"We really believe that whatever we're working to support in the communities, we need to also be doing ourselves. We wouldn't ask a community to undergo any sort of equity assessment without us doing it. We are learning from the communities as we do the work."

"Their applications were all online, which meant that communities needed broadband access to apply for funding."

"Funders need to make accommodations for rural gaps and capacity issues."

"[There is a] shift in philanthropy to smaller grants; smaller scale, quicker projects. Mini grants."

"Assumptions need to change by public and private funders that they can't be funding the same old people in these rural communities and expect anything but compliance and being a good grantee."