

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

As a philanthropist, elected official, nonprofit leader or concerned citizen, you can take action now that will make a difference in the health, well-being and future of rural communities and families in your area. You can do this by supporting the following types of community and regionally focused efforts:

- ▶ Community-wide planning activities that seek to include all groups of individuals and families in the decision-making process.
- ▶ Forums for gathering public opinion about needed policy changes that will remove barriers and create incentives for inclusive transformation.
- ▶ Leadership development programs that are open to all and provide greater access to marginalized groups and constituencies.
- ▶ Non-profit initiatives that seek to create community-oriented and community-controlled strategies for economic development, educational advancement, better health, stronger workforce, affordable housing, and small business development.
- ▶ Proven strategies to help rural families get out and stay out of poverty, such as financial literacy classes and credit counseling, Individual Development Accounts and Child Savings initiatives, free or low-cost tax preparation combined with increased use of the Earned Income Tax Credit, 529 college savings plans, and increased homeownership.
- ▶ Legislative changes at the local, state and regional levels that will remove bureaucratic obstacles and create incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Established or emerging philanthropic institutions that are grounded in a community vision, are governed by a broadly representative group of area residents, and that seek to catalyze and support activities, programs and initiatives that build on community assets and work toward long-term community transformation.

TO BECOME INVOLVED IN BUILDING A MOVEMENT FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION...

- ▶ Go to www.nrfc.org or
- ▶ Contact us at:

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Lessons from the Field – Our First Three Years

Rural America is a treasure house of America's natural resources, fertile ground of its food production, birthplace of our cultures and traditions and the rich expression of human determination and innovation. It also is inextricably linked to all that is urban: the well-being of our society relies on the complementary strengths of our metropolitan hubs and the vast rural landscape and communities that surround them.

At three years and counting, the National Rural Funders Collaborative is only beginning to uncover the vibrancy, diversity, and resilience of rural America—especially in those persistently poor communities and regions where individuals and families of color and diverse cultures continue to struggle to build a more just and equitable society.

Despite decades of economic and social disinvestment and neglect, rural communities are transforming themselves into increasingly sustainable and healthy places, capable of long-term achievement in several areas critical to successful rural transformation:

- ▶ Collaboration – The ability of diverse leaders and institutions within rural communities to work together to plan and implement asset-based strategies that weave together various components – social, environmental and economic – to support community and regional transformation;
- ▶ Wealth Creation – Using existing community assets as the building blocks for change, developing strategies – both individual and shared – that can increase family and community prosperity for all who work and live there;
- ▶ Family Self-Sufficiency – Ensuring basic services, enhancing social networks of interrelatedness and expanding opportunities for moving out of poverty on a permanent basis; and
- ▶ Civic Participation/Inclusive Leadership – Empowering all who live and work in rural America – despite race, gender, age, class or national status – to participate in the political process and to share in leadership opportunities.

After 3 years of grant-making and learning, more than \$3 million has been directly invested by NRFC into supporting models for rural transformation while leveraging another \$45 million in public and private funds. We hope these lessons convey ideas for both practice and further investment in rural regions. We encourage you to consider how you or your institution might help increase impact, bridge gaps and disparities, and build a movement of support for long-term transformation of rural poverty.

**National Rural
Funders
Collaborative**



Lessons Learned

ON COLLABORATION

- ▶ Developing a common sense of values in the early work of collaboration is essential to preserving the integrity, mission and engagement of all participants.
- ▶ The fabric of a collaboration changes with each new partner. Taking the time to weave these threads into the existing pattern strengthens the work and enhances outcomes.
- ▶ Focus on outcomes, not products. Collaboration requires flexibility and commitment to shared visioning and decision making.
- ▶ Multiple partners with complementary skills and expertise can shorten the learning curve and increase impact if their roles and relationships are clear.
- ▶ Multiple partners with their own resource bases and spheres of influence can have a multiplier effect on leveraging resources.
- ▶ Multiple partners with developed constituencies and a common agenda can be effective in overcoming traditional obstacles to community change.

ON BUILDING WEALTH

- ▶ Wealth creation and its instruments—entrepreneurship, innovation, economic development—must be redefined to mean less individual accumulation of personal wealth and more “community building” from shared assets.
- ▶ Rural America’s greatest resource and potential lies with its human capital—its diversity of people, talent and innovation.
- ▶ At the same time, the poor—and especially constituencies and communities of color—participate disproportionately in wealth creation strategies. Persons of color are twice to four times as likely to be poor as their non-minority counterparts.
- ▶ Rural communities and regions are being negatively transformed by economic strategies that prey upon the poor and persons of color—hog and poultry farms, prisons, casinos, big box retailers, meat-packing plants. “Alternative,” asset-based economies are needed.
- ▶ Natural resources and beauty are to be enjoyed and replenished by all, rather than exploited and exported for the benefit and the advantage of a few.
- ▶ “Wealth creation” as “philanthropy” must begin locally and be reconceived, not as “charitable giving” by the wealthy few, but as “civic participation,” in which all members of society can help to shape their communities’ future.

ON FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY

- ▶ Unless basic quality-of-life needs are met—food, shelter, clothing, health care, transportation and child care—individuals cannot participate fully in creating wealth and devising civic strategies.
- ▶ Self-sufficiency is not simply a matter of greater access to resources and services; it is also a matter of choice: choosing to live closer to assets of land and culture, even if doing so means less material wealth.
- ▶ Rural, culturally based livelihoods often restore self-respect and provide a means of supporting families without having to leave a sense of place and culture behind.
- ▶ Family self-sufficiency is about supportive relationships and networks created by alternative livelihoods as well as financial and job stability.
- ▶ Alternative rural economies are not simply about creating more jobs; they are also about recreating healthier lifestyles and economic engines that use local community assets and promote self-confidence and self-sufficiency.

ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

- ▶ Participation in civil society is not a privilege, but a right afforded to all who work and live in rural America and contribute to its well-being.
- ▶ Strengthening the voice and skills of grassroots leadership is essential to building stronger communities and overcoming historic imbalances that exclude low-wealth communities from the decision-making process.
- ▶ Providing a forum by which grassroots voices can be heard at local, state and regional levels is a necessary step toward creating a more relevant national rural policy.
- ▶ Inclusive leadership means “both/and” rather than “either/or”; building new leadership structures must include both advantaged and disadvantaged constituencies, both dominant and non-dominant communities of color, both communities of wealth and those of low wealth.
- ▶ Current and future leadership development efforts must include youth and young adults or current leadership development efforts, or they will be short-lived.

