# Investing in Rural Capacity



Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions

February 2023

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# Contents

# About the Regional Rural Development Centers

The Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) are funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to strengthen the capacity of local citizens to guide the future of their rural communities. They are charged with conducting research and outreach programming that builds the capacity of the Land-Grant University System to address crucial needs in our nation's rural communities. Each RRDC serves a defined geographic region and tailors its programs to address the particular needs and priorities of stakeholders within its boundaries. They also collaborate on issues that span regions, and in turn connect their regional partners to emerging Federal issues and priorities.

Established under the Rural Development Act of 1972, the RRDCs link the research and educational outreach capacity of the nation's public universities with communities, local decision-makers, entrepreneurs, farmers and ranchers, and families to help address a wide range of development issues. They respond to emerging issues, generate credible science-based information to clarify these issues, and create public-private partnerships to address them. Each RRDC is administered by a joint agreement between the USDA and host institutions within the respective region who operate Extension Services and Agricultural Experiment Stations. Core funding is from NIFA for integrated research, education, and Extension activities. As such they play a unique role in USDA's service to rural America.

The findings from this project have been used to inform the work of the RRDCs and have been shared with a range of stakeholder groups through meetings, webinars, conference presentations, and media.



**Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development**
Hosted by Penn State University

**North Central Regional Center for Rural Development**
Hosted by Purdue University

**Southern Rural Development Center**
Hosted by Mississippi State University

**Western Rural Development Center**
Hosted by Utah State University

# Executive Summary

The four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) conducted a rapid assessment of priorities for investments in rural community development. The overarching purpose was to identify the critical resources needed to build community capacity and improve quality of life in rural America. Conducted via an iterative process from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022, the assessment is from the perspective of stakeholders working in the rural development spaces. This process was divided into two phases:

- Phase 1: In Fall 2021, an online survey was distributed to stakeholders, which focused on eight topical areas that often impact rural recovery. Survey findings informed the development of the second phase.
- Phase 2: In Spring 2022, eight virtual listening sessions focused on identifying what is needed to fill the gaps between rural communities' assets and opportunities. These facilitated dialogues, which included interactive technologies, asked participants to think about Extension/education, research, and other investments that were needed, and to prioritize them by the most pressing areas for intervention.

Invitations to participate were broadcast to a wide audience of stakeholders working at various organizational and regional levels across the nation, including through professional networks. Participants came from organizations including Land-Grant Universities, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies, among others. Supplemental material identifies regional, demographic, and organizational identifiers collected in both phases. This report compiles recommendations and feedback collected over the process to inform rural development investments and provides a baseline for ongoing and future rural development initiatives. Findings are intended as a set of guideposts to support a broad audience of practitioners, decision makers, and government agencies.

The initial survey involved 680 stakeholders reflecting on topics including: physical infrastructure and public services, workforce development, training, and education; economic development; community vibrancy; health; agriculture and food systems; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather. Findings from priority rankings and written responses to open-ended questions concerning assets, challenges, opportunities, and capacities were used to inform listening session topics. Four regional sessions were conducted on the top priorities for the respective regions (North Central, Northeast, South, West). Also, four national listening sessions addressed: broadband and the digital divide; rural innovation and entrepreneurship; workforce development, training, and education; and community planning.

This report combines data and findings from both phases into a single, comprehensive summary. It identifies the investments that key informant stakeholders view as the highest priorities for U.S. rural

communities on the immediate horizon. Prioritization activities during the process also usefully highlighted connections between these topics and various issues that fall under them. These investments, if pursued, would build the capacity of organizations and individuals.

Through this rural development stakeholder engagement, several themes emerged from the eight listening sessions. Participants identified the desire to:

- support and increase collaborative efforts across disciplinary, organizational, and geographic boundaries;
- inform decision making through place-based and community engaged research and best practices;
- involve underserved groups and pursue greater equity;
- and build climate and related economic resilience into local, regional, and national planning.

This report's recommendations for future investments are intended to highlight and inform where direct programmatic efforts and resources may be effective in tackling key issues facing rural communities. Regional differences do occur, and additional interpretation and application of these results should be considered in complement with place-specific findings and existing literature.

In summary, the combination of findings from the survey and listening sessions underscore stakeholder priorities as those efforts that will advance organizational capacity, as well as funding and development opportunities, especially through research and Extension efforts. While these issues have been explored through the Rapid Assessment of Stakeholder Priorities conducted by the RRDCs throughout 2021-2022, additional work is needed to build upon this work and to activate positive impacts in the field of rural development.

In the sections which immediately follow, this report provides eight overview summaries – one for each of the topics of prominence covered in a nation-wide listening session and one for each of the four geographic regions. A universal summary is then provided, as are potential roles of the RRDCs in building capacity in these areas. The report concludes with a technical summary of the methodology employed and demographics of those who registered to participate in the facilitated dialogues held virtually.

A draft of this report created in October 2022 was sent for an augmented single-blind review by an external panel of professionals and academics. Individuals invited to the review panel included both those who participated in various aspects of the process and those who did not. A total of 10 external reviewers rated the draft report over six metrics, provided comments for both the authors and for a public assessment of the draft, and were provided the optional opportunity to identify if they engaged in the process or not. Half of the review panel indicated they were fully external, having had no direct engagement as an active participant. The panel's feedback was used to inform revisions of this report.

# KEY FINDINGS AROUND
# BROADBAND and THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

## Summary of Survey Findings

The significant need for **broadband access and related digital skills** was one of the cross-cutting themes that emerged from the initial stakeholder survey. The image below provides a brief snapshot of the ways in which this topic connects across all the priority areas on which the survey focused. This topic drew comments from over 38% of infrastructure and public service respondents concerning challenges (most frequent intersections) and one-quarter concerning opportunities (second most frequent intersections). The most notable other intersections concerned economic development challenges (nearly 15% of economic development respondents) and opportunities (close to 12%).

| Priority Area | Finding |
|---|---|
| **Physical infrastructure & public services** | Broadband was the most frequently noted infrastructure and public service to support rural resilience. |
| **Workforce development, training & education** | Remote working opportunities and online sales for small businesses require broadband access and skills. |
| **Community vibrancy** | Broadband access and skills provide remote work and educational opportunities for youth and adults, giving opportunities to stay in the community. |
| **Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather** | Broadband access can provide timely disaster information and allows for wider adoption of sustainable technologies. |
| **Economic development** | 1/5 of respondents saw broadband access as a significant factor in economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship. |
| **Health** | Telehealth and other online health resources can bridge challenges in limited health care access for rural places. |
| **Agriculture & food systems** | Broadband access and skills can support e-commerce expansion for food related businesses. |
| **Diversity, equity & inclusion** | Broadband access is an area where divides exist between rural/urban and among racial groups. |

**Findings across Survey Topics Related to Broadband**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Broadband is seen as a tremendous asset where available, encouraging rural vibrancy<br>• Several remote work trainings exist (such as Utah's Rural Online Initiative)<br>• Gives an opportunity for rural residents who want to stay in the community to access educational opportunities, obtain employment, and have viable incomes<br>• Provides timely access to disaster information where available |
| **Challenges** | • Broadband services, adoption, and skills tend to lag in rural areas<br>• Adults and youth may need to leave the community for jobs and education if broadband is not available<br>• Lack of broadband inhibits economic growth, including business expansion<br>• Affordability and reliability in rural areas is challenging<br>• Black communities are disproportionately underserved |
| **Opportunities** | • Invest in access, affordability, and reliability<br>• Advance digital adoption, literacy, and ability to use to improve quality of life<br>• Connect broadband access/adoption with education, workforce development, economic development, and telehealth<br>• Explore how remote work opportunities could support population retention<br>• Disseminate information and strategies for sustainability in context of climate change<br>• Address equity concerns |

# Broadband Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on March 23, 2022
- Hosted by Southern Rural Development Center
- Number of registrants: 64
- Number of participants: 40

# Recommendations for Future Investments from the Listening Session

After presentation of findings from the stakeholder survey, listening session participants were asked to identify, discuss, and prioritize future investments around broadband access and adoption. Their insights are listed below by key themes.

**Infrastructure Policy and Financing**

- Address limited competition between providers serving rural communities
- Provide more funding to support broadband expansion, access, and adoption
- Make broadband services more affordable at the individual/household level
- Offer planning grants for communities
- Increase opportunities for community-level free Wi-Fi
- Dedicate funding lines for Extension specialists to focus on broadband issues

## Research

- Map broadband service availability, speeds, and costs
- Identify places and groups that are underserved
- Inform the development of decision tools
- Explore the relationship between broadband access and health outcomes
- Investigate the impacts of broadband access and adoption on families and communities

## Extension

- Expand and enhance the digital literacy and skills training capacity of Extension
- Develop outreach and training tools for potential/new/non-traditional broadband users who live in rural areas
- Educate people on how broadband can be used to benefit families and communities
- Engage in planning for limited resource and underserved communities to stimulate more equitable infrastructure investments
- Create and deliver research-based and data-driven decision tools that communities can use for broadband access and adoption planning

> "One of the most commonly reoccurring issues in my state is broadband access, which in turn, creates limited access to economic/educational opportunities and health care. I believe initiatives and research focused on improving our understanding of how limited broadband access affects individual/community outcomes and the potential impact that expanding broadband may have would be beneficial."
>
> —*Survey respondent*

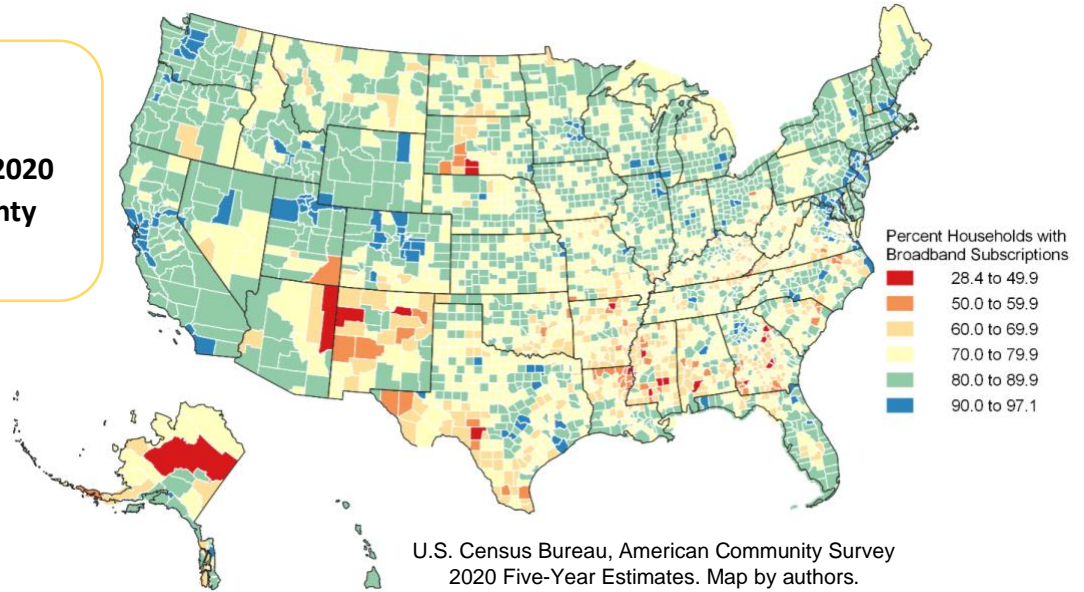## Intersections with Equity and Sustainability

- Build and strengthen partnerships to address broadband concerns across organizational, county, and state lines
- Address equity concerns with focus on often underserved groups (including those based on race/ethnicity, age, poverty) and places
- Recognize that even in counties and states with relatively higher rates of broadband access and adoption, there are still people and places that are underserved
- Attend to broadband infrastructure problems associated with adverse weather events that can knock out service
- Pursue more climate friendly energy used for massive data centers

> "High-speed internet would help too, but there's not as much thinking being done about the end of the wire. Without education and training for those technologies, they're just bricks in the wall between haves and have nots."
>
> —*Survey respondent*

These recommendations will be key to addressing the wide variation in broadband subscriptions across the United States, a key indicator of access and adoption, as demonstrated in the map below.

**Household Broadband Subscriptions (2020 Five-Year County Estimates)**

Percent Households with Broadband Subscriptions
- 28.4 to 49.9
- 50.0 to 59.9
- 60.0 to 69.9
- 70.0 to 79.9
- 80.0 to 89.9
- 90.0 to 97.1

U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2020 Five-Year Estimates. Map by authors.

# KEY FINDINGS AROUND
## RURAL INNOVATION and ENTREPRENEURSHIP

## Summary of Survey Findings

**Innovation and entrepreneurship development in** rural communities was a cross-cutting theme that emerged from the initial stakeholder survey. Within the survey there were two different issues, each nested within different topic areas. *Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention* was one of the issues under the Economic Development topic and *entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities* was presented as part of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Survey results indicated that both were among the issues with the greatest potential for investments that increase the capacity of rural development stakeholder organizations. Among eligible respondents[1], 30.7% said their employing organizations had low or no capacity to address the issue of *rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention* and 49.7% said they lacked capacity in the realm of promoting *entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities*. Respectively, 45% and 40% of respondents felt their employing organizations likely had interest in expanding programming on those issues. In answers to open-ended questions on assets, challenges, and opportunities faced by rural communities, elements of innovation and entrepreneurship also featured prominently across all eight topic areas presented. This included equity and sustainability aspects. We summarize those connections in the following table.

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[1] 308 and 166 total respondents, respectively.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Physical infrastructure & public services** | Natural resource endowments open space for renewable energy and bioeconomy entrepreneurs. Availability of broadband and public services (housing, child and elder care, etc.) are constraining factors for rural enterprise. |
| **Workforce development, training & education** | Vocational and technical education at secondary and post-secondary levels promotes entrepreneurship where available, but many rural communities lack access or programs targeted to emerging opportunities. |
| **Community vibrancy** | Social, cultural, and political capital in rural communities and small towns often is supportive of small businesses. Incorporating entrepreneurship learning into primary and secondary education and providing targeted start-up funds for rural entrepreneurs is needed. |
| **Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather** | Investments need to be properly scaled to rural entrepreneurial contexts and planning and partnerships that help identify emerging opportunities are key. Rural cultural morays, community trust, and change within the public sector also identified as factors. |
| **Economic development** | Support ecosystems can be rich in some areas but lacking in others. Access to wrap-around services and venture capital needed, as well as proper scale for rural enterprises. Tourism, recreation, and hospitality, is a critical opportunity space for rural entrepreneurs. |
| **Health** | Need for innovation within healthcare services industry to address rural health needs. Skilled workforce is a key barrier to rural health entrepreneurs. Food system entrepreneurs can play crucial role in improving nutrition. |
| **Agriculture & food systems** | Local and regional food systems and direct sales channels provide a space for agriculture related entrepreneurship and creativity. Improving access to financial capital, knowledge of emerging technologies, and a skilled workforce are critical needs. |
| **Diversity, equity & inclusion** | Civil society is key provider of support among minority groups, but infrastructure and resources are limited. Innovative financing approaches for minority-owned start-ups, addressing racism, and research on disparities are needed. |

**Findings across Survey Topics Related to Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Rural cultural facets – including self-reliance and ingenuity – create an environment ready for innovation and its translation into economic opportunity (entrepreneurship)<br>• Rural spaces have critical and unique assets for entrepreneurial ventures to utilize, particularly natural and agricultural resources<br>• Some regions/communities have rich entrepreneurial support ecosystems<br>• Desire to build local businesses that create and keep economic opportunity within rural communities<br>• Rural scale of businesses creates opportunity for craft, artisanal, and other high-value, novelty enterprises |
| **Challenges** | • Lags in when information, technology, and resources reach rural entrepreneurial community<br>• Support system investments often not properly scaled to contexts<br>• Innovation in public sector also needed in rural spaces<br>• Cultural features can make trust building and partnership difficult<br>• Workforce skill and availability often lacking, hindering acceleration<br>• Limited availability of public services, infrastructure, financing, and business wrap-around services<br>• Lack of access by small firms, especially to down-stream markets/services<br>• Historically underserved and socially disadvantaged communities being left out of entrepreneurial opportunities |
| **Opportunities** | • Create local and regional hubs that understand rural contexts and that direct funding specifically to rural ventures<br>• Targeted funding for research and outreach education on innovation and entrepreneurship in rural contexts<br>• Promote community economic planning focused on emergent industries<br>• Create entrepreneurial pathways for rural youth and for young people entering rural communities<br>• Sustainable and climate-smart innovation, including tourism/recreation, renewable energy, and agriculture and food |

## Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on March 29, 2022
- Hosted by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development
- Number of registrants: 97
- Number of participants: 45

# Recommendations for Future Investments from the Listening Session:

**Entrepreneurial Support Ecosystem**

- Support activities that build the capacity of rural entrepreneurial support ecosystem players, including targeted funding and the creation of rural-focused centers/hubs
- Enable a grassroots, bottom-up approach and improve context-relevant intervention
- Provide targeted opportunities for youth and young people to learn about and engage in innovation and entrepreneurship
- Provide workforce development opportunities for learners of all ages targeted at skills of the future (e.g., digital, sustainable tech, etc.)
- Increase broadband access, affordability, and reliability
- Better integrate research, Extension, and practitioner knowledge

> **OPPORTUNITY:**
> **RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**
>
> "Best practices with economic development agencies that focus on small projects, tourism, and entrepreneurs. The model of landing large attraction projects is not sustainable for small communities and the focus should shift to building multiple businesses to diversify the local economy instead of hanging all of a community's dreams on one large scale project."
>
> —*Survey respondent*

**Research**

- Identify best practices and structures for innovation and entrepreneurship promotion that work in rural contexts
- Identify incentives, structures, and environmental features that are conducive to locating entrepreneurial ventures in rural communities
- Examine the programs, structures, or partnerships that can improve access by underserved communities to knowledge and resources for innovation and entrepreneurship
- Develop a better understanding and conceptual frameworks of what constitutes innovation in rural contexts and how to measure it
- Identify industry clusters present and potential, based on community assets, for targeted investment in new venture growth

**Extension**

- Incorporate entrepreneurship and innovation learning into youth curriculum
- Build capacity of vocational and technical education programs, particularly in secondary and post-secondary institutions serving rural communities
- Invest in convening institutions that play a coordination function
- Expand corps of Extension professionals with competencies needed to support the development of local organizations and entrepreneurial ecosystems through provision of technical assistance and coordination

## Intersections with Equity and Sustainability

- Evaluate the metrics by which success is defined and measured, and impacts on different communities and populations
- Improve centrality of minority-serving institutions on programs and issues related to innovation and entrepreneurship
- Enhance integration and opportunities for Tribal and Indigenous communities
- Create culturally competent small business development programming
- Close the digital skills gap/the Digital Divide
- Green innovation and sustainable entrepreneurship in rural contexts – identify current activities and best practices, and support expansion of programming
- Improve coworking spaces and opportunities in rural communities to leverage expansion of remote and digital commerce

**OPPORTUNITY:**

**CLIMATE CHANGE, CLIMATE VARIABILITY, & EXTREME WEATHER**

"Identifying equitable strategies for transitioning to sustainable economic development, energy production and land use management (i.e. how can businesses, labor, communities that rely on legacy approaches transition to sustainable development with the least economic and environmental consequences?)."

—*Survey respondent*

**OPPORTUNITY: DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, & ACCESS**

"There are financing initiatives for minority and low-income businesses in existence that can serve as models. Banks have funds to invest in nonprofit organizations that target underrepresented minority and low-income applicants. Additional research on lending in rural communities and race would be very interesting to showcase any disparities that do still exist (they do). Even in our community of 120,000 people there is 1 (one) commercial lender of color. This is a problem in more than our community that needs to be addressed."

—*Survey respondent*

# KEY FINDINGS AROUND
# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, TRAINING and EDUCATION

## Summary of Survey Findings

**Workforce development, training, and education** in rural communities was a cross-cutting theme that emerged from the initial stakeholder survey. The image below provides a brief snapshot of the ways in which this topic was shown to connect across community capitals, especially human, social, built, and financial.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Physical infrastructure & public services** | Wrap-around services such as housing, childcare, and transportation can enhance rural communities and attract individuals to rural workforce opportunities. |
| **Workforce development, training & education** | Community colleges, tech centers, high school programs, and state and non-profit sponsored programs can provide facilities, opportunities, and training in rural communities. |
| **Community vibrancy** | Educational opportunities in rural communities for all ages promote workforce retention and resist "brain drain". |
| **Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather** | Extension and organizational offices can leverage planning and training opportunities in rural communities. |
| **Economic development** | Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention provide career opportunities in rural communities. |
| **Health** | Education and access to health programs and professionals along with access to healthy food can recruit more individuals to the rural workforce. |
| **Agriculture & food systems** | Extension offices, the Land Grant system, FFA programs, and 4-H can create opportunities in the rural workforce. |
| **Diversity, equity & inclusion** | Although colleges, universities, and trade schools bring diverse populations to rural communities, workforce opportunities could aid in retaining a diverse population. |

**Findings across Survey Topics Related to Workforce Development**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Youth-focused organizations, community colleges, and vocational schools can serve as a pathway into enhancing rural workforce development<br>• Community colleges, universities, trade schools, Extension<br>• Interest in equity to ensure high quality of life<br>• Work ethic, human capital, access to labor |
| **Challenges** | • Population decline/brain drain of youth from rural areas<br>• Lack of broadband and supportive infrastructure for remote work<br>• Poverty, low educational attainment, substance abuse<br>• Resources for rural school districts<br>• Lack of skilled and motivated workforce |
| **Opportunities** | • Create mentorship/apprenticeship opportunities<br>• Develop more opportunities in the trades<br>• Link local training to local needs in each rural community<br>• Meet basic needs such as transportation, housing, and broadband that enable rural workforce to be successful<br>• Offer training and certificate programs, including Entrepreneurship training |

## Workforce Development, Training, and Education Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 19, 2022
- Hosted by North Central Regional Center for Rural Development
- Number of registrants: 96
- Number of participants: 38

## Recommendations for Future Investments from the Listening Session:

**Economic Links and Supportive Services**

- Create remote work opportunities and prepare the workforce for these opportunities
- Increase the income for those working in rural areas and create workspace for remote workers
- Create affordable childcare with flexible work hours to accommodate childcare/family obligations

- Create life-long career paths instead of just "jobs" in rural communities and accommodate apprenticeships
- Understand the future of workforce: supporting employers and employees, connecting with businesses, identifying emerging industries
- Build supportive infrastructure for effective workforce participation including housing, child and adult care, broadband, transportation, healthcare, and health insurance
- Expand and emphasize community colleges and trade school options

> "Rural communities tend to have a responsive business community that is willing to engage in workforce development, mentorship, and internships. Many have access to a community college and/or technical trade school that can easily be approached and tends to be responsive to specific training needs, certifications, and credentials."
>
> —*Survey respondent*

## Research

- Investigate childcare: affordability, flexibility of employers, quality afterschool care
- Identify skills and training needed to be successful in the rural workforce (on all levels)
- Understand the role of mental health in rural workforce participation
- Quantify barriers to living wages for careers in rural communities
- Inspect quality and availability of telehealth, in-person providers, and health insurance from rural employers
- Identify capacity and economic drivers of workforce in rural communities as well as items that youth value to keep them in rural communities (such as wrap-around services)
- Inventory technical support available for rural workforce development and address gaps

## Extension
- Accommodate small businesses and entrepreneurs learning from each other on handling workforce shortages and staffing concerns
- Provide evidence-based training in remote work, leadership, entrepreneurship, tools of innovation for workforce, and augmented/virtual reality
- Provide work-ready skills for youth, displaced workers, past offenders, retirement-age individuals
- Offer micro-credentials, leadership training, apprenticeships, and other non-degree certifications
- Collaborate with and leverage existing educational outlets (local schools, Extension, adult education)
- Foster partnerships with businesses to develop curriculum for middle/high school students to prepare them for the workforce
- Provide knowledge on grants – knowing how, where, and when to apply for funding
- Explore and incorporate cultural awareness into the workforce in rural communities
- Offer remote work as an option for rural residents (broadband, hubs for workspace)
- Create opportunities for youth in communities without an Extension presence
- Develop a sense of place

**Intersections with Equity and Sustainability**

- Build culturally competent rural communities that welcome BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) residents
- Create paths to careers and offer training for people with criminal records to enter the workforce
- Include individuals with disabilities
- Construct pathways for youth/young adults new to workforce into rural opportunities
- Improve telemedicine for rural communities
- Lessen systematic gaps in types of entrepreneurs who are left out of Extension
- Reach minority residents in rural communities
- Guide rural communities on shifting to climate resiliency and its link to remote work
- Shift from resource extraction to climate-resilient economies
- Train youth on climate resiliency, employers developing climate-related programs to support sustainability
- Create sustainable bio-energy production
- Some industries may be shifting due to changing climate – how will rural areas be impacted?

"More support for broadband access and remote work opportunities. People prefer to stay in their rural communities, but the economy has changed and people need help adapting."

—*Survey respondent*

# KEY FINDINGS AROUND
## COMMUNITY PLANNING, LEADERSHIP and GOVERNANCE

## Summary of Survey Findings

**Community planning, leadership, and governance** in rural communities was a cross-cutting theme that emerged from the initial stakeholder survey. The issue was identified under the topic of community vibrancy, alongside issues of youth and inter-generational engagement, placemaking, and population change. This issue stood out as a recurring theme because it is the strategy by which other topics are identified, prioritized, and subsequently addressed. The quote at right is from a respondent who ranked Community Vibrancy as a priority topic while also recognizing the cross-cutting themes across priority topics. By applying a community and economic development planning approach, researchers were able to group topics into social, economic, and environmental outcomes, listed below, which better inform this initiative of identifying sustainable and strategic improvements for rural America.

> "Many of these issues are intertwined. The initiatives and research for one topic will overlap with many others. (i.e., rural housing development, broadband access and adoption, population attraction and retention, identifying opportunities to advance workforce, economic, and entrepreneurial development ecosystems)."
>
> —*Survey Respondent*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Physical infrastructure & public services** | Policy and zoning can affect community development and inform where future investments will be made. |
| **Workforce development, training & education** | Leadership and innovative planning are needed to support emerging industries and dedicate space for entrepreneurship. |
| **Community vibrancy** | Engaging youth and residents can help retain future leaders and attract new ideas for community growth and development. |
| **Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather** | Forward-thinking leadership and policy are needed to mitigate and adapt to increasing climate variability in rural communities. |
| **Economic development** | Local governance informs which sectors of the economy will be supported or face challenges within a community including emerging industries. |
| **Health** | Physical planning efforts like trails can support healthier lifestyles and outreach can help engaged residents make informed health decisions. |
| **Agriculture & food systems** | Policy can help promote access to local food systems that may subsequently lead to the development of new markets or value-added agricultural products. |
| **Diversity, equity & inclusion** | Transparency, accessibility, and inclusive policies can encourage opportunities for open dialogue and help foster a sense of community. |

**Findings across Survey Topics Related to Community Planning, Leadership, and Governance**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Strong sense of community<br>• Social capital in the form of strong connections, trust, and shared history between community members<br>• Community colleges, universities, Extension, and local schools<br>• Placemaking, arts, and culture |
| **Challenges** | • Population decline/brain drain of youth from rural areas<br>• Lack of funding to expand training and development opportunities<br>• Public distrust and discord on topics such as climate change, as well as community and economic development goals and priorities<br>• Lack of physical infrastructure or services to connect community members with resources<br>• The balance of placemaking and culture and the need to grow and change these identities or adapt them to be inclusive of new populations and demographics that are moving to communities |
| **Opportunities** | • Link local training to local needs in each rural community<br>• Build capacity for civic engagement and recruitment of community leaders<br>• Provide leadership training, conflict resolution training and general capacity building on the themes of outreach and civic engagement<br>• Develop infrastructure and skills to support remote work and other economic development opportunities<br>• Develop or improve quality of life and local assets including housing, employment, and public services |

## Community Planning, Leadership, and Governance Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 26, 2022
- Hosted by Western Rural Development Center
- Number of registrants: 101
- Number of participants: 10

## Recommendations for Future Investments from the Listening Session:

After presenting findings from the stakeholder survey, listening session participants were asked to identify, discuss, and prioritize future investments around community planning, leadership, and governance. Their insights are grouped below by key themes.

## Leadership and Civic Engagement

- Train or recruit community leaders for local engagement
- Identify leadership opportunities and community planning initiatives (i.e., public services and amenities) that support emerging industries like tourism, recreation, and hospitality
- Expand local community colleges and training programs by building up community resources such as broadband, transportation, and available workforce
- Collaborate across organizations and regions and use consistent messaging
- Strengthen and work across urban/rural interfaces
- Provide transparency and accessibility in the decision-making process as well as opportunities for community members to be engaged in it

> "Community governance is huge. In rural communities, some don't understand leadership or the importance of economic development. Leadership in government would greatly impact the public involvement with projects."
>
> —*Survey Respondent*

## Research

- Identify alternative sources of funding for community organizations that have limited funding and capacity due to governance issues, such as the local tax base
- Create systems of best practices and share success stories
- Expand toolkits so that resources can be easily shared between communities, such as targeted community-based initiatives
- Explore regionalism for areas with limited capacity

> "It would be helpful to see cases of rural communities that are successful in bringing youth back to the community. We hear often about 'brain drain', but what are the best practices to attract people to live in and support the community."
>
> —*Survey respondent*

## Extension

- Expand youth programming and training programs to encourage rural retention
- Provide relevant research and training on effects of climate change adaptation strategies, emerging technologies, and sustainable community and economic planning
- Facilitate community conversations and encourage public discourse to support planning efforts for new initiatives

## Intersections with Equity and Sustainability

- Foster a strong sense of community and work together to solve complex problems through inclusive practices
- Expand leadership and capacity-building opportunities on themes of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Address climate change skepticism and create incentives to adopt new technologies in sustainable planning and resilience in food production and natural ecosystems
- Encourage regional governance to navigate regulations, land use challenges, and economic opportunities across county and state jurisdictions
- Create pathways to equal and equitable representation in community conversations

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE
# **NORTHEAST REGION**

## Introduction

This section focuses on findings from the region served by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development. This region is the smallest in terms of total geographic area but the largest in terms of population. It comprises 12 states plus the District of Columbia. It is home to 16 Land-Grant Universities, of which three are minority-serving 1890 institutions, and 12 Sea-Grant program locations.
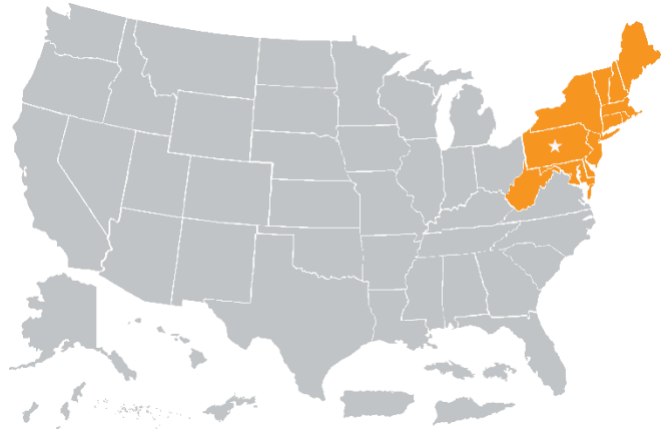


## Northeast Regional Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 5, 2022
- Hosted by Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development
- Number of people who registered: 34
- Number of people who participated: 16

## Summary Findings

**Priority Rankings**

Respondents who primarily work with Northeast communities, on average, indicated that addressing physical infrastructure and public services was the most important topic. Responses especially highlighted the need for broadband services, diversification of energy production and transmission, and pressures on housing availability and affordability. Economic development – particularly entrepreneurship and small business creation and retention – and workforce training were also top priorities. The Northeast was unique among the regional groupings in that it was the only one for which the topic of climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather ranked in the top four priority areas.

## Priority Ranks

| | North Central | Northeast | South | West | National Scope | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Physical infrastructure and public services | Health | Physical infrastructure and public services |
| **2** | Workforce development, training, and education | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development |
| **3** | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Health | Health | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education |
| **4** | Community vibrancy | Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education | Community vibrancy | Health |

**Assets, Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for Top Four Priorities**

Each survey participant was asked to answer questions concerning assets, challenges, and opportunities connected to the top three topics they identified as priorities. Responses to these open-ended questions were coded, and results are shown in the tables below. (Below each table, the statistic for perceptions of low/no capacity at the respondents' respective institutions came from the survey as well.) These are followed by the recommendations for future investments discussed during the Northeast Region virtual listening session.

Participants registering for the Northeast regional listening session were asked to identify two of these four top-priority topics that they would be most interested in discussing. Based on responses, the NERCRD staff created three topics for targeted dialogue during the session:

- Climate-resilient Communities and Economies
- Infrastructure and Economic Growth
- Preparing for the Workforce of the Future

Recommendations made via small-group conversations during the Listening Sessions are placed under the topical area to which they are most pertinent in the summaries that follow.

## Physical Infrastructure and Public Services – Northeast Region Survey Results

| Assets | • Access to land and space for further infrastructure development<br>• Limitations on community assets posing a challenge<br>• Networking and partnership among community organizations<br>• Renewable energy production sources |
|---|---|
| Challenges | • Limited broadband and wireless phone service<br>• Identifying funding sources and mechanisms – including taxes and tax structures - that can be used to invest in maintaining/improving infrastructure<br>• Meeting housing and transportation needs<br>• Sufficient leadership for community needs |
| Opportunities | • Housing developments that address access and affordability crisis<br>• Improve processes and planning for transportation infrastructure<br>• Expand renewable energy infrastructure and innovation<br>• Funding for rural community priorities and capacity to access funding sources |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 73%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Northeast Region Listening Session Results
- Human capital building critical; lacking capacity of community development professionals, leaving communities without expertise
- Create an ecosystem of community development within and across the University (whole of institution approach)
- Improve understanding within institutional environments of the types of processes and timelines inherent within community development work

## Economic Development – Northeast Region Survey Results

| Assets | • Natural and outdoor spaces<br>• Rural innovation and entrepreneurship<br>• Tourism, recreation, and travel<br>• Social reciprocity and sense of community |
|---|---|
| Challenges | • Limited amenities (affordable housing, healthcare, financial services, shopping/retail)<br>• Lack of resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs<br>• Lack of broadband or technologies<br>• Aging population and loss of younger generations within rural communities |
| Opportunities | • Startup funds, incubation effort, and training for business owners and innovators<br>• Broadband access, digital assistance and tools, and remote work capabilities<br>• Workforce development, training, and education programming<br>• Building rural tourism businesses, infrastructure, and capacity |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 53%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Northeast Region Listening Session Results
- Promote holistic engagement with and investment in diverse community members (not just established community leaders)
- Amplify rural voices, which are often lost in the region leading to dictates from outside
- Training and professional development programming that builds capacity of professionals to engage in economic development work and expands presence in rural communities
- Reform of matching requirements for funding mechanisms

**Workforce Development, Training and Education** – Northeast Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Educational programming at technical centers and vocational schools<br>• Access to rural community colleges<br>• Available, willing workforce in communities<br>• Partnerships and established relationships between stakeholder groups |
| **Challenges** | • Limited broadband access, affordability, and reliability<br>• Lack of higher education/training facilities and programs<br>• Workforce retention and retraining<br>• Community leadership and planning for workforce issues |
| **Opportunities** | • More workforce training and education programs<br>• Targeted funding on educational programs with workforce readiness<br>• Investments that build capacity of community leadership<br>• Improved access to broadband and wireless internet service |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 56%

**Recommendations for Future Investments** – Northeast Region Listening Session Results
- Promote and invest in activities that convene, foster networks, and build collaboration among various community development players/organizations
- Engage in narrative reformation that removes stigma of trades and vocational education
- Programs that help communities conduct asset mapping and enable holistic planning
- Diversify input streams/improve inclusiveness of planning so that youth and marginalized populations are at the table

**Climate Change, Climate Variability, and Extreme Weather** – Northeast Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Farming, agriculture, and local and regional food systems<br>• Extension and other outreach education programming<br>• State, local, and community-driven initiatives |
| **Challenges** | • Community planning processes and lack of established plans for climate change<br>• Inclusive and accessible programming for diverse populations<br>• Environmental justice and distributive effects on marginalized communities |
| **Opportunities** | • Research infrastructure, including institutions of higher education and private research industry<br>• Improve local capacity to expand community-driven approaches<br>• Build more inclusive and accessible programing that improves equity |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
• 48%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Northeast Region Listening Session Results
• Targeted programming investments, including financial and human capital
• Expand efforts to reach new and diverse audiences
• Integrated climate-related education into all Extension program areas
• Attention to groups with heightened vulnerability
• Inclusion of indigenous knowledge and perspectives
• Develop information and training on career and entrepreneurial opportunities in the new "green economy"

# SOUTHERN REGION

## Introduction

The overarching purpose of this initiative was to identify the critical investments needed for building capacity and improving quality of life in rural America. This was done using a stakeholder survey combined with a series of virtual listening sessions. This report is focused on findings from the region served by the Southern Rural Development Center.
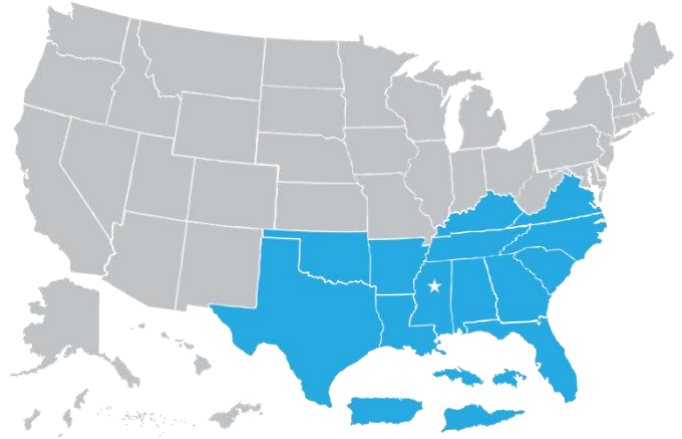


## Southern Regional Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 20, 2022
- Hosted by Southern Rural Development Center
- Number of registrants 81
- Number of participants: 42

## Summary Findings

**Priority Rankings**

Survey respondents were asked to rank in order what they view as the most critical rural development issues for further investment. There were eight options provided to all respondents, and the top four are shown in the figure, with comparisons between the regions that the respondents' organizations primarily served (explore the findings more closely via the interactive data dashboard: https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard).

### Priority Ranks

| | North Central | Northeast | South | West | National Scope | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Physical infrastructure and public services | Health | Physical infrastructure and public services |
| **2** | Workforce development, training, and education | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development |
| **3** | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Health | Health | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education |
| **4** | Community vibrancy | Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education | Community vibrancy | Health |

Each survey participant was asked to answer questions concerning assets, challenges, and opportunities connected to the top three topics they identified as priorities. Responses to these open-ended questions were coded, and the results are shown in the tables below. (Below each table, the statistic for perceptions of low/no capacity at the respondents' respective institutions came from the survey as well.) These are followed by the recommendations for future investments discussed during the Southern Region virtual listening session.

**Workforce Development, Training & Education** – Southern Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Access to rural community colleges<br>• Secondary/post-secondary vocational/technology schools<br>• State/regional/local workforce investment initiatives |
| **Challenges** | • Insufficiently trained local workforce<br>• Limited access to transportation and poor quality of roads/transportation<br>• Challenges in retaining workforce<br>• Lack of higher education/training facilities and programs<br>• Limited access to financial resources (especially for training)<br>• Lack of broadband access |
| **Opportunities** | • More training and education programs<br>• Research focused on work ethics, skillsets, community asset assessment, rural models of entrepreneurship, and issues around school district consolidation |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 44%

**Recommendations for Future Investments** – Southern Region Listening Session Results
- Realign incentives to meet the needs of rural communities
- Collaborate and partner across disciplines, communities, organizations, and other stakeholders
- Pursue equitable access to non-traditional and advanced education and training

**Physical Infrastructure & Public Services** – Southern Region Survey Results

| Assets | • Access to land and space for further infrastructure development<br>• Sense of community, connected residents, spirit of cooperation<br>• Existing or soon to be expanding broadband<br>• Networking and partnership among community organizations |
|---|---|
| Challenges | • Limited broadband and wireless phone service<br>• Identifying funds and mechanism that are in line with the population demand for maintaining/improving infrastructure<br>• Meeting housing and transportation needs |
| Opportunities | • Broadband<br>• Research and funding addressing the particular needs of rural areas and small towns<br>• Education investments including distance education (broadband), entrepreneurship, and technical skills training |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 71%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Southern Region Listening Session Results

- Inventory the physical infrastructure and public services that currently exist
- Engage community in meetings, involving the diverse communities to be impacted
- Meet the people who will be impacted where they are
- Include youth and those with lived experience
- Provide government officials with training for climate-friendly practices
- Incentivize green infrastructure regarding workforce opportunities, and help the people who may be displaced in a community
- Consider credentials necessary for education and open connections for remote expertise that can be shared across state lines

**Health** – Southern Region Survey Results

| Assets | • Land and natural resources that could be used to benefit healthy behaviors (e.g., fresh foods, outdoor exercise)<br>• Existing organizations and services (local and state)<br>• Local primary care/critical access services in some areas |
|---|---|
| Challenges | • Limited services relative level of need<br>• Mental, behavioral, and substance abuse<br>• Too few healthy food options<br>• Lack of cultural support for healthy lifestyles and equitable access |
| Opportunities | • Address the characteristics and interests of rural places and small towns<br>• Improve applied research/evaluation and planning to develop evidence on what works<br>• Increase funds for healthcare access and education (such as nutrition education, broadband access, Community Health Workers, school nurses) |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 51%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Southern Region Listening Session Results
- Expand stable broadband access critical to providing telehealth
- Build partnerships with libraries, churches, and others to use computers and internet for health appointments and to access medical records
- Address basic needs such as food access and safe drinking water as priorities
- Provide strategic funding for rural communities to address suicide rates, drug abuse, and mental health issues
- Actions should be taken simultaneously to be most effective

**Economic Development** – Southern Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Rural innovation and entrepreneurship<br>• Natural and outdoor spaces<br>• Tourism, recreation, and travel |
| **Challenges** | • Lack of resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs<br>• Limited amenities (affordable housing, healthcare, financial services, shopping/retail)<br>• Lack of broadband or technologies |
| **Opportunities** | • Startup funds, incubation effort, and training for business owners and innovators<br>• Broadband access, digital assistance and tools, and remote work capabilities<br>• Workforce development |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 51%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Southern Region Listening Session Results
- Conduct research and development around workforce interests and needs
- Improve education for basic life skills and employer needs, helping parents understand and meet student needs, providing better training for teachers on classroom management, and offering apprenticeship programming and other opportunities
- Remove barriers and increase access to resources and infrastructures needed to get to work (housing, broadband, transportation) and for entrepreneurs
- Enhance networks and share resources to be "community driven"
- Connect tourism to natural resources
- Move beyond the community as a unit of analysis to pursue solutions that are multi-community to achieve the scale needed to manage challenges and emergencies
- Engage in succession planning for cooperatives, land ownership, and businesses
- Look ahead to technological developments and trends reshaping entrepreneurship

# Continuing the Dialogue in the Southern Region

Following the survey and listening session, presentations were made to several stakeholder audiences in the southern region, virtually and in-person. In addition to disseminating results and providing opportunities to inform planning, these events were used to solicit feedback and engage in "ground truthing" among diverse participants. Recognizing that some groups were under-represented in the research, intentional efforts were made to engage with partners working in the 1890 Land-Grant University System. One important briefing took place at an in-person joint meeting of 1890 leaders in Extension and research. Following presentation of Southern Region results, participants were invited to provide feedback on a form asking for their rankings on the issue priority areas being considered in this project, additional topics in need of attention, and the importance of different capacity building initiatives. Approximately 80 people were attendance at the conference, and 33 people submitted forms.

Comparison of the research results with this feedback from the 1890 Extension and research leaders is important to consider for continued dialogue around priorities and capacity building activities both in the South as well as for any state working to engage Black/African American communities. Although not in direct contrast with the original research results, differences in prioritizing investment areas did surface. For instance, the top four priority areas were as follows, with the first in the highest priority: (1) economic development; (2) workforce, development, training, and education; (3) health; and (4) agriculture and food systems. In response to the open-ended question asking for additional priorities they felt needed attention, participants identified more specific issues falling under the more general topics, including broadband access, educational assistance for Black students, addressing financial resources for families and businesses, and addressing mental health needs. Regarding programming, coordination of Extension and outreach teams across state and institutional lines was seen as the most important.

Providing opportunities for feedback such as these are important to the continued work of the RRDCs in general, and the SRDC has plans to continue to solicit input for its own planning and to inform the priorities that are conveyed to partners. In fact, a southern region follow-up virtual briefing and feedback session is planned for early 2023.

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE
# NORTH CENTRAL REGION

## Introduction

The overarching purpose of this initiative was to identify the critical investments needed for building capacity and improving quality of life in rural America. This was done using an online stakeholder survey combined with a series of virtual listening sessions. This report is focused on findings from the region served by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.
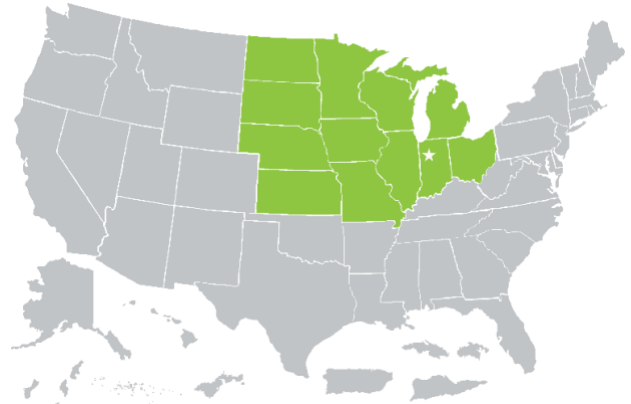
## North Central Regional Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on March 22, 2022
- Hosted by North Central Regional Center for Rural Development
- Number of registrants: 63
- Number of participants: 19

## Summary Findings

**Priority Rankings**
Survey respondents were asked to rank in order what they view as the most critical rural development issues for further investment. There were eight options provided to all respondents, and the top four are shown in the figure, with comparisons between the regions that the respondents' organizations primarily served (Explore the findings more closely via our interactive data dashboard: https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard).

## Priority Ranks

| | North Central | Northeast | South | West | National Scope | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Physical infrastructure and public services | Health | Physical infrastructure and public services |
| **2** | Workforce development, training, and education | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development |
| **3** | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Health | Health | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education |
| **4** | Community vibrancy | Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education | Community vibrancy | Health |

Each survey participant was asked to answer questions concerning assets, challenges, and opportunities connected to the top three topics they identified as priorities. Responses to these open-ended questions were coded, and results are shown in the tables below. (Below each table, the statistic for perceptions of low/no capacity at the respondents' respective institutions came from the survey.) These are followed by the recommendations for future investments discussed during the North Central Region virtual listening session.

**Economic Development** – North Central Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Social and community reciprocity, community pride<br>• Tourism, recreation, travel, hospitality, natural resource endowments<br>• Rich set of organizations that support ecosystem/social capital |
| **Challenges** | • Limited broadband access inhibiting economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship<br>• Lack of amenities (housing, healthcare, financial services)<br>• Lack of local leadership and/or political organizations<br>• Lack of business/professional services needed<br>• Lack of targeted/accessible financial resources and technical expertise |
| **Opportunities** | • Support entrepreneurship, building rural tourism<br>• Increase workforce training opportunities and improve digital and remote working skills<br>• Improve education systems<br>• Enhance broadband capability and infrastructure, and digital tools<br>• Funding, grant opportunities, and other financial assistance<br>• Financial assistance for families and housing opportunities |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
• 53%

**Recommendations for Future Investments** – North Central Region Listening Session Results
- Provide amenities that will attract and retain residents: affordable and attractive housing, schools, community colleges, broadband, health insurance
- Link people and assets in communities: create space for interdisciplinary work; investigate how to collaborate across tribes, local, and state government; bring Extension into conversations, research best practices from other communities
- Apply for and receive grant funding: include minorities and marginalized populations, collaborate on funding opportunities, grant-writing workshops

**Community Vibrancy** – North Central Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Where available, broadband can be an asset to encourage rural vibrancy<br>• Youth-focused organizations (4-H, Scouts), leadership training through Extension<br>• Rural places have opportunities for new leaders |
| **Challenges** | • Youth lack opportunities for careers with remote work/digital ready skills<br>• Lack of broadband for remote work<br>• Population decline/youth moving away<br>• Job losses, housing and amenity shortages<br>• Limited capacity to deal with complex issues |
| **Opportunities** | • Youth workforce training, leadership development and entrepreneurship training<br>• Broadband capability, affordability, and infrastructure<br>• Researching and sharing promising practices and case studies<br>• Building capacity for civic engagement and trust-building<br>• Researching and sharing how social capital and trust are built in communities<br>• Arts |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 43%

**Recommendations for future investments** – North Central Region Listening Session Results
- Connect and include marginalized groups in communities: individuals from under-represented groups, those living in poverty, and young people should be included in community conversations and planning
- Define, measure, and quantify *community vibrancy* along with rural: can be imperative in not only obtaining grants but also uniting communities to address issues
- Extension programming and collaborations: relationships, programming, and collaborations from and amid Extension in communities are vital to creating community vibrancy
- Support for grant writing and fundraising: programs that teach local groups and agencies how to search for, apply for, and acquire grant funding, including philanthropic organizations in planning, community-based fundraising efforts

**Workforce Development, Training, and Education** – North Central Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Youth-focused organizations<br>• Community colleges, vocational schools, colleges, universities, trade schools, Extension<br>• Interest in equity to ensure high quality of life<br>• Work ethic, human capital, access to labor |
| **Challenges** | • Population decline/brain drain of youth<br>• Lack of broadband for remote work<br>• Poverty, low educational attainment, substance abuse<br>• Resources for rural school districts<br>• Lack of skilled and motivated workforce |
| **Opportunities** | • Mentor/apprenticeship opportunities, training/certificate programs, entrepreneurship training<br>• Develop more opportunities in the trades<br>• Link local training to local needs<br>• Address transportation, housing, and broadband needs |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
• 52%

**Recommendations for future investments** – North Central Region Listening Session Results
- Remote work: create opportunities, prepare the workforce for it, increase the infrastructure and digital readiness of communities
- Provide wrap-around services: childcare, eldercare, housing/rentals, broadband
- Attract and retain talent in rural communities

**Intersections with Equity and Sustainability: Community Vibrancy (CV), Workforce Development (WD), and Economic Development (ED)**

**Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility**
- Tribal communities (CV, ED) and tribal enterprises (ED)
- Include young residents and retirees in training (WD)
- Minorities who may not be included in career opportunities (WD)
- Small town residents who are not connected to universities or professional careers (CV)
- Leaders from community-based organizations (CV)
- Ethnically diverse populations (ED) and providing them Extension resources
- Address appropriation in tourism regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (ED)
- Invest in creating culturally relevant materials and populations who have not historically had access (ED)

**Climate Resiliency and Sustainability**
- Include climate resiliency in community development plans (CV)
- Link small farmers' perception about climate change affecting wellbeing and farming operations (ED)
- Educate rural residents on how to be responsible regarding climate change (ED)
- Involve local utilities for investment in solar/wind projects or other renewable energy sources (ED)
- Must be community-driven and not provider driven – need to have capacity building in regard to sustainability (WD)

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE
# **WESTERN REGION**

## Introduction

The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) covers the largest geographic range of all the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDC). The WRDC's Jurisdiction stretches across 13 states and four territories in the Pacific Basin. Within the region, there are 17 Land-Grant University Systems, 13 Land-Grant Institutions, and for each western state and territory, a corresponding Agricultural Experiment Station. Today, many rural western communities are facing social and economic changes as traditional resource-extractive industries are being removed or replaced. In some communities, this has prompted the adoption of new industries and innovation, while others are experiencing out-migration of people and services, and loss of investment for new or improving infrastructure. Findings from the national survey and listening sessions conducted by the RRDCs provide insights into existing assets, challenges, and opportunities for community and economic development across rural America.
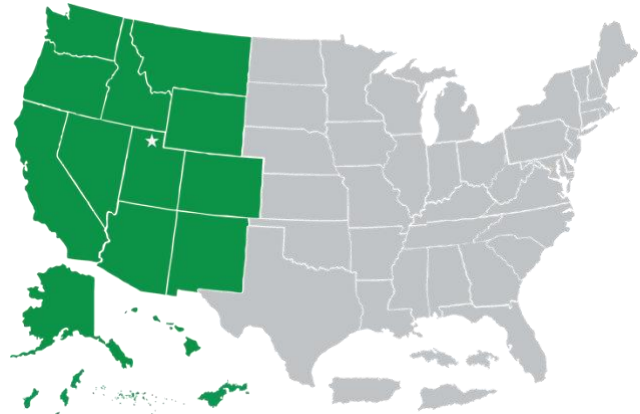
## Western Regional Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 13, 2022
- Hosted by Western Rural Development Center
- Number of people who registered: 28
- Number of participants: not reported

## Summary Findings

**Priority Rankings**

Top priorities identified by western stakeholders during the regional listening session included economic development, workforce development, health, and physical infrastructure. These findings mirror the top four priorities identified by Western stakeholders in the Fall 2021 survey. A comparison of top priorities and rankings between regions is shown below. (Explore the findings more closely via our interactive data dashboard: https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard).

## Priority Ranks

| | North Central | Northeast | South | West | National Scope | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Physical infrastructure and public services | Health | Physical infrastructure and public services |
| **2** | Workforce development, training, and education | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development | Physical infrastructure and public services | Economic development |
| **3** | Physical infrastructure and public services | Workforce development, training, and education | Health | Health | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education |
| **4** | Community vibrancy | Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather | Economic development | Workforce development, training, and education | Community vibrancy | Health |

### Recommendations

As a region, survey respondents reported that rural communities are innovative, have plenty of space and natural resources, and a strong sense of community. These are all assets that listening session participants agreed could be leveraged to expand partnerships and resources.

### Physical Infrastructure and Public Services – Western Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Access to land and space for further infrastructure development<br>• Lower construction and development costs<br>• Sense of community and desire to work together on projects<br>• Sense of self sufficiency to aid in becoming more economically and climate resilient<br>• Existing or soon to be expanding broadband |
| **Challenges** | • Limited broadband and wireless phone service<br>• Limited housing and transportation, including public transportation, roads, bike trails, or walking paths in the community<br>• Distance to goods to services<br>• Land use and zoning conflicts<br>• Funding<br>• Aging infrastructure and discord between future community and economic development plans and how it has been done in the past |
| **Opportunities** | • Expansion of broadband<br>• Open space for renewable energy projects<br>• Affordable housing incentives and transportation improvements<br>• Technical assistance, research, and funding<br>• Education opportunities that invest in climate mitigation and local leadership training |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 69%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Western Region Listening Session Results

- Invest in affordable housing infrastructure and quality of life services to improve the community's ability to recruit and retain talent
- Invest in local governance by providing funding and technical assistance to address land use, resource allocation, and priority topics in rural communities
- Create incentives to adopt climate mitigation strategies

**Economic Development** – Western Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Large open spaces and natural amenities<br>• Strong sense of entrepreneurship, innovation, and community involvement<br>• Tourism, recreation, and travel |
| **Challenges** | • Lack of a trained workforce<br>• Limited goods and public services within the community (affordable housing, healthcare, financial services, shopping/retail)<br>• Disagreement on where community and economic planning efforts should be placed, especially in rural communities with a strong tourism industry or history of resource-extraction (i.e., mining)<br>• Lack of broadband or technologies to grow skills and infrastructure |
| **Opportunities** | • Startup funds, incubation effort, and training for business owners and innovators<br>• Broadband access, digital assistance and tools, and remote work capabilities<br>• Workforce development<br>• Local and regional collaborative governance |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 60%

**Recommendations for future investments** – Western Region Listening Session Results

- Invest in research, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities to address workforce needs
- Build bridges between urban and rural populations to encourage resource sharing and policy planning
- Advocate for/facilitate urban investment in rural infrastructure
- Expand extension research and resources to include broader mission of economic development
- Encourage place-based research and case studies of small-town successes

## Health – Western Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Health departments and food bank programs in some areas<br>• Land and natural resources that could be used to benefit healthy behaviors such as fresh food and recreation<br>• Extension and other organizations that provide programming and resources on topics such as nutrition, food access, and health |
| **Challenges** | • Limited health services<br>• Lack of qualified workforce to work in healthcare<br>• Geographic isolation and distance to services<br>• Lack of funding and access to broadband<br>• Mental, behavioral, and substance abuse<br>• Food insecurity or too few healthy food options<br>• Lack of cultural support for healthy lifestyles and equitable access<br>• Healthcare costs |
| **Opportunities** | • Telehealth and mobile clinics and health services<br>• Trauma informed care<br>• Funding and capacity building for local services<br>• Increase connections between local food growers and consumers<br>• Improve training, outreach, and education opportunities to address servicing rural population needs |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 56%

**Recommendation for future investments** – Western Region Listening Session Results
- Train and equip community leaders, Extension, and health professionals with inclusive practices relevant to the communities they serve
- Acknowledge the importance and impact of sense of belonging and social determinants of health on individual and community health status
- Acknowledge historical traumas and distrust of external systems in relation to health equity, access, and education
- Create opportunities for co-creation of community projects and initiatives
- Build trust between educators, researchers, decision makers, and the populations they serve

*(continues on next page)*

## Workforce Development, Training, and Education – Western Region Survey Results

| | |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | • Access to rural community colleges<br>• Secondary/post-secondary vocational/technology schools<br>• Local knowledge and skills |
| **Challenges** | • Lack of a trained workforce<br>• Limited housing and transportation options<br>• Challenges in retaining workforce, competing with urban areas<br>• Aging populations<br>• Limited access to financial resources such as funding for training/programming and startup investments<br>• Lack of broadband access |
| **Opportunities** | • Offer a variety of training opportunities including mentorship, apprenticeship, certification, and other trade skills development<br>• Research and initiatives focused on skillsets and entrepreneurship<br>• Funding and transportation initiatives focused on rural development to support a local workforce<br>• Invest in skillsets and training for new and emerging industries such as clean energy, remote work, and agritourism |

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
• 46%

**Recommendation for future investments** – Western Region Listening Session Results
• Increase Extension resources, technical assistance, and sharing of best practices as a means for uplifting rural workforces
• Help communities identify and apply for relevant funding to expand programming and training opportunities
• Leverage existing Extension resources and physical spaces, like state specialists and schools, to expand community efforts, like skills development and leadership
• Increase transparency and accessibility to local governance and the decision-making process to address public services and amenities needed to retain a local workforce
• Provide training opportunities outside of Extension to help local workforces acquire new skills and earn competitive wages

# Discussion and Recommendations for Future Action

The summary findings from this process highlight several recurring themes and stakeholder priorities across topics and regions. In addition to thematic areas covered by the national priority topics already identified, stakeholders named interests in:

- more collaborative efforts across traditional institutional and geographic boundaries,
- place-based and community engaged research and best practices,
- involvement of underserved groups, and
- building climate and related economic resilience into development efforts.

While this report condenses the most critical and recurring of these findings, nuances exist in how they might be interpreted in a local or regional context. For example, health was ranked as the third priority topic in both the Southern and Western regions. However, during the listening sessions, while participants in the Western regional session emphasized partnerships that co-create community initiatives and acknowledge historical traumas in relation to health equity, participants in the Southern regional session focused on inventorying assets like access to food and safe drinking water as well as highlighting the importance of connecting residents to services like telehealth. All recommendations which are impactful and many which can be adopted broadly, and across regions.

Findings from these efforts are intended to assist stakeholders across different types of organizations and various levels of governance to identify, evaluate, and address the assets, challenges, and opportunities within their respective purviews. For instance, recommendations for future investments include specific ways in which Extension can assist communities, as well as strategies that government, nonprofit, and business leaders can adapt to uplift rural development. Furthermore, feedback given throughout this process also suggests that stakeholders are seeking tools, resources, and partnerships to tackles these issues across organizational and state silos that often define this work. The assessment processes allowed opportunities for collaboration and capacity building to be identified. Opportunities to expand upon this research are outlined below.

## Broadening and Deepening Engagement

Opportunities to build upon this participatory work include examining factors that affect effective engagement, communication, and goal setting. This includes, for example, closing the gap between the number of participants that register for an event with the number of participants who attend. Several studies have quantified the impact of survey fatigue in select communities and burnout across wide swaths of the population. Important considerations for reducing barriers to future participation should include time of year, length of event, communications prior to the event, naming outcomes for participants of the event, and event format (i.e., in-person, virtual, or hybrid).

While several of these barriers can be mitigated, others are more difficult to address, particularly with limited resources, broad scope, and a public health context like that of this study. For example, one of the national listening sessions discussed the topic of broadband and digital access. Due to the format of the listening session being held virtually, a qualifier inherently built into registration was that

participants have access to reliable broadband if they wanted to be fully engaged. As a result, individuals most impacted by the topic might have been excluded from the conversation, but on the same hand individuals who might not be able to commute to in-person discussions were able to participate virtually.

Following this comprehensive process there have been opportunities to expand upon the study and consider some of these factors. In addition to hosting both virtual briefings and in-person presentations and discussing how to partner with existing community centers like libraries and schools to help facilitate access to these discussions, regional efforts have taken place. As an example, in Fall 2022, the Southern Rural Development Center hosted a three-part webinar series focused on the topic of broadband research and quality of life, capped off with a briefing on the related listening session findings. Participants were able to engage in further dialogue to address the digital divide. Furthermore, as discussed in the southern region report, a briefing and feedback session was held with 1890 research and Extension leaders, and the information participants provided has been used to inform further programmatic developments.

## Communication and Relationship Cultivation

Another consideration for future iterations of this work should be the cultivation of relationships between researchers, Extension Professionals, and stakeholders throughout the process. Given the shortened timeline and administrative requirements associated with this national assessment, capacity to establish trust and communication with institutions and stakeholders unfamiliar with the work of the RRDCs or participatory research were reduced. Existing partnerships across agencies helped elevate the visibility and importance of the study, however research and outreach efforts building upon this work should consider a lengthier timeline that will allow facilitators to identify and foster relationships with key advocates among stakeholders where not already present.

## Goal Setting and Impact

Lastly, applied, participatory research expanding upon this work should clearly define what outcomes or deliverables will be returned to stakeholders following the process. The purpose of this two-phase rapid assessment has been to gauge the priority needs and issues impacting those working in rural development, which has been completed. However, further analysis should consider assessing priorities and outcomes by institution or stakeholder type.

Additionally, follow-up studies might include as outcomes some of the resources already identified by this process. Outcomes for participants could include things such as grant training, capacity building strategies, professional development opportunities, or leadership roles in the process itself. Providing a degree of buy-in and ownership of the process to participants could help move these critical issues forward. Historical and regional context should also be considered for any approach or exchange that is adopted.

# Roles for the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs)

The listening sessions were intended to inform a broad range of rural development partners, including leaders with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Land-Grant Universities, among others. Given their focus on building capacity across organizational and state lines, the RRDCs may play several roles in advancing the strategic investments addressed in this report. These include the following themes.

**Reaching across 1862, 1890, and 1994 Land-Grant University systems to collaborate on priority issues**.

**Conducting, translating, and disseminating research through journal articles, special issues, briefs, and presentations**.

**Scaling Extension outreach through curriculum development, training, gauging impacts, and showcasing promising practices.**

**Helping to acquire and leverage funding for research, Extension, and scholarship**.

**Actively encouraging the integration of research and Extension on key issue areas.**

**Facilitating workshops, listening sessions, and dialogues for innovative problem solving**.

**Convening researchers, Extension practitioners, and rural development stakeholders on high priority issues.**

**Building and coordinating multi-state teams.**

# Methods and Participants

To ascertain needs, opportunities, and priorities among rural stakeholders for community, economic, and workforce development, the RRDCs designed and implemented an iterative process for engaging key informants. This process included data collection, facilitated dialogue, and knowledge updating. The first phase of the process was a survey of rural development stakeholders, designed to provide a baseline assessment of stakeholder priorities, capacities, and opportunities for expansion in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Informed by the findings from the baseline, the second phase held a series of virtual gatherings that brought stakeholders together via listening sessions into facilitated, structured conversations around regional and national priorities. Between the first and second phases, findings were presented to select stakeholders for preliminary processing. Following the second phases, the RRDC team presented updated findings to additional stakeholder groups to receive feedback and processing prior to formulating this report. These periods of reflection informed design and analysis of subsequent materials and activities. This section details the two primary methodological components - the survey and the listening sessions. Plans for research were submitted through the Institutional Review Boards of The Pennsylvania State University and Mississippi State University.

## Survey Procedure

### Recruitment

The Regional Rural Development Centers hold a unique position within networks of community, economic, and workforce development stakeholders. They have deep connections to Extension and Research professionals in these fields at institutions of public higher education, as well as to practitioners, community leaders, local and state officials, and industry leaders. Recruitment of respondents was primarily among these networks of professionals working in support of rural community development in the field. Staff at each RRDC coordinated to also incorporate critical organizations and individuals outside of these networks. The team also acted with intentionality in inviting survey participation from organizations whose work has an emphasis on minority and historically underserved communities.

### Instrument Design

A team of experienced researchers and Extension professionals from the four RRDCs worked collaboratively to design the survey instrument. As a beginning framework they utilized a similar priority-gathering process successfully deployed by the Southern Rural Development Center in the past. Respondents were first asked to rank eight broad topics – each with four to five constituent issues as examples – based on the priority they perceived these topics held for rural communities with which they work or in which they live. These topical areas are depicted in the image on Page 5. Detailed information can be found in the report of findings from the survey, issued October 31, 2021. Topic areas were selected to be relatively broad, encompassing a number of activities and issues, while maintaining a similarity of focus and relevant competencies. These topics are those predominant within the fields of community, economic, and workforce development and pertinent to policy across levels of governance.

Based on their ranking of the broad topic areas, respondents were then asked about the capacities and interest of their employing organizations to address key issues within the three topical areas indicated as being of the greatest priority. Open-ended questions asked them to identify the kinds of assets, challenges, and opportunities they see U.S. rural communities facing within those top priority areas. They were also asked to rate the kinds of programming that they valued in support of rural community development practitioners, to identify their own demographic characteristics. Questions included quantitative, closed-response items (rankings, ratings, yes/no, etc.), and those eliciting qualitative, open-ended responses.

### Implementation

Invitations to participate in the survey were sent via email for approximately three weeks to directed contacts. Invitations also asked contacts to forward the survey on to others within their professional network, using an augmented form of snowball sampling. Media releases and broad announcements were also issued to make stakeholders aware of the survey, including a number of advance communications preparing stakeholders for the survey distribution. Responses were collected for a period of just over two weeks, from September 20th to October 6th, 2021. In total 680 responses were recorded from across the country where participants completed the majority of the questionnaire. Participants included people from Land- and Sea-Grant Universities, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private businesses.

### Data Analysis

Preliminary analysis of survey data, including core demographics, was published in the report *Investing in Rural Recovery: Findings from a Rapid Assessment of Stakeholder Priorities for Rural Development*, issued in October of 2021 (Entsminger et al., 2021). That report is available via: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions. It emphasized results from the quantitative questions contained within the survey. Data from that report were also turned into an interactive data exploration tool, which was used throughout the iterative process of the initiative and shared with participants in the listening sessions. The tool is available at: https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard. Detailed analysis of qualitative responses was conducted following publication of the October 2021 report, some of which is summarized in this document. The survey results – both those published in the first report and subsequent to it – revealed several cross-cutting themes, which informed the selection of four single topics of national importance as well as issues and topics of regional importance.

## Listening Session Procedure

### Process and Design

In order to ensure that both specific regional issues and broad national issues had spaces for priority-setting dialogue, the RRDCs collectively hosted a total of eight listening sessions. Each RRDC hosted two sessions – one on a single topic of national scope and one focused on several topics only within their region. The four national topic sessions engaged participants from across the country. In the four sessions with a regional focus, each RRDC invited only participants from within their designated geographic area to engage on topics the survey revealed as pertinent by the survey's respondents from that given region. The list of national topics and dates of sessions is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

| Session Focus | Host | Date (2022) |
|---|---|---|
| North Central Region | NCRCRD | 22 March |
| Broadband and the Digital Divide National Session | SRDC | 23 March |
| Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship National Session | NERCRD | 29 March |
| Northeast Region | NERCRD | 5 April |
| Western Region | WRDC | 13 April |
| Workforce Development, Training, and Education National Session | NCRCRD | 19 April |
| Southern Region | SRDC | 20 April |
| Community Planning, Leadership, and Governance National Session | WRDC | 26 April |

**Design**

The eight listening sessions were held virtually using Zoom and took the form of facilitated, guided dialogues. The RRDCs drew on the competencies of the Land-Grant University Cooperative Extension Service faculty, educators, and specialists to serve as facilitators and recorders of the virtual conversations. Each of the eight sessions took a similar form, based on a consistent process agenda. To encourage dialogue in the virtual space, digital tools were also implemented as a means of fostering participant engagement and capturing collaborative insight. Google's Jamboard platform was utilized to create a virtual canvas where participants could place ideas and concepts in groupings, and Zoom's native polling and chat features were employed to enable greater participation and to provide rapid feedback in large group settings.

A draft of the process agenda and related materials were crafted and deliberated upon through a collaborative editing process among the initiative's Design Team. The draft process and materials were presented to the corps of facilitators in a virtual orientation meeting, where feedback was collected and incorporated, where feasible, into a revised, final process agenda. This final process is summarized as follows.

Generally, sessions opened with a welcome and introduction by the hosting RRDC staff or a lead facilitator, setting the stage for the process and specific topic(s) for discussion. The topics covered drew on data that was collected during the 2021 stakeholder survey completed by the RRDCs. Participants were then asked to place in chat their answer to the following question: What 1-2 words come to mind when you think about rural resilience? This question oriented participants to the topics that were about to be discussed while also giving some technical context to the situation in rural America. The lead facilitator or an RRDC staff would also cover the meeting agreements, which included: be present – turn off/minimize distractions, be respectful of other perspectives, contribute and share, give space for others, one person speaks at a time, everyone helps the facilitator move forward, and maintain confidentiality. Internal Review Board information was also covered during this

time, highlighting to participants that they do not have to turn on cameras and are free to exit the session at any time.

Following the orientation, participants were broken out into small groups, each with its own facilitator to guide participants through the dialogue. For the national topics, participants all covered that topic in their breakout room. Regional listening sessions covered a few topics (2-4) that were the highest priority for that region, identified in the stakeholder survey. Participants of regional sessions were asked to state their top 2 topic preferences at the time of registration so that breakout rooms could be assigned prior to the session (and participants could be equally distributed among available rooms).

Approximately 50 minutes were spent in these small groups on a collective brainstorming activity to identify issues and investments that could be made to fill the gaps between assets and opportunities. Thirty minutes were allotted to brainstorm and discuss investigation, actions or resources in: 1) research questions and other activities; 2) Extension, outreach, and technical support; and 3) other kinds of resources. During this brainstorming, participants were also reminded to consider the lenses of sustainability/climate and equity/inclusion. Jamboard slides were utilized to place investments, actions, and resources for each category in a time frame: short (the next year), medium (next 3-5 years), and long (more than 5 years).

After brainstorming and collecting information on each of the topics, another 20 minutes was spent summarizing and then prioritizing within the small-group rooms. Although it often seemed like a monumental task, participants worked collectively with their facilitator to choose the top 3 investments that need to be made to create a resilient Rural America. Groups chose their top investment priorities by reviewing the previously populated Jamboard slides and coming to consensus while keeping in mind potential individuals and entities who are missing (equity/inclusion) and sustainable climate resilience.

Participants were then returned to the main session virtual space where priorities could be shared with the group at large. Utilizing Round Robin, facilitators reported their group's prioritization and a summative listing was developed across the sessions. To close the session, participants were asked to utilize the chat and/or polling features of the Zoom platform to identify an outcome from their participation that energized them as well as those individuals, groups, perspectives, or voices that still need to be included in conversations about rural capacity building.

**Facilitator Recruitment and Engagement in Design**
The RRDCs drew upon the expertise present within the Land-Grant University system, recruiting Cooperative Extension Service faculty, educators, and specialists to serve as facilitators for the listening sessions. Invitations were targeted to those with expertise in community dialogue and planning facilitation and who were affiliated with institutions other than those that host the four RRDCs. Individuals were sent a job description that gave them an overview of duties and roles, expected skills and abilities, and anticipated honoraria as compensation for their service. In total, 22 facilitators participated in the various listening sessions. Between facilitators and the RRDCs, individuals from a total of 20 Land-Grant Universities provided facilitation and leadership of the

sessions. There was approximately the same number of facilitators from each of the four Extension regions – six each from the South and West and five each from the Northeast and North Central.

## Participant Recruitment

Similar to the process used to recruit survey respondents, the RRDCs relied on their deep and varied networks to send invitations to participate in the listening sessions to professionals in community, economic, and workforce development and other stakeholder groups, including educators at community colleges and in secondary vocational education, agricultural producer groups, local and state government, and the nonprofit sector. Survey respondents had also been given the opportunity to request more information about the upcoming listening sessions, and all who indicated so were sent invitations to participate in the second phase. Recruitment was intentionally targeted for national topic sessions to those with expertise or work in those areas. There was also intentionality in recruiting participants from organizations that work closely with or emphasize marginalized and historically underrepresented communities. Each RRDC led recruitment for the sessions they hosted, although the effort was overall collaborative.

In order to participate in one or more of the virtual listening sessions, individuals had to complete a unified registration form via the Qualtrics platform. The form was designed so that registrants could only register for the region-focused session for the geography in which they reside, but could register for any of the available national topic sessions. This form first presented prospective participants with an Informed Consent statement describing the purpose of the sessions, what activities participants would be asked to engage in, the potential risks and benefits of participation, and options individuals had to affirmatively increase their anonymity or confidentiality during participation. A total of 256 unique registrations were recorded. A supplement to this report includes information about registrant demographics.

Due to limitations imposed by IRB protocols, registration records cannot be tied to participation, nor could demographics be collected for actual participants. Registration was required to receive virtual meeting space access. Rates of participation in comparison to registration were in line with recent experiences with other virtual gatherings; it is also noteworthy that the sessions began and extended through a period of transition in the pandemic where in-person events began to rapidly occur again.

## Implementation

In each of the eight sessions, the process described above was followed with minor variations to suit factors, including the number of total attendees, the topic(s) being covered, and the available number of facilitators. Within breakout rooms, small groups of attendees first engaged in a brainstorming exercise to identify investments, actions, and resources that are needed in relation to the topic across the three key domains of research, education/technical support, and miscellaneous. Each mini brainstorming exercise also included visual and spoken prompts to elicit ideas relevant to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (*who is missing?*), and climate resiliency. After idea generation was complete, the small group moved into a summary and prioritization phase, searching for common threads and important ideas across the ideas. Top priorities were reported by facilitators in a closing plenary segment of the session.

Following each of the four national topic sessions, staff from the hosting RRDC rapidly synthesized the identified priorities and other knowledge gained from the session into a briefing presentation. The presentation was made to select members of USDA NIFA's staff in meetings held within one week of each national topic session. Invited and present at these rapid debriefs were staff from all the RRDCs, and facilitators who led small groups within the session. Each of the four national topic sessions was rapidly debriefed for NIFA staff.

In the weeks and months following the sessions, these syntheses – along with additional analysis – formed the basis for briefings and presentations to other stakeholder groups. These included Extension professionals and program leadership, research communities relevant to community and economic development, policymakers, non-profits, and funding and finance organizations. In each instance, feedback and dialogue in these settings enriched understanding and context of the themes and priorities identified by participants in the Listening Sessions. This feedback loop, in conjunction with the role of the Phase 1 survey in designing and framing the agenda for facilitated dialogue within the Listening Sessions, made implementation an iterative process.

## Data Analysis

This qualitative process created and captured voluminous and rich data from participating key informants. The nature of the process structured that data in a collaborative, stakeholder-driven manner. Records have been kept of the more detailed data (e.g., Jamboard slides for each breakout group, etc.) and can be consulted to deepen and enrich summaries when needed. In this report, we summarize the highest level of the information gathered, as this represents the consensus view of the stakeholder voices gathered in each session. These are the most central and critical findings from the engagement process, identifying the most pressing investments stakeholders identified through survey responses and dialogues. The following sections provide summaries from the four national topical sessions followed by the four regional sessions. These sections also incorporate context derived from the initial survey where pertinent.

## Description of Listening Session Registrants

A total of 256 unique registrations were recorded. When registering, participants were allowed to register for one regional session (the region in which they indicated they reside), as well as the national topic sessions. To protect confidentiality, the research team is not connecting registrant data to participant record. Participants were asked to identify their first and second preference among the four priority topics for their respective region that were identified using the results of the Fall 2021 national survey. The map below summarizes the distribution of registrants across the four regions. These results are in line with the response rates to the national survey in Fall 2021.

North Central:
29.3%

Northeast:
18.7%

West:
13.3%

South:
38.7%
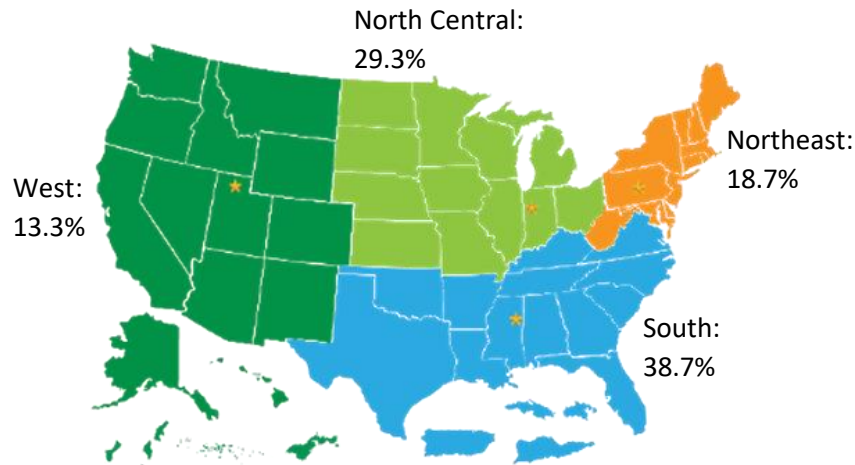
Registrants were asked to identify one or more professional roles with which they identify. Of the 256 registrants, 9.8% (25 individuals) did not identify any role for themselves. The most represented role among registrants was Extension professional with Land- or Sea-Grant University, with 34.4% identifying themselves with this perspective. Academic perspectives also included the roles of academic faculty or researcher (19.5% identifying as such) and higher education administrator (8.2% identifying with this role). Nearly a quarter – 21.5% – identified with the role of community development practitioner. Registrants also had public service roles outside of higher education, including public sector employee/civil servant (7%), local or state government official (6.3%), and K-12 educator (2%). Those working in private industry were also among the registrants, including the roles of small business owner/entrepreneur (8.6%), farmer or rancher (6.6%), and private sector employee (0.8%). A total of 34 individuals (or 13.3%) also indicated other role in their registration forms. In the space provided to specify the other role, registrants indicated a range of positions within society, including non-profit or community-based organizations, economic development authorities, Tribal leadership, graduate students, healthcare administration, and more.

The vast majority of registrants live within the communities in which this initiative is trying to inform decision-making – rural areas (35.2%) and small cities and towns (30.5%). The remainder live in suburbs near large cities (9.4%) or urban areas/large cities (15.6%). Most have graduate-level education, with their highest earned degrees being masters (35.2%), doctorates (29.3%), or professional advance degrees (4.7%) such as medical and law degrees. Another 16.8% had at least a bachelor's. Unsurprisingly, nearly a quarter (22.3%) were part of households whose total income was $150,000 or greater. Another 27.7% had household incomes between $90,000 and $149,999, and 23.4% lived in households making $50,000 to $89,999. Similar to the demographic characteristics of the Fall 2021 national survey respondents, most registrants are likely established professionals, with 69.5% indicating they were aged 41 or older. The majority of registrants – 58.2% – also indicated their gender identity as female. Registrants could also identify with a number of sexual orientation and gender identity minority groups, and 3.5% indicated they are part of the LGBT+ community via one or more identities.

Individuals who are Latino or of Hispanic descent were underrepresented in registrant profiles, with only 3.5% identifying as such. [Note: 15.6% did not respond to the question on ethnicity.] Registrants were also allowed to identify one or more racial groups with which they identify. In analyzing the multiple response data, 64.5% are presumed to be White-only, as they did not identify with any racial or ethnic minority group but did indicate *White or Caucasian*. Analysis also indicated that 20.3% of registrants self-identified as being of one or more racial or ethnic minority groups. [Note: 15.2% of registrants did not provide information that could be used to determine their racial or ethnic identity.] Of the registrants, 12.9% indicated they identified as being Black or African American, 3.4% as Asian, and 2.7% as American Indian or Alaska Native.

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## National RRDC Initiatives | rrdc.usu.edu

**Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development |** nercrd.psu.edu

**Southern Rural Development Center |** srdc.msstate.edu

**North Central Regional Center for Rural Development |** ncrcrd.org

**Western Rural Development Center |** wrdc.usu.edu

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