

ARTS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Supporting Arts and Creativity in Rural Community and Economic Development

ACTION NEEDED

We urge Congress to:

- Sponsor/co-sponsor and pass the Rebuild Rural America Act (RRAA) of 2023.
- Affirm the contributions of arts and creativity to rural development and to the attraction and retention of talent in rural communities by upholding the language that establishes arts and culture as an eligible use of grant funds in RRAA.
- Prioritize strengthening federal agency partnerships between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Endowment for the Arts. Instruct agencies to collaborate on strengthening existing programs to be more flexible and responsive to arts and creative industries and to develop long-term investment and technical assistance for arts and creative industries in rural development.

TALKING POINTS

Support Rural America

- Roughly 60 million Americans live in rural counties, accounting for nearly 20% of the U.S. population.
- Rural areas can struggle to secure public and private resources. They may lack economic development organizations or cannot afford grant writers and lobbyists to assist in securing these resources. In the case of philanthropic dollars, most resources do not reach rural communities.
- Rural areas are underserved by philanthropy. In 2015, the Economic Research Service (ERS) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a study on grantmaking trends in rural communities. This study found that rural organizations received, on average, 5.5% of total domestic grants from large foundations between 2005 and 2010.
- Given the inequitable distribution of philanthropic dollars to rural areas, access to federal dollars play an important role in rural communities. Rural leaders and communities deserve equal opportunity to access their own federal tax dollars to help their communities.
- Existing federal programs are complex, lack flexibility, and are too narrow to lead to transformative solutions to facilitate economic growth for all rural Americans.
- Investing in rural development is vital because it sustains communities, bolsters local economies, and helps rural Americans thrive.

Arts and Creativity: Foundations of Rural Community Development

- Arts, culture, and creative industries are foundational to rural development and community development.
- Arts and creativity strengthen the fabric of America's rural communities. They celebrate local culture—both cherished and new traditions—telling stories of people and places. Arts and creativity promote connection and cohesion, foster the entrepreneurial spirit communities need to thrive, and create the kinds of communities where young people want to build families.
 - A prime example of creative spirit used to build thriving communities is the **Red Ants Pants Foundation and Music Festival in White Sulphur Springs, Montana**. Red Ants Pants Foundation's mission is to develop and expand leadership roles through women, to preserve and support working family farms and ranches, and to enrich and promote rural communities. Its music festival brings together people from different backgrounds to celebrate rural Montana through music. Proceeds from the festival are then used to support the Foundation's leadership and skills programs.
- Arts and creativity foster the entrepreneurial spirit communities need to survive and thrive. Many small businesses are based on the arts, and many others rely upon the creative skills honed by arts and creativity. The existence of organizations focused on arts and creativity is a key indicator of business innovation potential in rural communities.

- In a 2017 study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, it was found that the presence of performing arts organizations in rural counties is positively associated with the location of businesses that are substantive innovators.
- Organizations like **Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky** are community anchor institutions that contribute to the local economy through vocational training in creative industries such as filmmaking, music, media, radio, and art. In working to document, disseminate, and revitalize the lasting traditions and contemporary creativity of Appalachia, Appalshop develops creative skills and entrepreneurial opportunities for its community.
- Arts and creativity create the kinds of communities where young people choose to stay and build families. By offering entertainment, family enrichment and opportunities for creative engagement—and by contributing to strong and resilient local economies—arts and creativity play a key role in attracting and retaining young families and helping communities counter the “brain drain.”
 - According to the National Association of Counties, rural population decline is noted as a factor that limits economic development in rural communities. **Rural population decline is strongest among working-age adults**, threatening the continued economic resilience of rural communities. It is vital to come up with solutions that will retain working-age adults in these communities.
 - Retention of talent is a key challenge in rural areas. A 2023 report from Goldman Sachs found that **68% of rural small business owners have trouble attracting and retaining workers**, compared to 45% in non-rural areas.

BACKGROUND

The *Rebuild Rural America Act* seeks to change this by **establishing a new \$50 billion Rural Future Partnership Fund** that would provide multi-year, flexible block grants to support regional revitalization. Rural regions that work together to become certified would **automatically receive a commitment of five-year, renewable funding** to support progress on the region’s locally developed goals and objectives.

This legislation transforms the Federal government away from being complicated, siloed, and top-down into a more responsive, effective partner for rural communities.

- ***Creates a State-By-State Rural Innovation and Partnership Administration:*** A newly created USDA Rural Innovation and Partnership Administration would oversee this program and would offer staffing in all state USDA RD offices to provide hands-on help to local leaders craft and implement their rural revitalization plans, and a direct line to call with questions and requests.
- ***Empowers Local Leaders:*** A new suite of national capacity and training programs will help connect the expertise and resources of national technical assistance providers with rural regions. A Rural Future Leadership Institute will be established to support annual cohorts of rural leaders in skill-building seminars, best practice reviews, and other training.
- ***Streamlines Disaster Response and Recovery:*** This new program offers a new delivery system for direct Federal disaster response and recovery efforts to rural communities rather than working through states which can delay and complicate local areas receiving vital assistance.
- ***Coordinates Federal Resources to Make Government Helpful, Not a Hassle:*** The new agency will work with the cross-government Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development to ensure local leaders have knowledge of and access to all Federal resources to meet their complex needs. Local leaders are also encouraged to use existing Federal plans to develop their rural regional plan so as to reduce duplication for local stakeholders.
- ***Informs Strategies with Data:*** The new agency will work with Federal and non-Federal partners to provide cutting-edge, timely data that assist regions in developing effective economic and community development strategies, measuring progress and impact of plans, and assessing future needs and vulnerabilities.
- ***Launches the Rural Future Corps:*** USDA RD will coordinate with AmeriCorps to launch a Rural Future Corps to help rural communities expand critical services like childcare, health, nutrition assistance, education, and job training. This program would also help improve the capacity of local governments and economic and community development organizations. Specific efforts would be included to retain the Corps members in the

rural areas after their service, helping to reverse population loss and creating a pipeline of a new generation of local leaders for rural America.

Issue brief prepared by the Cultural Advocacy Group, a collaboration of arts and culture stakeholders working collectively to advance federal policy. Updated 2023.