



USDA Rural Development
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Partners Network Annual Report 2023

Building Rural Prosperity

Issued May 2024

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**“...for America to succeed,
Rural America must succeed.”**

— President Joe Biden

Then-USDA Rural Development Under Secretary Xochitl Torres Small visits with Twin City, Georgia Mayor Matt Donaldson as part of a January 2023 Rural Partners Network visit. Torres Small now serves as the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture.

A note about website links: For ease of reference, this document provides links to relevant, useful information hosted outside the USDA domain. Endorsement of non-USDA programs or activities is neither intended nor implied. Please be aware that, when you access information through a link provided in this document, you are subject to the copyright and licensing restrictions of those sites. All links in this document were active as of May 2024.

Welcome to the Rural Partners Network



We have often said true community development takes time. We are so appreciative of the engagement with the communities and their willingness to put their trust in us as collaborative partners. Now that we are going into year three, we are realizing the possibilities from this partnership and see the strong results through investments. I am even more excited for the future of RPN and the advancement of opportunity in rural places that need us the most.

— Executive Director for the
Rural Partners Network
Lee Jones

The Rural Partners Network (RPN) was created by the Biden-Harris Administration to ensure rural Americans have every opportunity to thrive and can find those opportunities right at home in rural America.

Now building on our second year, the RPN is transforming the way the federal government collaborates with, listens to, and delivers resources to rural communities.

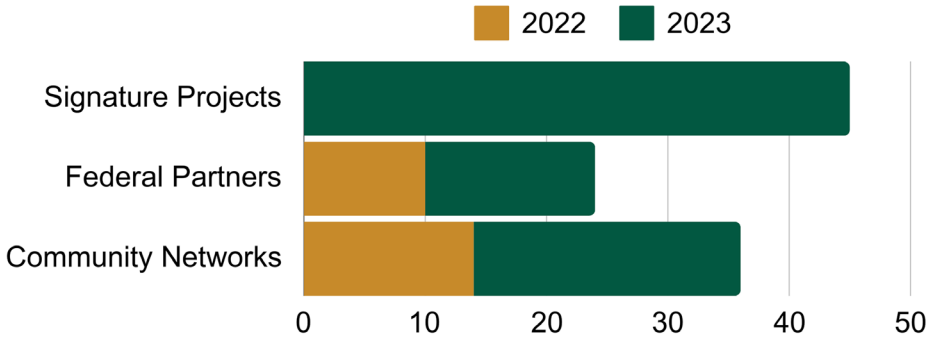
Through a robust alliance of federal agencies and civic partners, rural prosperity is being built through job creation, infrastructure development, and community improvement — helping ensure equitable access to federal programs, and funding and driving local economic development.

We are fully staffed at the national and state office levels, working exclusively with rural community networks to provide federal resources and state, local, and philanthropic collaborations to meet their goals for the future.

In transforming the way the federal government partners with rural communities, our federal partners' renewed rural commitment expands interagency collaboration, providing targeted staffing, tools, and resources to spur inclusive, sustainable economic growth.

Rural Partners Network at a Glance

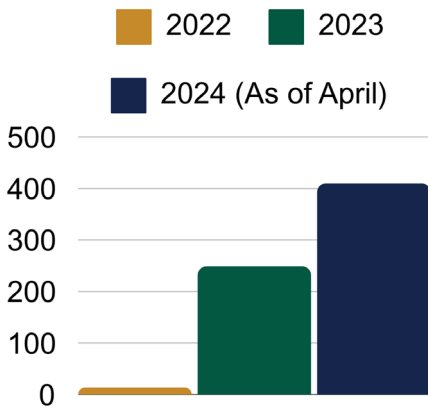
RPN TOTALS



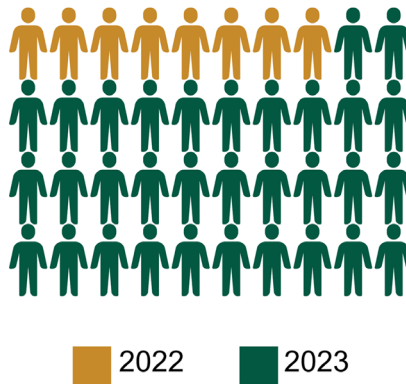
INVESTMENT DOLLARS

Nearly
\$3 billion
across the federal
government has been
invested in RPN
communities

TOTAL PROJECTS



LOCAL RPN EMPLOYEES

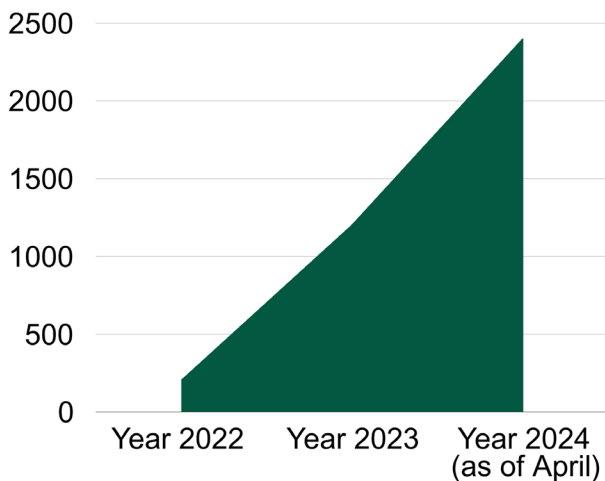


LOCATIONS

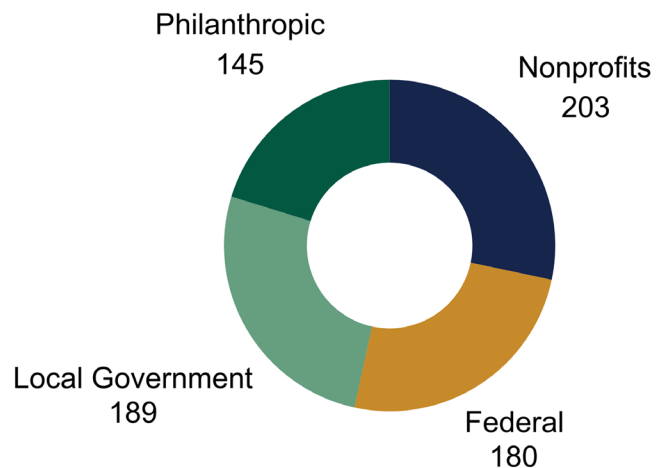
112
Counties and Municipios
(Puerto Rico)
4
Tribal Nations

CONNECTIONS AND PARTNERS

Total RPN Partners



New Connections in 2023 (Total 439)





What We Do



Build Trust: Listen and acknowledge the diverse perspectives of rural people across the nation.



Promote Equity: Improve social, economic, and health outcomes for everyone in rural America.



Provide Expertise: Connect people to resources and technical assistance to plan and fund community improvements.



Develop Capacity: Help expand the know-how of local people to plan and carry out projects that fit the community's vision.



Increase Investments: Develop funding priorities and new programs that meet the needs of rural people.



Leverage Assets and Multiply Returns: Organize public and private resources to maximize outcomes.



Support Long-term Sustainability: Establish federal support – including programs, staffing, and priorities – that are effective and sustainable.

Who We Are

USDA is leading a broad partnership of 24 federal agencies, offices, and commissions collaborating to bring funding and opportunities to rural America.

These partners* support RPN Community Networks across the country to drive resources to high-priority areas, helping improve program processes in all rural communities.

“The past three years have seen an unprecedented focus on place-based initiatives across the government. These efforts strive to ensure that no communities are left behind. The Rural Partners Network (RPN) plays a central part in our nation’s efforts to ensure rural Americans have access to federal opportunities that create good paying jobs and support economic revitalization in their communities.

As part of our whole-of-government approach, the RPN has been a wonderful partner to the Energy Communities Interagency Working Group to align strategies and the resources necessary to support energy communities across the nation. Together, we’ve worked to engage communities in West Virginia and Kentucky, and I look forward to our continued collaboration as we revitalize rural economies and position these communities to thrive in a clean energy economy.”

— Executive Director of the Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization, Senior Advisor on Energy Communities, U.S. Department of Energy
 Brian Anderson

*See page 33 for a list of federal partners and website links.

Federal Partners



Rural People Lead the Way



1 MEET

To ensure we designed a program that works for all of rural America, the RPN team met with a wide range of community leaders and stakeholders who identified common areas of need, challenges, and opportunities.



2 IDENTIFY AREAS

We work with communities to identify areas of need and opportunity using quantitative and qualitative information to analyze levels of economic distress, social vulnerability, persistent poverty, low participation rates in federal programs, local capacity, and interest in RPN participation.

3 ESTABLISH COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Once RPN is determined to be a good fit for a community, the same leaders and stakeholders then determine the geography — or footprint — of their Community Networks.

(You can learn more at this link: rural.gov/communitynetworks.)



4 IDENTIFY PRIORITIES

Rural community and economic development are identified as crucial needs in more than half of all RPN projects. Other concerns and opportunities include infrastructure, public safety, rural health, and cultural enrichment.



5 IDENTIFY PROJECTS

In 2023, community networks identified over 410 projects.

A Focus on Tribal Communities

Rural Partners Network (RPN) strives to be a valued partner to our Tribal Nations. For instance, we've worked alongside the Cocopah Indian Tribe in Somerton, Arizona, to address infrastructure, energy projects, and community and economic development.

The Cocopah Indian Tribe Community Network serves the Cocopah Tribe (Kwapa) — also known as the River People — who live along the lower Colorado Rivera and Delta. For centuries, the Cocopah people have maintained their traditional and cultural beliefs despite an ever-changing landscape.

The Cocopah Tribe of Arizona is comprised of three, noncontiguous bodies of land totaling 6,500 acres. Collectively, these are known as the North, West and East Reservations. Much of this land is leased to non-Indian farmers and ranchers for agricultural use.



“These leads would not have been possible without the guidance and technical assistance from the Rural Partners Network!”

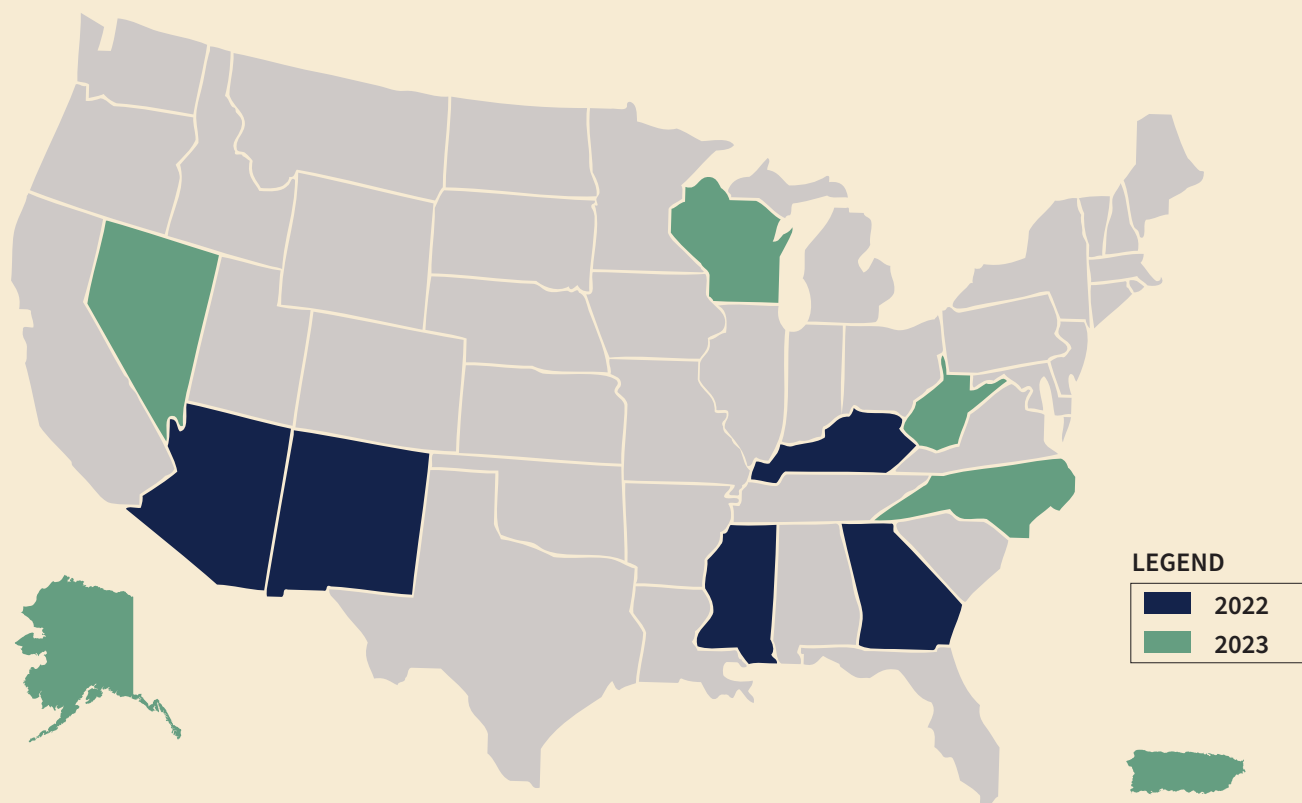
— Cocopah Tribe Business Development Director Gary Magrino

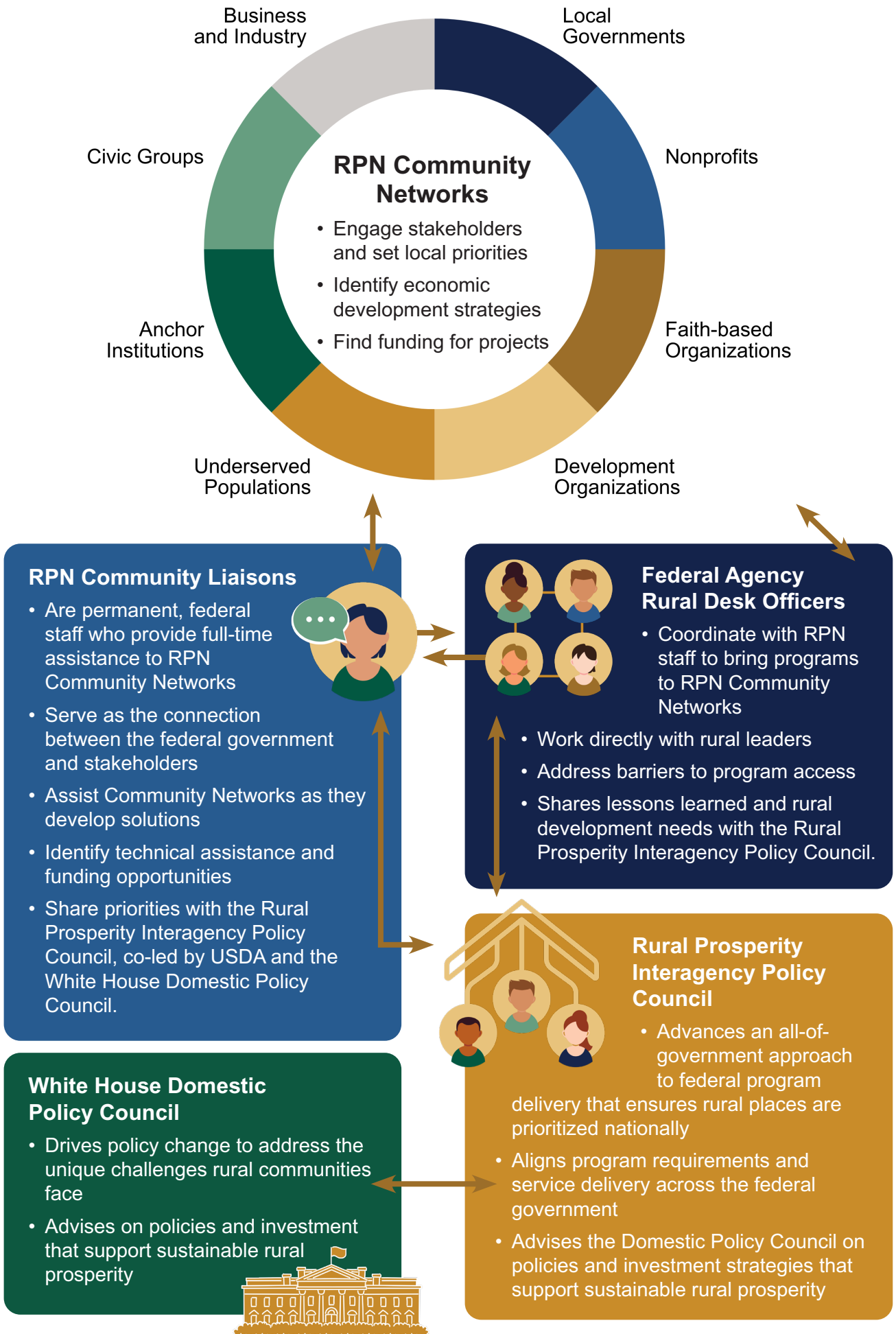


RPN Community Networks

In early 2023, the USDA-led Rural Partners Network (RPN) expanded to include 17 communities in six additional states and U.S. territories. Networks and permanent support staff now exist in Alaska, Nevada, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

You can learn more about each RPN Community Network at this link: [Rural.gov](https://www.rural.gov)





Locally Driven Success: Fulton County Community Network

By Mark Welch

Building the first new home in 15 years

With the exception of subsidized housing, no new home construction had occurred in Fulton, Kentucky since 2008.

Thanks to a new partnership with Lexington-based nonprofit Community Ventures Corporation (information at this link: tinyurl.com/msf7sw5n) we broke that long drought with the construction of a beautiful, three-bedroom, two-bath home now occupied by a grateful first-time homeowner.

And with support from local and federal partners, Community Ventures recently was awarded \$2.6 million from Kentucky's Rural Housing Trust Fund (information at this link: tinyurl.com/3mxt58as) to build additional low-income housing in Fulton County.



“Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of this new growth is that significant private dollars are also being invested in the Twin Cities of Fulton, Kentucky, and South Fulton, Tennessee.”

— Fulton City Manager Mike Gunn



New airport taxiway improves access and safety

Fulton Airport has the only paved runway in the four “River Counties” of Ballard, Carlisle, Fulton, and Hickman. The airport boasts a fairly new, 4,000-foot runway, and is embarking on a new fuel system project. However, the airport lacks a taxiway – a crucial safety requirement for a small rural airport. Fortunately, a representative from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA - information at this link: faa.gov) attended Fulton County’s RPN Convening Forum in April 2023, resulting in nearly \$3 million in funds to build the much-needed taxiway. “The predominate sound in our county for years — too many years — was the sound of demolition. Now we are hearing the sound of construction and it’s wonderful!” said Fulton County, Kentucky Judge-Executive, Jim Martin.

Partnerships in Action

Rural Partners Network (RPN) uses its all-of-government approach to ensure rural Americans have every opportunity to thrive. We continue to show our commitment to rural prosperity through a diversity of partnerships and collaborations, and by helping ensure there is an equitable seat at the planning table for all.

Rural maternal health collaboration

In 2023, USDA Rural Development (USDA RD) and the U.S. Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA - information at this link: [hrsa.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov)) began collaborating on a pilot project addressing maternal health issues in rural communities.

Through this partnership, a team is working with three RPN community networks in West Virginia, Mississippi, and the San Carlos Apache Tribe in

Arizona to understand community needs, address barriers, and identify solutions to maternal health issues in these communities. Together, USDA RD and HRSA are creating a resource guide to highlight lessons learned from the pilot. The guide will identify programs that can support rural communities confronting maternal health challenges.



Coal and power plant-impacted communities

RPN partner U.S. Department of Energy (DOE - information at this link: [energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov)) is among 11 participants on the Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization (Energy Communities IWG - information at this link: [energycommunities.gov](https://www.energycommunities.gov)).

Two of the 25 identified priority communities in the IWG's initial report to the President are in Kentucky, where RPN has community networks.

To support energy communities, RPN and IWG member Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC - information at this link: [arc.gov](https://www.arc.gov)) awarded

\$500,000 to five area development districts through its READY LDDs Program (information at this link: [arc.gov/ready/ldds](https://www.arc.gov/ready/ldds).)

This investment is helping communities use the resources available to energy communities through the:

- American Rescue Plan (information at this link: tinyurl.com/AmcnRescuePlan)
- Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (information at this link tinyurl.com/BInfrastructureLaw)
- Inflation Reduction Act (information at this link: tinyurl.com/InfRedAct).

Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation: Rural Partners Network Technical assistance partners

Rural Partners Network (RPN) joined forces with the Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC — information at this link: lisc.org/rural) to provide expertise, training, and tools for key community development projects in RPN states.

Rural LISC helped address issues in five crucial areas: Creative Capital, Affordable Housing, Workforce Development and Small Business, Broadband, and Disaster Solutions.

Successful FY23 activities include:

- Creating a Regional Economic Development Plan and Housing Needs Assessment
- Writing a proposal for a strategic planning grant to identify assets, challenges, and opportunities for housing, workforce development, and land use
- Designing a workforce development strategy and securing funding to support its implementation

- Helping a municipality apply for and secure a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD — information at hud.gov) Distressed Cities and Persistent Poverty Technical Assistance grant (information at this link: tinyurl.com/9esr48zh) to provide technical assistance for financial planning, housing redevelopment, elderly housing, and home rehabilitation work

Rural LISC also offers RPN state community liaisons and community representatives one-on-one technical assistance, as well as access to training webinars throughout the year.

Finally, RPN states participated in the annual Rural LISC Seminar, during which RPN partners heard from rural community development leaders from across the country. Participants connected with their peers and learned how key strategies and programs can successfully be executed in their own rural communities.

We are already seeing measurable impact in rural communities as Rural LISC staff work with USDA and other agency partners to drive positive change focused on housing, workforce development, broadband, small business growth, creative lending and more, all while building the capacity of our rural allies and friends.”

— LISC Vice President
and Rural LISC Director
Nadia Villagrán



Madeline Fraser Cook (left), LISC VP and Rural LISC Director Nadia Villagrán (center), and former Rural LISC Director Caitlin Cain (right) attended an RPN Day for community network leaders during their annual summit.

Rural Partners Network History

APRIL 2022

Rural Partners Network launches Cohort 1 with 14 Community Networks in Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, and with Arizona Tribes

1



2

[Rural.gov](https://www.rural.gov) launched as the official website of the Rural Partners Network



First Rural Partners Network Community Liaison hired in Kentucky

3



JULY 2022

Federal Rural Desk Officer Team is convened with a regular cadence of reporting and meeting

4



NOVEMBER 2022

Rural Partners Network expands with Cohort 2, adding 22 Community Networks in Alaska, Nevada, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, West Virginia, and Wisconsin

5



6

DECEMBER 2022

Community Liaisons hired for Cohort 1 and 24 Community Liaisons positions advertised for Cohort 2



MARCH 2023

Federal partner deputies convened by the White House Domestic Policy Council

7



8

MAY 2023

Communities identify signature projects for federal lead agency engagement



JULY 2023

Community Liaison hires are at full strength and supporting RPN Community Networks

9



10

PRESENT

Nearly \$3 billion across the federal government has been invested in RPN Communities, including over \$300 million directly leveraged through RPN.

Community Network Success

NEVADA

Rural Partners Network (RPN) Nevada offers essential resources to rural and agricultural communities in five rural regions. Here are some examples of the Nevada network's FY23 efforts:

- The Moapa Valley Community Network identified a need for health care providers and infrastructure.
- The Northern Nye County Community Network collaborated with USDA Rural Development and the University of Nevada to create a health care feasibility study.
- The Walker River Paiute Tribe collaborated with USDA Rural Development to identify funding sources for essential community facilities such as water tanks, a water looping project, and a health clinic.
- The Southern Clark County Community Network, the Searchlight Town Board, and local residents came together to reestablish a community garden.



- The Southern Nye County Community Network identified a need for a Housing Stabilization and Nutrition Center in Pahrump. HUD expressed interest in helping address housing disparities for the unhoused population.

The strong partnerships and collaborations in Nevada's RPN Community Networks have dissolved barriers and created growth and development in rural communities.

“New relationships can create systemic change in a community. We strive daily to build an ecosystem of support for our rural communities”

— RPN National Lead for Engagement Christine Sorensen





ALASKA

Biomass heating system addresses high energy costs

In the Yukon-Koyukuk Census area, the City of Nenana was awarded a \$605,521 USDA RD Rural Energy Pilot Program grant (REPP - information at this link: tinyurl.com/mryymksh) to support a biomass-fueled district heating system.

REPP grants support community-driven solutions to address high energy costs and pollution through renewable energy systems such as wind, solar, geothermal,

microhydropower, biomass and bioenergy.

REPP also helps people in rural towns develop community-sized renewable energy projects that help lower energy costs and create jobs.

Nenana is using its REPP grant to buy a woodchipper with conveyors for the city's biomass district, which includes a school, a recreation center, and a fire station.

Alaska Tanana Chiefs Conference added as Rural Partners Network host

In September 2023, the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC - available at this link: tananachiefs.org) signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Rural Partners Network (RPN). An Alaska Native nonprofit corporation, TCC focuses on meeting the health and social service needs of Tribal members throughout the Interior region.

In other FY23 activities:

- RPN initiated relationships with the Alaska Division of Homeland Security and

Emergency Management (information at this link: ready.alaska.gov)

- Several communities in the Interior region were referred to the USDA RD Alaska's Energy Coordinator
- Others were connected with USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR - information at this link: tinyurl.com/528zwunc)



Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy is a OneUSDA effort

The Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy (SASS) reflects a “OneUSDA” effort with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS - information at this link: fs.usda.gov) Rural Development (RD - information at this link: rd.usda.gov) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS - information at this link: nrcs.usda.gov). The collaboration resulted in \$25 million in community-led projects in FY23, including:

- \$12.5 million in Tribal and Indigenous projects
- \$6.24 million in natural resource conservation
- \$3 million in community capacity building
- \$3 million in various other infrastructure projects, including a composting and biomass fuel project at Craig High School in the Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area

An estimated 45 full-time jobs were created as a result of these investments, reflecting an overall economic impact of \$1.9 million.

Rural Partners Network (RPN) sought input

and involvement from other RPN partners including the Denali Commission (information available at this link: denali.gov).

We also successfully collaborated with:

- Juneau-based Southeast Conference (information at this link: seconference.org)
- Central Council of Tlingit and Haida (information at this link: ccthita.org)
- Southeast Alaska-based Spruce Root Community Development (information at this link: spruceroot.org).

Aquatic farming in Alaska has been around for centuries, and modern mariculture (ocean farming for kelp and oysters) is a promising industry for coastal Alaska. RPN is working to understand coastal communities’ infrastructure needs to help ensure success.

RPN staff has made nearly 50 contacts in the regional mariculture industry, and is connecting community economic development groups with federal resources.

Rural Partners Network partners with nonprofit Tribal consortium Kawerak Inc.

We also are partnering with Nome-based Kawerak Inc. (information at this link: kawerak.org), a nonprofit Tribal consortium that serves 20 federally recognized Tribes in the Bering Strait Region. Together,

Kawerak Inc. and RPN identified housing and workforce development as areas of focus. Efforts are underway to identify resources to address these needs.



NEW MEXICO

Wood processing projects lead the way for climate smart solutions

Since its inception, the New Mexico Rural Partners Network (RPN) has cultivated relationships and built trust with local governments, nonprofit organizations, businesses, state agencies, and federal representatives.

These partnerships have led to projects improving local economies by creating jobs and stimulating growth in the state's three Community Networks.

In April 2022, San Miguel and Mora counties in the Northern New Mexico Community Network suffered the largest, most destructive wildfire in New Mexico's history. Over 340,000 acres of burned, including just under 200,000 acres of privately-owned forest lands. This

created an economic loss for hundreds of landowners dependent on forest products for income.

The RPN Northern Network joined forces with San Miguel County, Santa Fe-based North Central Economic Development District (information at this link: tinyurl.com/5n85jkyw), a local, private wood processing business, and the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA - information at this link: eda.gov) to secure a \$1 million economic recovery Community Development Block Grant to purchase equipment to harvest salvageable trees.

A similar project supporting three small, local wood processing businesses is underway in Mora County. An estimated 30 jobs are expected to be created as a result of this collaboration.

GEORGIA

Truck driver training program gets a boost

As a result of Rural Partners Network (RPN) partnerships, in August 2023, a \$742,180 U.S. Economic Development Administration grant was awarded to Wiregrass Georgia Technical College (information at this link: wiregrass.edu) in Fitzgerald (Ben Hill County). Funds are being used to bolster truck driver training workforce development and boost regional job creation.

Grant funds also will help build a new Commercial Drivers' License (CDL) practice pad and access road students can use to work on truck maneuvers. You can learn more about the grant at this link: tinyurl.com/42cb6czp.



PUERTO RICO

Changes ease home loan application process

A change in Puerto Rico's USDA Rural Development Single Family Housing direct home and home repair loan programs income eligibility limits now makes it easier to apply.

These loans (information at this link: tinyurl.com/bdfbwxz7) help income-qualified people buy decent and safe housing in eligible rural areas by providing loans and payment assistance to increase their repayment ability.

"Homeownership has been out of reach for far too many hard-working Puerto Rican families," said USDA Rural Housing Administrator Joaquin Altoro. "The Biden-Harris Administration is proud to announce that we are expanding access so more families can qualify for USDA home loans and grants."

Relationships Fortified

The Rural Partners Network (RPN) Federal Partner Forums provide opportunities for federal representatives and community stakeholders to build connections, address challenges with federal funding, and identify potential federal investments. The forum agendas are community-driven and varied. They provide time for community leaders to share their goals for their communities, host subject-based panels to address network project areas, offer time for public, private, and philanthropic overviews, and participate in resource fairs with RPN partner representatives.

Wisconsin Federal Partner Forum

In FY23, Federal Forums brought together more than 200 interested stakeholders in Rhinelander and Osseo.

Participants included residents, businesses, nonprofit leaders, community members, federal and state agency staff, and elected officials.

USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development Farah Ahmad joined representatives from the White House Domestic Policy Council at several roundtable discussions.

With work groups and priorities established, Community Liaisons held in-person and virtual meetings resulting in more than 50 project inquiries.

Community Network leaders have submitted several applications for funding or technical assistance to support 11 projects. Four are now fully funded. Community Liaisons have engaged hundreds of community members, growing the email distribution list to more than 3,000 Wisconsin-based subscribers.



“What an amazing turnout. It was great to see all the state and federal people there. It was a day full of learning and connections.

— Federal Forum attendee

Puerto Rico Federal Partner Forum



In our first year of Rural Partners Network (RPN) Puerto Rico, we found opportunities to collaborate with our colleagues at USDA Rural Development, along with other USDA agencies and federal departments.

From participating in housing fairs to farmers' outreach events, the RPN Puerto Rico team helped facilitate a mutual understanding of the three island networks' needs and priorities.

Using events and community outreach, RPN staff helped create an inventory of priorities resulting in the proposal of four signature projects across all three networks.

Puerto Rico RPN's first Federal Forum in 2023 was structured as a one-day event including speaker panels, table discussions, networking opportunities, and a resource fair.

The forum introduced RPN to a broader audience, building collaborative partnerships and connecting the Community Networks with targeted federal and civic partners, and offering peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

Puerto Rico RPN helped solidify these relationships, provided insightful information, and generated a sense of commitment among participants about the possibilities for rural prosperity in Puerto Rico.

As a result of the forum, a renewable energy organization (Empowered by Light — information at this link: tinyurl.com/3vhmes9f) — is now engaging with the Southwest Community Network.

Empowered by Light focuses on improving access to renewable energy in remote areas and for rural schools that lack reliable electricity.

North Carolina Federal Partner Forum

In Wilson, North Carolina, change makers and rural leaders from federal, state, and local government met for the first-ever convening of the North Carolina Rural Partners Network (RPN).

The forum brought together more than 200 attendees with a shared commitment and enthusiasm to improve the lives of the rural people of North Carolina.

The event kicked off with North Carolina USDA Rural Development State Director (and Wilson native) Reginald Speight, who was eager to help bring key leaders together to ensure economic development investment opportunities reach North Carolina's rural communities.

“Because of the urgency of the times, I didn’t want to keep anyone out of this room who wanted to be here,” said Speight.

Joining representatives from the federal family — among them, USDA Rural Development, U.S. Economic Development Administration, the Small Business Administration, AmeriCorps, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — were local philanthropic organizations, dozens of North Carolina mayors, leaders, and nonprofit organizations. It was clear that the right people were in the room to create opportunity for the people of North Carolina.

Also in attendance were state partners, including the North Carolina Rural Center, the North Carolina Department of Information Technology Division of Broadband and Digital Equity, representatives from the North Carolina General Assembly, and North Carolina Commission on



Elm City Mayor Tawanda Moore was among 200 officials who met at the North Carolina Rural Partners Network Community Forum.

Photo by Drew C. Wilson.

Indian Affairs.

Assistant Senior Advisor to President Joe Biden and Director of Public Engagement Stephen Benjamin led an afternoon session dedicated to sharing lessons and best practices from community development projects.

“The best ideas are scalable and replicable,” said Benjamin, the former mayor of Columbia, South Carolina. “We are in a moment right now. Let’s be thoughtful, let’s be strategic, and let’s be driven by the love for our communities.”

Attendees shared insights with one another and spent the afternoon making valuable connections for projects in their communities.

“What we have in North Carolina is very unique. We are deeply committed to RPN. We bring a genuine commitment to rural communities.”

— USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development Dr. Basil Gooden

Nevada Federal Partner Forum



In Nevada, federal, state, and local leaders convened to find solutions and change through the Rural Partners Network (RPN) Federal Partner Forum.

Joined by USDA Rural Development Rural Utilities Service (RUS) Administrator Andy Berke and White House Domestic Policy Council Director Neera Tanden, Nevada RPN leaders assembled a robust agenda covering a wide range of topics.

Among these, U.S. Health and Human Services Regional Director Jeffrey Reynoso discussed the importance of telecommunications infrastructure in rural health, and RPN Executive Director Lee Jones identified some of the urgent community needs RPN can address.

Tanden also hosted a breakout session discussing crucial rural issues ranging from housing and child care to supporting long-term economic stability in rural communities.

The event ended with presentations on funding opportunities for attendees to share with their networks.

Federal departments and agencies on hand included the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Small Business Administration, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Social Security Administration, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service.

“We are excited to partner with the town of Searchlight to create a community garden which will provide opportunities for not only fresh vegetables for the senior center, the elementary school and the overall township, but also encourage a new social setting, provide horticulture and healthy living learning opportunities, and create multigenerational conversations and events centered around growth, green initiatives, and sustainability for the future.”

**— Community Services Coordinator Kelly Lehr,
University of Nevada, Reno**

Kentucky Federal Partner Forums

The Fulton County Rural Partners Network (RPN) network is one of two community networks in Kentucky, and it's the only community network that crosses state lines into neighboring Tennessee.

Historically, federal initiatives have used special pots of money to spark economic development in targeted areas. These special pots of money are important, but even the largest pots eventually run dry.

RPN uses a different approach. Dedicated RPN staff serve as liaisons in designated communities, connecting stakeholders with local, state, and federal resources to create jobs, improve infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability on their own terms.

Network community member Kentucky Highlands Investment Group (information at this link: khic.org/housing-solutions) hosted the second RPN-led federal convening, pulling together a meaningful, well-organized event.

For this convening, RPN was joined by USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development Farah Ahmad and then-Director of State Operations, Dr. Basil Gooden (now serving as Under Secretary for Rural Development), in addition to RPN partners from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Energy Communities Interagency Working Group.

Panel discussions helped illustrate how an



idea can become reality when local, state, and federal government agencies collaborate with nonprofits.

For example, a project spearheaded by Housing Development Alliance (information at this link: tinyurl.com/5n96katn) in Hazard is helping bring a neighborhood of affordable homes to the community.

Affordable housing continues to be one of eastern Kentucky's biggest challenges. This is why the Kentucky Highlands Community Network chose it as the primary focus of their efforts, and the network is working closely with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop an action plan.

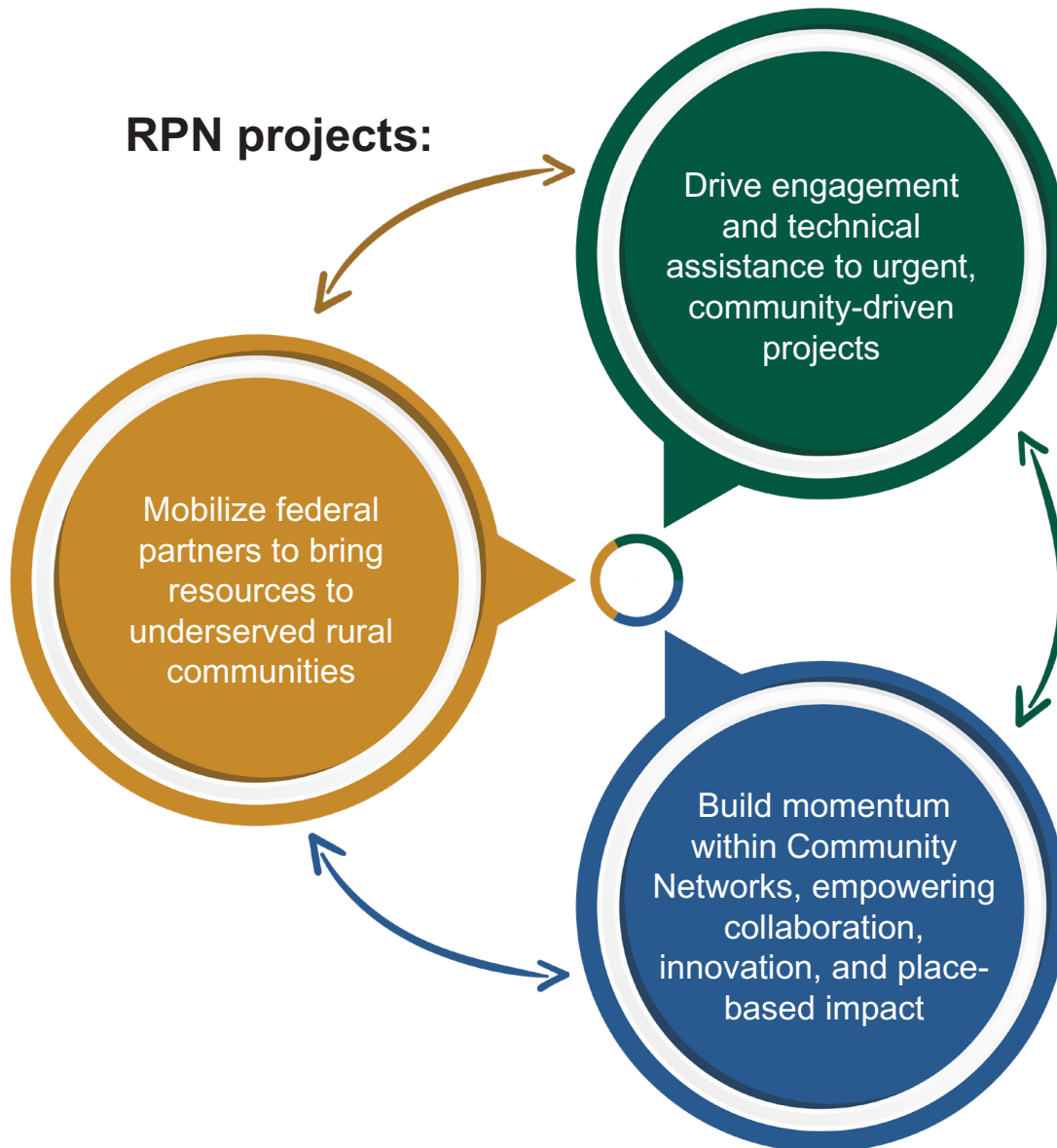
The Kentucky Highlands Community Network includes eight counties: Bell, Clay, Harlan, Knox, Leslie, Letcher, Perry, and Whitley.

“We’re here because we have a common goal of making this region as prosperous as possible. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a nonprofit or for-profit, from local, state, or federal government. It’s time for all of us to come together and light the spark that sets this region ablaze with prosperity!”

— USDA Rural Development Kentucky State Director Dr. Tom Carew

Signature Projects

Rural Partners Network (RPN) Community Networks identify key projects in their communities that galvanize federal, state, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners to bring resources to underserved rural areas.



“The best ideas are scalable and replicable. We are in a moment right now. Let us be thoughtful and strategic, and let’s be driven by the love for our communities.”

— Director of Public Engagement and Senior Advisor to President Joe Biden Stephen Benjamin



Located in the territory's northeast region, Puerto Rico's El Yunque National Forest is a rural recreation economy gem for both locals and visiting tourists. It's the only tropical rainforest in the U.S. Forest System.

Puerto Rico Municipios identify signature projects

In FY23, four signature projects were identified to address priorities set by Puerto Rico's three Rural Partners Networks (RPN).

In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Energy and the nonprofit organization Barrio Eléctrico (information at this link: barrioelectrico.org), the Central Mountain Network will support the Coamo-based community of San Diego in transitioning from fossil fuels to solar energy.

The East Network is focusing on a community-based tourist-economy project in the Naguabo-based community of Cubuy. This initiative is being led by the nonprofit Foundation for Puerto Rico (information at this link: foundationforpuertorico.org/en/) with help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service El Yunque National Forest (information at this link: fs.usda.gov/elyunque). In January 2023, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, was in Puerto Rico and announced the Forest Service will invest \$1 million to improve access to El Yunque

National Forest. This forest is part of the Puerto Rico East RPN Community Network.

Using U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Distressed Communities Technical Assistance Program (DCTA - information at this link: tinyurl.com/9esr48zh), the Southwest Network is collaborating with the Municipal Administration from Guánica and the communities of Esperanza, Siberia and Arena, on a strategic plan to promote the community-based redevelopment of Guánica. Rural LISC will lead this technical assistance as the designated HUD service provider.

And finally, the nonprofit Fundación Bucarabón (information at this link: fundacionbucarabon.org) and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (information at this link: fns.usda.gov) are collaborating on a food security project which will educate 225 households in the Maricao and Las Marías municipalities about protein (eggs and tilapia) production.

North Carolina Team builds a foundation for development

The North Carolina Rural Partners Network (RPN) encompasses five communities spanning 14 counties.

While priorities vary, all networks have identified a shared need for access to clean water and wastewater treatment, along with affordable housing, and downtown redevelopment.

The North Carolina RPN staff remains committed to listening to - and acting on - community-identified priorities.

For example, the Randolph County-based Glow House Society Community Network is building food hub infrastructure and support for underserved growers and suppliers. You can learn more about the network at this link: tinyurl.com/34nex5tn.

They're educating residents and small farmers about the importance of maintaining healthy nutrition habits, teaching people how to properly nurture and maintain arable land, and identify and secure recourses necessary to boost rural



economic development.

As part of its signature project, the Glow House Society Community Network received a \$47,000 Rural Business Development Grant (information at this link: tinyurl.com/RBCSRBDG) being used for a feasibility study on how to increase agribusiness development. Grant funds also will be used to help identify overall economic development opportunities in Randolph County.

Mississippi regional airport project on the move

In April 2023, the Greenville Mid-Delta Regional Airport project in Mississippi received a \$2.5 million grant from the Delta Regional Authority (DRA - information at this link: dra.gov) to support improvements to Hangar 450, currently used by Greenville Kearns Aerospace Maintenance (information at this link: gkam.aero)

Grant funds will be used to help make the hangar compliant with U.S. Department of Defense standards, which will boost regional job opportunities in fixed-wing and rotor aircraft

maintenance, repair, and overhaul.

Additional funding includes a \$16 million dollar bond from the city of Greenville, a \$1.4 million dollar training grant to the Mississippi Community College Board from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL - information at this link: dol.gov), and a \$150,000 investment from the Washington County Economic Alliance (information at this link: wceams.com).

The Hangar 450 project is expected to bring 200 to 300 jobs to the region.

“Convening meetings like we’ve held in Mississippi are perfect examples of how the Rural Partners Network should function. We were able to bring our sister agencies together under one roof and create a one-stop shop for our staff and members of that community to share knowledge and best practices on how to best deploy the resources available.”

— USDA Rural Development Mississippi State Director Dr. Trina George

West Virginia Rural Partners Network helps advance much-needed Lincoln County Business Resource Center

When Rural Partners Network (RPN) launched in West Virginia, Community Liaison Adam Stollings met with Tommy Adkins, executive director of the Lincoln Economic Development Authority (LEDA - information at this link: lincolnedata.com) and learned of the organization's hopes for a Lincoln County Business Resource Center.

“The purpose of the project is to purchase a building, provide business services, and assist entrepreneurs with startup and expansion of their respective businesses. The building will also provide short- and long-term office and meeting space for business owners that require space beyond their current capabilities.”

— Executive Director Lincoln County Economic Development Authority
Tommy Adkins

Because funding is limited, LEDA is unable to provide LEDA-sourced services to regional businesses. A business resource center will allow LEDA to engage outside service providers to help with business development.

Although a potential site location was already identified, financing site control and development seemed impossible on such a limited budget. Working with RPN staff, LEDA developed a project plan that includes a viable capital stack, additional partner engagement, and a timeline for completion. They are now seeking funds to secure site control, conduct feasibility studies, draw up architectural and engineering plans, complete renovations, and buy furnishings and equipment.

Since engaging with RPN Community Liaisons, the project team also has

partnered with the Lincoln Primary Care Center — the current owner of the identified site — and the Lincoln County Commission approved \$250,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for the acquisition and construction match.

With help from the West Virginia Grant Resource Centers, (information at this link: wvgrantcenters.com), which is providing its grant writing services free of charge, and RPN Community Liaisons, LEDA is pursuing opportunities to complete the project. This includes potential funding from U.S. Economic Development Administration, USDA Rural Development, and the Charleston-based Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation (information at this link: tgkvf.org). The targeted project completion date is Spring 2025.

Opportunities such as this aren't viable without industry partners and the technical assistance they provide. In addition to the grant writing services offered by the WV Grant Resource Centers, technical assistance providers around the state are participating in project predevelopment activities. For example, RPN Supervisory Community Liaison Kayleigh Kyle supplied the conceptual drafting plans required for cost analysis. Marshall University's Brownfields Assistance Center (information at this link: tinyurl.com/bd9txutx) is handling environmental reviews, and the Huntington-based Region 2 Planning and Development Council (information at this link: region2pdc.org) will manage grant compliance and implementation.

Projects such as these are multifaceted, making them challenging for even the best teams to complete. When communities have limited capacities, projects that are most needed often seem unattainable. RPN aims to increase capacity for these communities so their dreams can become a reality.

West Virginia rural health care project

Located in central West Virginia, the Pioneer Network comprises Braxton, Calhoun, Clay, Gilmer, Nicholas, Roane, Webster, and Wirt counties. The network is focused on improving health care infrastructure crucial to providing services to more than 86,000 rural residents, of which the majority are covered by Medicare and Medicaid.

For example, Rural Partners Network (RPN)

staff is helping identify funding for renovations to the Minnie Hamilton Health System (information at this link: mhhs.healthcare) to improve its emergency department, medical and dental clinics, laboratory, dietary services, and pharmacy. As the largest employer in Calhoun County, the health systems' goal is to provide uninterrupted services, and keep intact more than 300 jobs with a regional economic impact of more than \$35 million.

Wisconsin Community Network collaborates to improve housing

Facing a housing shortage, the Adams County Visionary Community Network made housing a part of its signature project. With a limited stock of single-family homes and continued rising home values, many young professionals can't afford to buy a home as they enter the area's workforce.

As a result, some long-time Adams County area residents are unable to stay in the community despite a desire to do so, and local businesses find attracting and keeping employees a challenge.

Adams County leaders are collaborating with RPN staff to identify technical assistance opportunities and resources to increase affordable housing.

Along with USDA Rural Development Rural Housing Administrator Joaquin Altoro, Senior Advisor and Assistant to the President

and Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs Tom Perez visited Wisconsin in early November 2023. Together, they engaged with the community during a housing roundtable.

Attendees also included county board and department supervisors, Adams City Council members, and Friendship Village trustees. Nearly 40 stakeholders and partners participated, sharing insights about housing needs, and identifying existing assets and challenges. Partners such as signature-project lead U.S. Housing and Urban Development shared resources and offered examples of successful housing projects.

You can learn more about the Adams County Visionary Community Network at this link: tinyurl.com/bjn3mm3v



Investment Strategy

Unprecedented federal funding opportunities are available for infrastructure, high-speed internet, business and workforce development, transportation, and community improvements through the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, and annual appropriations. The Rural Partners Network is working to make sure rural communities get their fair share.

In addition to directly helping rural communities unlock these funds, we are also coordinating across federal departments and agencies to prioritize rural places for targeted investment, and addressing barriers for small and rural places to successfully apply for programs.

RECIPIENT	INVESTMENT	DESCRIPTION
Eleven RPN states	\$4.58 million	Hire federal staff dedicated to supporting community networks and locally driven projects
Two Arizona Tribal nations	\$600,000	RPN funding to each Tribe to hire and support community development staff
Three state-based organizations	\$113,500	Provide forum and event management that delivers program outreach to help connect local projects with federal program dollars
Five national organizations	\$2.92 million	Deliver direct technical assistance to rural and underserved communities

“Community Liaisons partner with network stakeholders to advance their projects and ideas by building capacity and momentum. RPN goes beyond finding grants and funding opportunities to fill funding gaps. Community Liaisons facilitate meetings, navigate community training opportunities, and connect stakeholders with field specialists who can answer questions and provide technical assistance. They serve an important role in linking communities and their priorities to needed resources.”

— USDA Rural Development Wisconsin State Director Julie Lassa



A Vision for the Future

Two years ago, the Rural Partners Network (RPN) was tasked to help rural people build prosperity through job creation, infrastructure development, and community improvement. The strategies and objectives guiding our work are long-term investments that take time and require intentional engagement. Today, we continue to build economic diversity by leveraging technical assistance opportunities and philanthropic and private investments, and by building new and better partnerships to help boost the flow of capital resources to rural communities.

The RPN team is committed to advancing equitable rural prosperity by improving community capacity, engagement, and access to resources for all rural communities using the following strategies:

STRATEGY 1

Provide localized, concentrated place-based community network support.

STRATEGY 2

Establish a federal interagency commitment to rural America.

STRATEGY 3

Expand access to federal programs.

You can stay connected to RPN's work by subscribing to our quarterly newsletter. Information is available at this link: [Rural.gov](https://www.rural.gov).



"There is more funding available for rural areas than ever before. As Rural Parters Network staff, our goal is to make sure our rural communities in Mississippi get their fair share of that money. We are going to make sure our communities have access to grant funding and technical assistance like they have never seen before. We must make sure their economic growth in 2024 is much better than it was in 2023!"

**— USDA Mississippi RPN Senior Community Liaison
Monica Smith**

A Commitment to Rural America

Since the Rural Partners Network's inception, millions of dollars have been invested in rural projects. Today, we are active in 11 states, with RPN staff living and working in the communities they serve. RPN relationships and connections help make things happen in rural communities — bringing federal funding and resources together to help drive rural prosperity.



Our Federal Partners

RPN Federal Partners and links to their websites:

- Appalachian Regional Commission: [arc.gov](https://www.arc.gov)
- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau: [consumerfinance.gov](https://www.consumerfinance.gov)
- Delta Regional Authority: [dra.gov](https://www.dra.gov)
- Denali Commission: [denali.gov](https://www.denali.gov)
- Department of Agriculture: [usda.gov](https://www.usda.gov)
- Department of Commerce: [commerce.gov](https://www.commerce.gov)
- Department of Education: [ed.gov](https://www.ed.gov)
- Department of Energy: [energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov)
- Department of Health and Human Services: [hhs.gov](https://www.hhs.gov)
- Department of Homeland Security: [dhs.gov](https://www.dhs.gov)
- Department of Housing and Urban Development: [hud.gov](https://www.hud.gov)
- Department of the Interior: [doi.gov](https://www.doi.gov)
- Department of Labor: [dol.gov](https://www.dol.gov)
- Department of Transportation: [transportation.gov](https://www.transportation.gov)
- Department of the Treasury: [treasury.gov](https://www.treasury.gov)
- Department of Veterans Affairs: [va.gov](https://www.va.gov)
- Environmental Protection Agency: [epa.gov](https://www.epa.gov)
- Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation: [fdic.gov](https://www.fdic.gov)
- Northern Border Regional Commission: [nbrc.gov](https://www.nbrc.gov)
- Small Business Administration: [sba.gov](https://www.sba.gov)
- Social Security Administration: [ssa.gov](https://www.ssa.gov)
- Southeast Crescent Regional Commission: [scrcc.gov](https://www.scrcc.gov)
- Southwest Border Regional Commission (No website available)
- The White House: [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov)



The first business in Braxton County, West Virginia to open in conjunction with the newly constructed Elk River “Rails to Trails” system is now open for business.

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2. Postal mail:
U.S. Department of Agriculture
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3. Fax: (202) 690-7442

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