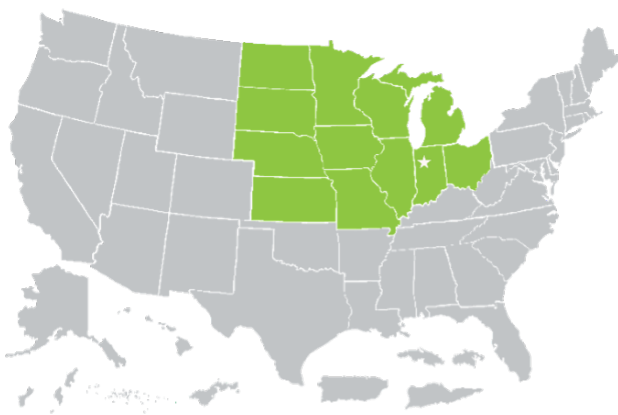*Investing in Rural Capacity:*
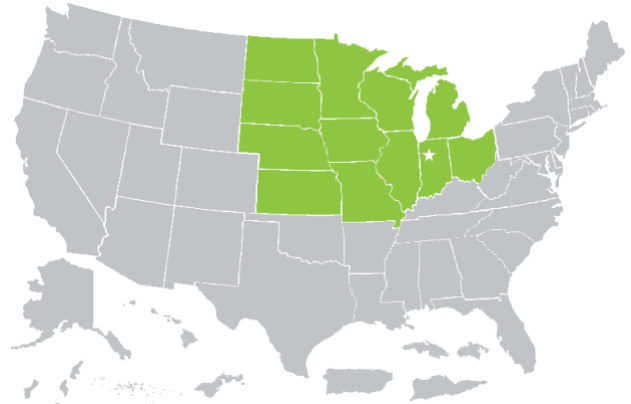
Key Findings from the North Central Region

A Comprehensive Summary of Findings from the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions

February 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 • Tourism, recreation, travel, hospitality, natural resource endowments • Rich set of organizations that support ecosystem/social capital
Challenges	• Limited broadband access inhibiting economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship • Lack of amenities (housing, healthcare, financial services) • Lack of local leadership and/or political organizations • Lack of business/professional services needed • Lack of targeted/accessible financial resources and technical expertise
Opportunities	• Support entrepreneurship, building rural tourism • Increase workforce training opportunities and improve digital and remote working skills • Improve education systems • Enhance broadband capability and infrastructure, and digital tools • Funding, grant opportunities, and other financial assistance • 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 • Youth-focused organizations (4-H, Scouts), leadership training through Extension • Rural places have opportunities for new leaders
Challenges	• Youth lack opportunities for careers with remote work/digital ready skills • Lack of broadband for remote work • Population decline/youth moving away • Job losses, housing and amenity shortages • Limited capacity to deal with complex issues
Opportunities	• Youth workforce training, leadership development and entrepreneurship training • Broadband capability, affordability, and infrastructure • Researching and sharing promising practices and case studies • Building capacity for civic engagement and trust-building • Researching and sharing how social capital and trust are built in communities • 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 • Community colleges, vocational schools, colleges, universities, trade schools, Extension • Interest in equity to ensure high quality of life • Work ethic, human capital, access to labor
Challenges	• Population decline/brain drain of youth • Lack of broadband for remote work • Poverty, low educational attainment, substance abuse • Resources for rural school districts • Lack of skilled and motivated workforce
Opportunities	• Mentor/apprenticeship opportunities, training/certificate programs, entrepreneurship training • Develop more opportunities in the trades • Link local training to local needs • 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)

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.

Notes

Information in this report is excerpted from a report titled "*Investing in Rural Capacity: Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions*." The report shares findings from a national initiative conducted through the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs).

For a comprehensive description of methods and participants, download the full report at:
https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions#reports

Suggested Citation

Entsminger, J., Green, J., Welborn, R., Wiatt, R., Bednarikova, Z., Gayle, R., Pan, Y., Goetz, S. (February 2023). *Comprehensive Summary of National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions.* Regional Rural Development Centers. https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions

For More Information

More information, including the comprehensive listening session report, survey report, supplementary materials, and an interactive data dashboard, is available at:
https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions

Learn more about the Regional Rural Development Centers at: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/index