

## Rural Partners Network Frequently Asked Questions

### How does the Rural Partners Network (RPN) compare with previous efforts under the 2013 StrikeForce Initiative? How do the two initiatives differ?

USDA was the sole federal agency chosen to design and carry out the original StrikeForce Initiative in 2013. In contrast, while USDA Rural Development (RD) is the lead federal agency responsible for implementing and running RPN, it will do so in collaboration with 16 federal departments, commissions, and authorities. This is one of several important distinctions between the StrikeForce Initiative and RPN. Additional distinguishing factors are summarized in this table:

Distinctive Characteristics	StrikeForce Initiative	Rural Partners Network
<b>Staffing</b>	Managed as collateral duties by existing USDA staff	Additional full-time, permanent staff hired by RD state offices
<b>Focus</b>	Persistent Poverty Counties	Broader socioeconomic indicators of distress as a first step in the selection
<b>Federal Government Equities</b>	<b>USDA</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural Resources Conservation Service</li> <li>• Rural Development</li> <li>• Farm Service Agency</li> <li>• Food and Nutrition Service</li> <li>• USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach</li> </ul>	Through the Rural Prosperity Interagency Policy Council, USDA RD will lead the implementation of RPN in states, Tribal areas, and territories in collaboration with more than 16 federal departments, commissions, and authorities
<b>Objectives</b>	Focused on food access and other targeted strategies	Ties directly to community needs and place-based strategies

### In addition to USDA, which other federal departments and agencies support RPN?

RPN is working in direct partnership with the following federal departments and commissions to provide coordinated service and assistance to RPN Community Networks and rural communities:

- [Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#)
- [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau \(CFPB\)](#)
- [Department of Commerce \(DOC\)](#)
- [Department of Education \(ED\)](#)

- [Department of Energy \(DOE\)](#)
- [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#)
- [Department of the Interior \(DOI\)](#)
- [Department of Health and Human Services \(HHS\)](#)
- [Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#)
- [Department of Labor \(DOL\)](#)
- [U.S. Small Business Administration \(SBA\)](#)
- [Social Security Administration \(SSA\)](#)
- [Department of Transportation \(DOT\)](#)
- [Department of the Treasury](#)
- [Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\)](#)

USDA will also work in partnership with the following federal commissions and authorities in cases where selected Community Networks are located within their respective service regions:

- [Appalachian Regional Commission \(ARC\)](#)
- [Delta Regional Authority \(DRA\)](#)
- [Denali Commission](#)
- [Northern Border Regional Commission \(NBRC\)](#)
- [Southeast Crescent Regional Commission \(SCRCC\)](#)

## **When RPN was launched, community networks were announced, how do you define a community network?**

Historically, USDA has seen great success when counties and other interested stakeholders collaborate with one another. When being considered for RPN, rural stakeholders were asked to define their community network. Examples include illustrating their footprint as a multicounty region, or demonstrating an existing, successful collaboration between key organizations and anchor institutions.

## **What are the goals and objectives of the Rural Partners Network Program?**

The vision is to establish an “all-of-government” service delivery model to provide coordinated interagency support necessary to bolster rural, place-based capacities, including the ability to:

- access multiple types of assistance to address critical unmet needs
- effectively invest this assistance in a strategic vision for inclusive economic growth and community revitalization

USDA RD state offices will hire RPN Community Liaisons to work with participating RPN Community Networks who understand the needs of the rural communities to which they are assigned. In this role, Community Liaisons will:

- enable constructive and strategic dialogue among local stakeholders, residents, and critical partners
- contribute technical expertise and guidance regarding effective community economic development tools and methods

- introduce local partners and stakeholders to a variety of program resources – both federal and non-federal – and develop stakeholders' ability to navigate, leverage, and administer these resources in support of local strategies and projects

Additional RPN staff at the state and national offices will also support the Community Liaisons assigned to each network.

### **How long will RPN remain in operation? Is this a time-limited initiative?**

RPN is a long-term investment of time and human capital designed to help rural communities grow capacity, and develop collaboration and partnerships. We know sustainable transformation takes time, and we are committed to ensuring success.

### **Does USDA intend to publish any program regulations or notices to guide the implementation of RPN in communities and regions?**

RPN represents an innovative model of service delivery that will be leveraged in support of rural communities and regions. USDA and its federal partners are developing materials to guide the work of USDA RD Community Liaisons and the Community Networks.

### **What methodology does USDA RD use to prioritize which states, territories, Tribal areas, and their respective communities will be selected to participate in RPN?**

The long-term vision is to implement RPN in every state. To ensure success, USDA RD is launching RPN in groups of five to seven states or territories, with multiple groups launched each year. Two or three RPN Community Networks will be selected from each state in that group.

USDA selects RPN states and community networks based on quantitative and qualitative factors such as levels of economic distress, and readiness of communities and local stakeholder organizations to participate. As part of this selection process, USDA conducted community engagement sessions with local community leaders.

### **Does USDA intend to provide RPN services to other states, territories, and Tribal areas?**

USDA intends to implement RPN in additional states, territories, and Tribal areas in subsequent years as funding is available. The long-term vision of RPN is implementation in every state.

## **Can an organization with a statewide service area be selected to participate in RPN?**

RPN is open to local public, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations and partnerships. Statewide organizations and larger anchor institutions are encouraged to play a supporting role on behalf of Community Networks in any given state or territory, however, because they serve a larger footprint, it may be most appropriate for them to be partners and not serve as the lead entity.

## **What types of coordinated federal assistance is available through USDA and its interagency partners to states, territories, Tribal areas, and their respective communities if they haven't been selected to participate in RPN?**

The USDA RPN Team and the Rural Prosperity Interagency Policy Council (IPC) are implementing policies and activities to support the administration's commitment to resourcing inclusive economic growth and community revitalization in rural places and regions nationwide. Key agencies are designating a person or team to coordinate within agencies, with a specific focus on:

- coordinated support for RPN Community Liaisons and Networks, including developing whole-of-government resources (such as rural resource guides) and building the skills necessary for RPN staff to bring a whole-of-government lens to their work
- renewed rural commitment for streamlined support across agencies to empower rural communities to inform federal policy decisions that better serve rural America.

## **How will you measure success of the first year of RPN?**

We will evaluate using both internal and external evaluation measures. Internally, USDA will evaluate the procedures used for the community selection process. Externally, assessment measures will be based on data indicators of socioeconomic change, as well as community-driven benchmarks.

## **What do selected RPN community networks receive?**

USDA RD will put in place newly-hired, full-time rural development staff to help navigate resources. These staff will work collaboratively with the final selected communities to help clarify priorities, identify federal investment opportunities, and connect communities to participating federal agencies. Examples include supporting community development planning, coordinating with partners to harness skills, and identifying other resource opportunities. The purpose is to help rural communities take advantage of unprecedented resources.

RPN field staff will be tasked with feeding key information to federal agencies on community needs and barriers to accessing federal resources. Agencies will then take this information and use it to drive policy

changes that address the unique challenges faced by rural communities. As a result, RPN will not only support pilot sites but inform changes that make the federal government better deliver for all rural communities. Through this new direct line between rural communities and Washington, D.C., the Biden Administration will change business as usual and work across agencies to coordinate technical assistance to rural communities, share rural data and measures of success, and align grant requirements.

### **When will RPN staff be in the field in community networks?**

Some of the staff are on board in Community Networks that were announced in the spring of 2022, and we are continuing the hiring process for the positions that are still vacant. We plan to recruit staff for the second group of RPN Community Networks after those networks are selected for the program this fall.

### **When will you announce the second round of community networks?**

We are currently working with semi-finalist communities in Alaska, Nevada, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, West Virginia, and Wisconsin to determine their readiness and willingness to participate in the RPN program. We expect to announce the second round of RPN Community Networks in late September or early October 2022.

### **How can I learn more about the RPN?**

Information is available at <https://www.rural.gov>. Questions can also be sent to the RPN email inbox at: [RuralPartnersNetwork@usda.gov](mailto:RuralPartnersNetwork@usda.gov).