



# The State of American Philanthropy

Giving for  
Rural  
Communities

In partnership with:



## ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions.

Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at [insidephilanthropy.com](https://insidephilanthropy.com).

## ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy.

The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at [insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy](https://insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy).

**PRIMARY AUTHOR:** Allen Smart

**EDITOR:** Michael Hamill Remaley

**COPY EDITOR:** Chris Packham

**CONTRIBUTING EDITORS:** David Biemesderfer, United Philanthropy Forum and Debby Warren, MDC

**RESEARCH ASSISTANCE:** Rachel Rush-Marlowe and Melissa Eggen

**INTERVIEWS:** Christine Reeves Strigaro

**GRAPHICS & DESIGN:** Sue-Lynn Moses

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Get to Know Rural Philanthropy ..	3
Overview of an Emerging, Distinct Field .....	3
A Brief, Essential History.....	6
Inherent Challenges .....	9
The Nation's Social Justice Challenges, with Rural Solutions.....	13
Coalescing Around Key Rural Issues.....	13
Rural Perspectives on Equity.....	20
Funder Strategies and Trends.....	23
Introduction to a Growing Community of Funders .....	26
Data on Rural Giving is Scarce.....	26
Health Conversion Foundations.....	27
National Foundations with Significant Rural Giving.....	29
Regionally Focused Foundations.....	30
Community Foundations.....	32
Corporate Funders.....	33
Major Donors.....	33
Intermediaries & Associations.....	34
Individuals to Know in Rural Philanthropy.....	37
An Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges.....	41
Resources .....	44

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current attention being paid to rural America by many leaders in the world of philanthropy continues to swirl in the crosscurrents of interests that first emerged during the dawn of institutional philanthropy more than 100 years ago. While many would argue that there has been historic underinvestment in rural people and places, there is a significant history of philanthropically supported rural innovation that continues today with a dynamic group of new funders, leaders and advocates.

Understanding the complexity of the field starts with the most basic question “What is rural?” Definitions vary greatly, which makes even this starting point and any subsequent data analysis challenging. Nonetheless, rural philanthropy is a distinct field, with its own best practices and structures, and it is emerging to reflect the differences in scale, strategies, resources and time commitment necessary for working effectively in rural communities.

This brief serves as a first in-depth – although hardly exhaustive – guide to the people and institutions that have put their mark on rural philanthropy through the present. Importantly, the guide also provides a review of important rural issues and philanthropic responses, considers fundamental questions about rural designation and giving data, and concludes with a slate of recommendations to support the continued evolution of the field.

## **An Emerging, Distinct Field**

- Many of the most significant early philanthropists invested in solving rural problems.
- Foundations like Ford (community and housing development) and Kellogg (rural leadership) started major rural bodies of work in the 1960s and their rural interests have continued through the present.
- The National Rural Funders Collaborative was founded in 2001 to increase economic investment in rural America but quickly found that investment must first be made in dismantling power and race structures.
- The creation of healthcare conversion foundations picked up steam in the 1990s with enormous additions to rural philanthropic investment possibilities continuing through the present.
- Attention to rural people and places by funders rose dramatically after the 2016 presidential election. Funders, advocates and researchers developed new networks, conferences, reports and publications.

## **National Challenges, Rural Solutions**

- Population shifts to cities from rural areas began well over 100 years ago. Today, 19% of the United States population lives in rural areas.
- Limited financial, human and social capital in rural areas, compared to the concentration of financial and human resources in urban areas, is causing leaders to rethink what effective rural philanthropic investments and partnerships should look like.

- There is a growing recognition of the interdependence of rural and urban areas for natural resources, workforce and healthcare.
- Social justice concepts are increasingly being applied to rural concerns with the focus on communities of color in rural areas and related disproportionate impacts of the COVID pandemic on rural communities in general, which has signaled intensified attention to rural issues from equity-focused funders.
- Foundation staff not familiar with rural places merit ongoing support and skills development to accelerate learning and effective engagement opportunities.
- Rural philanthropy provides opportunities to have a greater impact by proportion in specific communities, even if with fewer in total numbers of people.

### **Growing Community of Rural Funders**

- Family foundations have always been a strong and consistent presence in rural work.
- Starting in the 1990s, health conversion foundations formed from the sale of nonprofit healthcare assets have become a major rural philanthropic force.
- Rural-based community foundations have launched throughout the country over the last 35 years — often with initial support from larger family and corporate funders.
- Philanthropy support organizations, both those formed around geography and issues, are beginning to organize and sustain rural bodies of work.
- MacKenzie Scott, one of the largest individual donors in the world, makes significant gifts to rural-serving healthcare conversion foundations in recognition of their work on rural health equity.

The challenges of rural philanthropy are, on the surface, not particularly distinct from the challenges in working in urban communities: finding effective and representative partners, and investing the right amount of resources and supporting structures to sustain effective work over time. Behind these high-level considerations, however, are a host of strategic decisions that require a funder to be committed to rural people and places for the long haul. Funders need to have flexibility and adapt their skills to work with rural leadership who have varying nonprofit structures and cultural and economic histories. There is a significantly large number of committed rural funders working today, and as the rural philanthropic field evolves, more funders will be able to access and implement the lessons learned by these leaders.

# Get to Know Rural Philanthropy

## Overview of an Emerging, Distinct Field

The issues facing rural America today are not new; neither are the challenges confronting a limited philanthropic sector as it attempts to support communities scattered across a vast U.S. terrain. But what is new and exciting for the sector is the distinct and growing cadre of funders who recognize that social justice concerns addressed effectively in rural communities could have pivotal effects on the nation's wider identity and cohesion. This State of American Philanthropy brief provides an introduction to the field of rural giving, spotlights a few dynamic funders making waves in this emerging field and dives into the challenges and opportunities funders say they are encountering.

The United States became an urban-majority population nation between the 1910s and 1920s, following the industrial revolution, bringing vast concentrations of people, wealth and highly visible poverty to urban areas. In this first quarter of the 20th century, institutional philanthropy and the formal philanthropic sector itself had its beginnings with the foundations established by business titans like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, James Buchanan Duke, Charles Stewart Mott and Russell Sage, as well as the establishment of the first community foundation, The Cleveland Foundation, in 1914. From these early days, the philanthropic sector concentrated the vast majority of its resources and attention on urban-centric charitable interests focused on places where the most Americans lived. Today, with over 80% of Americans living in urban or suburban areas, the

needs of rural communities are even less obvious to most advocates, funders, leaders and policymakers.

One frequent barrier for funders and fundraisers exploring rural giving is the confusion around the definition of "rural." Does rural America primarily consist of small pockets of population in the Midwest or the Mountain States, far from anything remotely urban? Or does it include communities that are proximate to urban areas but beginning a journey toward suburbanization? What about rapidly changing recreation and tourist communities? These and many related examples all fit at least one governmental definition of rural.

The broadest groupings of rural communities come from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget. Ironically, neither provides a definition of what constitutes a rural community per se, but rather sets "rural" as the default for all places that are not urban. OMB provides some further delineation as it identifies 1,180 counties as metropolitan and 1,963 as nonmetropolitan. Of the nonmetropolitan counties, those with a population center of at least 10,000 are classified as micropolitan. Throw in the fact that federal and state grantmaking and development programs do create their own definitions to accomplish certain goals or to respond to funding interests of elected officials and you have a general state of confusion about what is rural, which carries over as funders need to describe or target their rural work.

Adding an additional informal variable, it is often the case that there are differences between local and outsider perceptions of what is rural, exacerbating dissonance between governmental definitions and locally held cultural values and histories. The [Center on Rural Innovation](#), a funding intermediary and consultancy group founded in 2017, is placing considerable emphasis on the importance of this issue through its [Rural Aperture](#)

**Project.** Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Rural Aperture Project uses data to shift the national conversation about racial and economic equity in rural places to assist practitioners, journalists, researchers, philanthropists, and government officials with accessible data, graphics, and narratives to inform how they can better tell stories, conduct research, distribute resources, make investments, or develop policy that is backed by up-to-date data.

This ongoing dialogue about what is rural has been complicated over the past three decades by political rhetoric that sets urban and rural communities in opposition—with ongoing battles over both distribution of public resources and perceptions of cultural control—increasingly with suburban communities tethered to the interests of “urban elites.” The Republican Party’s 1994 Contract with America was a key turning point in urban/rural identity politics. It also jumpstarted an increasingly popular portrait of rural Americans as a frustrated

and angry white populace in competition and conflict with urban dwellers, and especially wary of policymakers in Washington, D.C. Vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin further ramped up this rhetoric during the 2008 presidential campaign.

This perception of rural voters reached new heights in 2016 with the election of President Donald Trump and has continued since then. White rural voters were both credited and derided for the Trump election results and many subsequent outcomes. For some national and statewide funders, this association of “rural” with a conservative political movement fuels additional hesitation to engage with these communities. The notion of an irreparable rural/urban divide — one portrayed as not just political, but as economic, demographic and cultural — is simplistic. Funders are finding significant opportunities in rural settings to stimulate and enhance rural viability across a broad and dynamic set of issues, demographics and solutions — all with the potential to inform adjacent urban people and places.

Rural communities, like their urban counterparts, are not homogenous on political, cultural or racial dimensions. In fact, specific rural communities might present high-leverage opportunities for social change. While rural voters in areas with past or present extractive economies like energy and timber are more likely to hold conservative positions, counties with higher levels of nonwhite voters, higher employment in tourism and recreation, and rural communities that are increasing in population have increasingly voted for more progressive candidates and might be welcome partners in philanthropic initiatives. And while perceptions (and some federal definitions) of rurality might include agriculture, there is no one

### Examples of Conflicting Federal Definitions of "Rural"

- “Any place with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants and not located adjacent to an urban area”
- “Any city, town or unincorporated area with 10,000 or fewer inhabitants”
- “Any city, town or unincorporated area with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants”
- “Areas with a population density between 7 and 1,000 people per square mile”
- “A populated area with boundaries at least 40 miles apart, which is not contiguous to a large urban area, and is considered, ‘rural in character’”
- “Any area that is not defined as urban”

defining industry. Extractive economies such as industrial agriculture, forestry and mining are still common in certain rural regions, but the service and governmental employment sectors are often dominant and growing and include education, health, retail and recreation. Though manufacturing has been declining, it remains the second-largest sector in rural communities, employing 14% of rural residents, representing a much larger proportion of jobs than in urban areas.

Countering the homogenous “white rural” perception, the 2020 Census shows that nonwhite people now make up 24% of the rural population, up from 20% in 2010. Nearly one-third of children living in rural areas are members of a nonwhite race or ethnicity, an increase from 28% in 2010. Hispanic children represent 14% of the population of children under the age of 18 living in rural areas in the U.S. These rural populations of color are more deeply represented in the Southeast and Southwest, but growth in nonwhite rural populations is occurring in 30 states. Without the growth of Hispanic rural populations, as an example, many states would have lost rural populations.

The importance of funder engagement and investment in an accurate representation of contemporary rural America has two significant dimensions. One is the interrelationship between urban and rural areas for workforce, natural resources, educational and health systems, economic growth and leadership. The impact of underinvestment in rural places on developing a skilled workforce, as an example, can have a profound impact for regional economic growth. Rural and urban areas are also deeply interconnected in other ways, with similar low-wage employment, substance use and affordable housing challenges.

The second common thread is rural people’s social justice and advocacy needs, and inequities experienced by rural Americans that have often been overlooked by the funder community. The recent pandemic and its disproportionate impact on rural populations, particularly rural communities of color, highlights crumbling and under-resourced infrastructure, including schools and public health systems, in much of persistently poor rural America. A recent [University of Michigan](#) and [Princeton University study](#) indicates that 80 of the 100 of the most historically deeply disadvantaged counties in the United States are rural and 22 of these 100 counties include tribal lands. In short, whether a place-based or issue-driven funder, the state of rural America and its people should be reflected in philanthropic decision-making concerning itself with racial and economic justice.

### Project Spotlight



The Rural Aperture Project “uses data to shift the national conversation about racial and economic equity in rural places.”

Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and in collaboration with MDC, the project aims to shine a positive light on rural America and disprove common misconceptions in order to advance rural prosperity.

Recognition of rural philanthropy as a distinct field is still emerging. For the philanthropic community, there is a need to continue to distill the differences and similarities between rural and urban approaches, models and outcomes.



There are, however, encouraging signs that funders are increasingly recognizing rural philanthropy as a discrete field with undeniable opportunities to make lasting change. There are many promising examples of resolutely committed rural funders, a small sampling of which are profiled in this brief. In every state, inspiring and effective rural philanthropic leaders work creatively with the assets of rural places in ways that are aligned with a partnership vision for a diverse and equity-centric rural future – and the complementary philanthropic practices necessary to make it happen. This brief introduces the history, issues, leaders, promising practices and distinct challenges funders and fundraisers in the field are facing.

## A Brief, Essential History

The “Gilded Age” of the late 1800s to early 1900s saw explosive growth in charitable giving from individual donors. Gaps in income and wealth were widening, and despite the establishment of the first ongoing national income tax in 1913, the United States was trending toward domination by urban assets and interests, as we know today. The origins of targeted rural philanthropy in the United States can be traced to this period, and to some notable individuals of great personal wealth.

In 1889, Andrew Carnegie, a steel magnate from Pennsylvania, published “The Gospel of Wealth,” one of the first statements of philanthropic mission and strategy. Carnegie argued that surplus wealth is put to best use (i.e., produces the greatest net benefit to society) when it is administered carefully by the wealthy. Carnegie also argued against wasteful use of capital in the form of extravagance, irresponsible spending or self-indulgence, instead promoting the administration of capital over the course of a philanthropist’s lifetime toward the cause of

reducing the stratification between the rich and poor. At age 66, Carnegie sold his business interests and became one of the country’s first full-time philanthropists. While his philanthropic interests were varied, the establishment of almost 1,700 Carnegie libraries in the United States affected rural communities in almost all states, with particularly deep rural presence in Alabama, Indiana, Maine, Minnesota and South Dakota.

The first specifically rural philanthropic initiative was likely funded by John D. Rockefeller, who at one time controlled 1.5% of the gross domestic product of the United States. In 1902, Rockefeller created the General Education Board, charging it with a wide-ranging mission that included improving rural education for both whites and Blacks, modernizing agricultural practices, and improving public health, primarily through efforts to eradicate hookworm, which debilitated many southerners and dragged down productivity of all sorts. The General Election Board helped establish hundreds of public high schools throughout the South, promoted institutions of higher education, supported teacher-training efforts for African Americans, and contributed resources in support of rural development.

Beginning in the same era, and continuing for decades, Julius Rosenwald, one of the founders of Sears, Roebuck and Company, teamed with Booker T. Washington to construct almost 5,000 Rosenwald schools for African-American students. These one-, two- and three-room structures were built throughout the South but extended out to Oklahoma and Texas. By 1928, Rosenwald schools represented 20% of the school sites for African Americans in the South. Only about 500 of these school buildings exist today.



Another significant early rural philanthropist was James B. Duke, whose fortune derived from tobacco and energy interests, who formed the Duke Endowment in 1924. From its establishment and continuing into the present, the endowment has held a formal financial and strategic commitment to the needs of rural Methodist churches in the Carolinas. As the years have passed, the endowment has also made significant investments in rural healthcare and rural child development. These rural investments included a \$100 million investment for the Rural Carolina Initiative, which supported 23 projects in the rural Carolinas with the goal of building leadership, wealth and economic sustainability for rural communities struggling with economic transition.

## Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

*“[Philanthropy is neglecting] Work in rural communities, work in the South, work by grassroots groups, community organizing, voter engagement in non-swing states, power building for vulnerable communities, housing, wealth disparity, voting rights, education justice, etc.”*

—Foundation professional, United States

As wealth continued to grow in rural regions of the United States, additional rural-serving family philanthropies were established, and many continue their rural community support today. Some notable examples include the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation (tobacco), with philanthropic interests throughout the southern U.S.; Blandin Foundation (paper) in Minnesota, the Ford Family Foundation (timber) in Oregon, and the Rasmuson Foundation (banking) in Alaska.

Since the 1960s, there has been episodic interest in rural America from large regional and national funders. The Ford Foundation, with early stage commitments to the establishment of community development corporations, and later, community development financial institutions, has seeded and at times sustained many of these rural anchor institutions. The Ford Foundation-supported Rural Community College Initiative, established as a national demonstration program in 1995 with nine pilot colleges, provided coaching and financial assistance for a cohort of rural-based community colleges around the country in efforts to make them more accessible and relevant to the contemporary economies within their regions. In 2021, Ford committed to a \$75 million social bond investment in the American South.

The Kellogg Foundation began supporting rural leadership training in the 1960s and 1970s. It recognized at the time that its traditional support of rural agriculture development did not speak to the growing needs of rural communities as they were transitioning from dominance by agricultural interests and engaging with the emerging field of rural community development. In the 2000s, the Kellogg “Rural People, Rural Policy” initiative supported networks across the U.S. to better align policy work and showcase the assets of rural America’s geographic regions. Kellogg continues to maintain a visible rural presence with dedicated staffing in Mississippi and New Mexico and longtime support of the National Rural Assembly and the Daily Yonder, a rural journalism site.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, established by UPS founder Jim Casey in 1949, has maintained rural interests throughout its history. In 2006, Casey developed a rural model for family economic success and implemented it in association with the

rural-serving West Central Initiative. In 2019, along with national nonprofit partners, Casey launched one of the nation’s first rural collective impact models in three pilot communities—Perry County, Kentucky; Whitley County, Kentucky; and Cocke County, Tennessee. The model was designed to improve children’s lives from cradle to career and provided \$1.2 million in grants to align action to improve outcomes for children and families.

The first large-scale rural pooled fund was established in 2001 as the National Rural Funder Collaborative (NRFC), with seven regional and national funders: Kellogg Foundation, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, F.B. Heron Foundation, Fannie Mae Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, and joined in 2006 by the Ford Foundation, The California Endowment, Lumina Foundation for Education, Northwest Areas Foundation and Otto Bremer Foundation. The NRFC committed to a 10-year time horizon in which they planned to learn from and invest in some of the most disadvantaged rural communities across the country to address persistent poverty.

Through its early work, the NRFC came to an understanding that persistent poverty in rural areas was the result of historic and current disinvestment and disenfranchisement of rural communities, a structural issue that required addressing race, class and power. As a result, the NRFC shifted to a focus on alternative rural economies that opened up opportunities for marginalized communities to lead, benefit and participate. A Kellogg Foundation-funded retrospective evaluation of the work pointed out the difficulties of supporting long-term rural community change with such a disparate group of philanthropic voices supporting single

projects in isolated rural communities, among other findings.

The late 1980s saw the rapid growth of healthcare conversion foundations, many of which serve rural populations, and are described in additional detail later in this brief. These foundations were often the first significant philanthropic resources available to hundreds of rural counties. Healthcare conversions continue to be formed and are significant place-based rural funders, whether representing one county, multiple counties, or statewide geographies. Integration of these resources with existing philanthropic and nonprofit structures has not always been easy, and the transparency of the governance and practices of these funders has not always been exemplary. Notwithstanding those community concerns, many rural-serving health conversions are philanthropic leaders within their communities and on a national scale.



**Blandin Foundation™**  
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

*“I spend a lot of time thinking about how we talk about rural inequity that is not othering urban. We are interdependent and interconnected...So thinking hard about how we show up as rural practitioners, with solutions that help all of us actualize the future together, and by providing concrete data in terms of how philanthropy can not only fund but use its unique status to effect transformative changes in rural America, which simply doesn’t have the same dynamics as our urban friends.”*

— Tuleah Palmer, president and CEO, Blandin Foundation

Recently, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has become a significant presence in the rural grantmaking space with support of national learning, policy and research efforts including the Life in Rural America survey series, and creating rural advocacy opportunities consistent with their ongoing broader work on health equity considerations and health outcome differences. The RWJF-supported [County Health Rankings and Roadmaps](#) and the Culture of Health Prize have also highlighted rural issues and communities, as has the recent support of the [Thrive Rural Body of Work](#), a portfolio of investments that aims to advance rural opportunity, health and equity by developing a more connected, cohesive and influential rural ecosystem. Its grant and impact investments in the [Partners for Rural Transformation](#) are a good example of RWJF's efforts to support structurally excluded communities within the community development finance system, which includes geographically excluded communities such as tribal and rural.

While those listed above are only a sampling of RWJF's rural-specific investments, importantly, in addition to its explicitly rural-focused investments, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has intentionally developed work across many of its portfolios that improve policies, systems and outcomes impacting rural people and places. As such, RWJF's rural impact is much broader and deeper than just their programming easily tagged as "rural."

The interest in rural America across sectors of the philanthropic landscape comes and goes, often rising during periods of social and political upheaval and natural disaster. There remains, however, a consistent segment of place-based or legacy funders interested in rural places, bringing a

wide variety of structures and asset pools. The recent gifts from MacKenzie Scott to 23 rural-serving health conversion foundations totaling upward of \$150 million is a promising recognition from a philanthropic trendsetter that rural communities may best be served by those with an ongoing philanthropic presence. The Scott gifts may signal to other newly public donors of extraordinary wealth that rural America presents opportunities for broad social impact with attention and investment.

## Inherent Challenges

The rationale for greater philanthropic investments in rural communities has been the subject of debate over many years and varies with the interests of specific rural stakeholders – whether advocate, community, funder or policymaker. Thematically consistent across all these groups, however, is a belief that rural communities have been both under-resourced and ineffectively engaged in philanthropic investments made by the funder community – both public and private. This section presents some of the reasons that advocates say increased philanthropic investment in rural areas merits greater consideration.

There are several structural factors across philanthropic organizations that compel investment in rural communities. For health conversion foundations created from the sale of nonprofit healthcare assets, there may be rural geographic requirements tied to the creation of the foundation and the historic relationship with the residents of a community. Some families of wealth have been involved in rural giving for generations, even prior to early discussions of a recognized field of rural philanthropy as (1) civic contributors in the places where their wealth was amassed, (2) in recognition of a multigenerational

legacy of family commitments to these rural places, and/or (3) from charitable impulses focused on some of the least-resourced people and places in the country. And for rural community foundations, the donor base is mostly rural, and the work will take place in these same rural places.

These are some of the most prevalent systemic issues embedded in rural life that present obstacles to communities and the many funders working to address their needs:

**Impacts of the pandemic.** By summer of 2020, the proportional incidence and mortality associated with COVID-19 in rural areas had [surpassed metropolitan areas](#). By the end of 2021, COVID-19-related mortality in rural places was over twice that of metropolitan areas. In the early days of COVID-19, the incidence of rural morbidity and mortality was significantly propelled by outbreaks in government-deemed essential industries such as meatpacking, agriculture and prisons. Such industries are often disproportionately located in rural areas and populated by low-wage workers. Later crests of outbreaks have been driven by rural vaccine hesitancy and the disproportionate numbers of older adults in rural areas in some states. In response to the dynamics of rural COVID-19 spread, rural-interested funders can readily identify roles in shoring up underfunded rural health, elder care, broadband, housing, child care,

and education systems, in keeping with finder system change strategies and goals. Importantly, helping rural communities have meaningful dialogue and partnership toward strengthening these anchor systems impacted by COVID-19 will prevent or mediate the next episodic or generational crisis.

**Rural costs and infrastructure challenges.**

Because of the inherent diffusion of populations across geographies, rural communities face additional costs and physical and systemic infrastructure deficits. A rural challenge impacting private and public investment is the higher cost of providing basic services in comparison to more population-dense places. Certain geographies and terrain, for example, make it challenging to lay fiber for broadband or to allow the delivery of goods and services during winter months. Similarly, working at a smaller scale due to lower population density inhibits costly investment in healthcare, general infrastructure, higher education and housing. Finally, an underdeveloped nonprofit infrastructure diminishes opportunities for effective delivery of health and human services. While the immediate impact of these structural issues might appear to be solely a burden on rural communities, underinvestment in rural places on developing a skilled workforce can profoundly impact regional economic growth. Using healthcare as another example of these rural/urban

### Grantee Spotlight



In 2022, Mackenzie Scott made a \$6 million donation to the Texoma Foundation in support of its work promoting health equity across 4 counties between Oklahoma and Texas. The foundation provides community grants to local nonprofits with mental health as a major focus of its giving. Other supporters include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Argyros Family Foundation.

connections, with 40% of rural hospitals having closed in recent years, demands are being made on already overburdened urban and suburban hospitals by rural residents.

**Healthcare access.** The rural healthcare environment has changed dramatically over the past 40 years. Changes in federal reimbursement methods, costs of technology, transfers of ownership from public to private and consolidation of healthcare systems across regions represent some of the major shifts that have left many rural communities with fewer healthcare options. At least 136 rural hospitals closed between 2010 and 2021, with 19 closing in 2020 alone. Federal counts from March 2023 indicate that over 60% of nationally designated healthcare shortage areas in primary care, dental care and mental healthcare reflect rural places or institutions.

Partnership Spotlight



**PARTNERS FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION**

Partners for Rural Transformation is a collaborative effort comprised of 15 organizations committed to helping residents of high and persistent poverty communities. In the last 10 years, it has disbursed over \$2 billion, bringing much-needed capital to rural communities historically suffering from disinvestment. The Robert Wood Johnson and F.B. Heron foundations, the USDA and NeighborWorks America, among others provide funding support.

Given the enormity and complexity of the healthcare access challenges in rural America, funders are ill-suited to provide financial bailouts to sustain existing care. Instead, funders can be key to (1) helping communities plan for sustainable systems of care; (2) helping pilot delivery systems led by less costly health professions like dental therapists and peer counselors; (3) supporting recruitment, residency and training programs with a rural focus; and (4) supporting telehealth and other technology-driven healthcare systems.

**Long-term underinvestment.** Although far from monolithic, many rural communities do have shared characteristics, one being a history of chronic underinvestment from both public and philanthropic dollars. One of the few estimates we have of rural philanthropic giving indicates that somewhere between 6% and 7% of private philanthropic investments are distributed in rural communities. Limited data indicates that philanthropic investment in rural, African-American-led communities and organizations is far below that threshold. Even more of an afterthought are Native-American-led organizations, which, per a Candid and Native Americans in Philanthropy study, may receive as little as .4% of grant dollars.

The decades-long trend of public underinvestment in rural communities has only recently shown small signs of reversing with promising renewed federal investment via the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 and in anticipation of the 2023 Farm Bill. Federal agricultural investment is, however, frequently going to urban and international landowners. It is estimated that less than 20% of congressional representatives and U.S. senators are from rural communities, a significant factor in the difficulty of garnering support for public investment in rural places.

The barriers that prevent rural communities from accessing competitive public dollars presents just one more opportunity for philanthropy to leverage influence and support rural growth. It is difficult for communities to know what types of governmental resources are available and to get the kind of support necessary to access these resources. Even grantmaking programs specifically designed for rural development require a level of human and financial resources available only to a limited number of rural communities.

**Natural resources.** Every basic underpinning of urban and suburban life is dependent upon resources extracted, harnessed or cultivated in a rural place—energy, food and water, are a few examples. Funders who understand these connections, and the people and communities tasked with the production, distribution and maintenance of these resources, are actualizing the concept of philanthropy working “upstream” to the root causes of these regional issues. These connections are deeply entrenched in related regional policy and advocacy work on state and federal levels. While the urban-rural divide might be a newly revived headline, the interrelationship of rural and urban places based upon natural resources is longstanding.

The lingering effects of extractive systems can be seen everywhere in rural America from the desecration of land by mining to agricultural runoff and the environmental hazards of corporate meat production. Funders can be powerful advocates on behalf of rural communities in preventing continued damage and leading efforts for remediation.

**Scale, piloting and innovation opportunities.** The smaller scale of rural communities can actually

be an advantageous landscape for funders interested in learning and adaptation. While it may sound impressive for an urban philanthropic initiative working with tens of thousands of people (or 5% of a city’s residents), it is as transformative for a funder to be engaged with multiple small school districts, where the impacts can be on 100% of student populations and their communities.

Similarly, the ability to test and adapt work in real time is an opportunity that most urban funders don’t have, given the enormity of the infrastructure that is often created for funder initiatives coupled with the methods of traditional funder-supported evaluation – sometimes taking years to render results. If innovation is part of a funder ethos, then creative problem-solving is less apt to come from large institutional partnerships and more likely from smaller, nimbler partners.

**Social justice.** Given the longstanding economic, education, health and racial disparities in many rural communities, funders working with an explicit equity lens would be well served to focus efforts on rural people and places. Groups like the Center for Coalfield Justice, the Rural Coalition, funded by RWJF, and the Rural Democracy Initiative are working with funders on effective rural social justice change strategies – just as funders use similar groups as entry points and actors in urban social justice work. As funder investment in rural places for civic engagement and social justice work is only recently receiving renewed attention, many funders have not had a counterbalance to the narrative of rural isolation and anti-democratic trends.

# The Nation's Social Justice Challenges, with Rural Solutions

## Coalescing Around Key Rural Issues

For the donor or fundraiser interested in rural philanthropy, it is vitally important to develop a working knowledge of social sector issues as they present themselves in the rural context. These issues don't present themselves in the same manner or with the same intensity across rural communities. There are, for example, rural communities that have excellent broadband access, counter to the situation faced by many of their rural brethren. What these rural communities do generally share is a heritage of ongoing challenge across issues informed by limited political and social capital, underinvestment in physical infrastructure and racism past and present.

The most effective rural philanthropy recognizes that the interplay between these rural social sector issues is always impacting rural people and places concurrently. Effective rural philanthropy embraces expertise but understands that the social and political systems in rural places have only so many resources to address these issues discreetly. In practice, this means understanding the day-to-day overlap of issues of health, education and transportation as just one example. With fewer nonprofits dedicated to single issues, limited government staffing and the multiple roles played by rural leaders across institutions, a single-issue orientation by rural funders is not only likely to be ineffective but will be treated with skepticism or indifference by local rural communities.

**Mental health.** The mental health status and related systems of care for rural community residents has not been a major focus of

philanthropy. The rural dimensions are fourfold: access to care, stigma, isolation and economic insecurity.

Access to mental healthcare is a huge challenge. Most rural counties do not have psychiatrists or psychologists available locally. Decades-old federal programs to attract and retain mental health professionals through loan repayment have not made a dent in the ongoing struggles to support a rural continuum of behavioral healthcare. Similarly, decades-old attempts to move behavioral healthcare from government-sponsored systems to community-based supports have been under-resourced. Coupled with fewer insured with behavioral health benefits and technology challenges that may limit virtual behavioral health treatment, funders can have a leadership role in shoring up behavioral health support systems via anchor institutions like religious organizations, libraries and schools.

A recent study by the Rural Health Equity Research Center at East Tennessee State University found that public stigma associated with mental illness was comparable among urban and rural residents. Among rural residents, negative perceptions of those with a mental illness were highest among males, older adults and Black residents. These perceptions exacerbate already existing barriers to mental healthcare access in rural populations.

While social isolation impacts health for rural and urban populations with relatively similar frequency, factors like driving distance, weather, rapidly aging populations and distance from family

elevate social isolation to a mental health challenge increasingly being recognized by funders that are investing in intergenerational and community connections programs.

As many rural communities continue to grapple with the economic realities of long-term, living-wage job loss, the relationship with mental health crises and multigenerational poverty continues. Suicide rates are driven in part by rates of gun ownership that are significantly higher than in urban communities, as is abuse of alcohol, opioids and methamphetamines, and these gaps have been increasing in recent years.

## Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

*“Mental health and addiction are rising concerns but the funding commitment levels have not risen correspondingly. There is increased awareness and there have been changes in insurance to allow coverage but resources and access remain limited.”*

—Nonprofit board member, Chicago, Illinois

**Broadband access.** While exact numbers are hard to pin down, it is estimated that rural Americans are approximately 10 times less likely to have access to high-speed internet than their peers living in urban and suburban communities. The COVID-19 pandemic brought increased attention to these inequities, but lack of broadband access in rural communities doesn't just reduce access to reliable news and information; it prevents people in rural places from tapping into important opportunities and resources in education, healthcare and workforce development. The recently passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act paved the

way for a historic federal investment in high-speed internet, \$65 billion, to ensure that all Americans have access to reliable broadband, including \$2 billion for tribal communities. However, it has yet to be determined how investments will be allocated, and how quickly access will increase. Undoubtedly, many rural communities will be left on the sidelines for lack of access to these dollars without a support system to help them navigate, apply for and receive federal funds.

Fiber optic cable networks, among the most reliable ways to provide internet, are difficult to install in many rural places, where there may be difficult landscapes. In addition to these challenges, many states have legal roadblocks that make it difficult to ensure the long-term provision of internet access. Seventeen states have legal restrictions against municipal broadband and four states have other barriers in place that make it difficult to operate municipal networks. To overcome these funding challenges, some community foundations have developed creative workarounds.

The Hutchinson Community Foundation (Kansas) provides one example of a local rural funder that has seized the opportunity for rural broadband leadership for a region where, until recently, 20% to 30% of students lacked broadband access at home. The foundation recognized an urgent need to provide rural families with better internet access when schools shut in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. HCF partnered with United Way, Network Kansas, Kansas Health Foundation and other local stakeholders to raise funds for an impact investment fund designed to expand broadband service in their community and add new, full-time jobs for displaced workers. HCF was also able to leverage local matching funds to secure a \$2 million federal CARES Act grant, and in addition to



other funds leveraged, ultimately received \$13.7 million in grants to expand broadband to more than 8,000 homes in early 2021.

**Early childhood.** Almost 20% of low-income children under six years old with two working parents live in rural communities. Finding and affording child care in rural communities can be exceptionally difficult. Families in rural places spend a significantly larger percentage of their income on child care than those in urban communities. Of all rural census tracts, 58% are considered child care deserts, defined as a census tract with more than 50 children under the age of five that has few or no options for licensed child care. A recent poll by the Save the Children Action Network found that rural residents perceived that access to quality and affordable child care had decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Differential access to child care exists across race and ethnicity. Rural Hispanic, American Indian, and Alaskan Native populations, for example, are more likely to live in childcare deserts. Lack of access to quality and affordable child care has long-term consequences on the trajectory of child development. Research finds that continuous and consistent exposure to quality early childhood education provides opportunities for healthy relationships and promotes early literacy and vocabulary skills.

Progress is happening with statewide rural child care efforts gaining traction in Vermont (Let's Grow Kids) and Minnesota/Michigan (First Children's Finance Rural Child Care Innovation Program) — both with solid foundation backing. Regional efforts led by Minnesota's Southwest Initiative Foundation and the Oregon Community Foundation are helping local entrepreneurs to establish and expand rural child care access.

**Climate change.** Rural communities are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Many rural economies are reliant on natural resources, with economies based on agriculture, recreation, or tourism dependent on the natural environment. Drought, wildfire, flooding, hurricanes and tornadoes are all occurring with increasing frequency in rural America, and these natural disasters not only impact the environmental health of a community but contribute to a variety of negative social and economic outcomes for rural residents.

### Grantee Spotlight

#### First Children's Finance

First Children's Finance is the only national organization focusing its work on sustainable childcare for low- and moderate-income families. By providing financial and business development aid to childcare businesses First Children's helps ensure that rural families have access to affordable, high-quality childcare. Along with federal funding, it has received support from funders including the Hewlett and W.K. Kellogg foundations.

The Heartland Fund's Rural Climate Partnership focuses on creating sustainable jobs by leveraging climate investments in rural communities and small towns. Since 2019, The Heartland Fund has made more than \$18 million in grants to organizations in 20 states, including Georgia and Wisconsin, where investments of more than \$1 million have been made toward rural civic engagement. With support from funders such as the Ceres Trust, Stolte Family Foundation and the Wallace Global Fund, the Heartland Fund is

building on a civic engagement strategy to improve organizational strength and develop rural leaders who can influence community change to address climate-related efforts.

**Educational disparities.** While rates of college enrollment have increased among rural residents over time, overall educational attainment continues to lag behind urban areas. In 2019, 21.0% of rural residents had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34.7% of urban residents. An important predictor of where a student will attend college is college proximity, a barrier faced by rural communities, as 82% of people living in education deserts are living in rural areas. This means that they live more than 25 miles away from an open access or broad public access postsecondary institution, and do not have sufficient internet service to access postsecondary education online.


The Center for Education Equity has found that while 28.5% of schools are in rural regions, they receive only 16.9% of state educational funding. This is often exacerbated by costs associated with

student transportation, where geography demands, and the lack of public transportation may require a rural district to transport their students over a half-million miles a year. Rural communities face other challenges disproportionate to their urban and suburban counterparts. Older populations may not be supportive of bonds or tax increases for schools; second home “weekenders” are not likely to be active participants in the educational culture of the place and a general anti-tax/anti-government mindset may limit schools’ ability to rally support for improved facilities or teacher pay increases.

There are cultural barriers at play, also. For decades, residents may have been able to pursue economic sustainability and raise a family without a college education. The fear that postsecondary education is associated with leaving the community can support a diminished college-going culture, as can a lack of college counseling services and mentors for first-generation students. Funders are supporting programs like College Possible and College Advising Corps to provide extra support to address some of these embedded family and community barriers and to expand the universe of higher education opportunities available to rural students.

One creative structural response to rural education challenges is supported by the Greater Texas Foundation. The Roscoe Collegiate Independent School District in west Texas operates a unique pre-K-to-college school system with an early childhood center, elementary school and high school, and in the 2021-2022 school year, had an enrollment of approximately 637 students. RCISD focuses on supporting a strong foundation for successful postsecondary education and supports students in obtaining an associate degree while enrolled in high school. In 2017, 96% of Roscoe’s 2017 high school class earned an associate degree through this

**Grantee Spotlight**

  
**COLLEGE POSSIBLE™**

College Possible is among the largest nonprofits in the country helping students from underrepresented communities get into college and complete their degrees. The organization has served nearly 86,000 students since 2000. College Possible supporters include the Ballmer Group, which committed \$20 million over 10 years and Blue Meridian Partners, which committed \$7 million over three years.

mechanism. Funds from the Greater Texas Foundation allowed RCISD to continue expanding its model and to establish a demonstration site so that others across the country can learn from and adapt similar models in other communities.

**Environment.** There are three distinct areas for philanthropic investment on rural environmental issues. One area is the environmental impact associated with big agriculture, coal/mineral extraction, timber and wood processing, and other extraction industries. Like broadband, opportunities present themselves to funders on behalf of rural communities to ensure that rural voices are heard and able to access all the available corporate, federal and state resources that may be available – but only successfully navigated by communities with a unified voice and advocates to help them negotiate these complex systems of garnering financial support.

The impact of climate change on rural communities is another area of distinct interest to rural funders. The diminishing Louisiana coastline and the recent spate of West Coast rural wildfires are only the beginning of these environmental impacts. Funders can serve and support important advocacy efforts to prevent further damage.

Environmental racism is a third growing concern of rural funders. While we may think of environmental racism in the form of the Flint water crisis, much of the environmental racism in the United States impacting poor rural communities of color are, for example, in areas surrounding corporate hog production in North Carolina and unregulated landfill operations in the deep South. Similarly, tribal nations are impacted by centuries of mining and energy operations, as well as the degradation of land necessary to ensure

life-sustaining biodiversity. Like much rural philanthropic work, the connections between health, human services, economic status and social justice with environmental impacts is threaded through the history of many rural places.

**Housing.** Lack of inventory, high construction costs and a rural median income that is on average 25% lower than urban median incomes results in housing insecurity for many residents of rural counties. Housing insecurity and homelessness have historically been treated as urban issues, resulting in a shortage of good local data on rural housing insecurity. Affordable housing options are limited in rural areas, and many residents are cost burdened, meaning that they spend more than 30% of their monthly income on housing. In 2016, 25% of rural renters spent more than 50% of their income on housing costs. Additionally, racial disparities in homeownership are significant in rural communities. Only 55% of nonwhite residents own their own home, compared to 77% of white non-Hispanics.

Since 1963, the United States Department of Agriculture, through its Section 515 Rural Rental Housing Loans Program, has provided mortgages for affordable rental housing for very low-, low- and moderate-income families, the elderly and people with disabilities. Since its inception, the program has provided financing for 533,000 affordable apartment units in rural communities. Many of these loans are coming to maturity over the next decade and will relieve property owners from any affordability requirements—diminishing the already limited rural rental housing stock.

Rural LIHC, the National Rural Housing Coalition and the Housing Assistance Council (all national, rural-serving nonprofits) have long served as

national funding intermediaries on rural housing, but more effort is required to provide a base for local and regional funder learning and action. Direct foundation engagement in rural housing is still in its early stages, with participation in discussions around manufactured home communities, trailer park cooperatives and healthcare worker housing as some of these new areas of interest.

**Local journalism.** From 2004 to 2018, over 500 rural news broadcast outlets merged or closed and 1 in 5 newspapers went out of business, many in rural areas. Declines in rural journalism mean that much of the news and information available to rural communities, but not about rural communities, come from national outlets and social media. National portrayals of rural communities have been frequent in recent years, but media echo (the frequency with which an article is shared on social media) is still highest for news and stories with the least representative rural portrayals.

Funder responses to these local rural news deserts are occurring in the development of new national and locally based organizations. The Missouri Foundation for Health and the Helmsley Trust support the regionalization and rural focus of Kaiser Health News. North Carolina funders have given significant support for the sustaining operations of North Carolina Health News and EducationNC. Lion Publishers (Local Independent Online News) is a membership organization for 450 online news sites—many rural. Report for America, founded in 2017, has over 300 journalists placed in underserved communities and covering underreported topics. In 2022, it started a focus on placing journalists in rural news deserts. The Walton Family Foundation has provided grant support for coverage of rural issues, including a

grant to the University of Missouri School of Journalism to support environmental journalism in the Mississippi River Basin.

**Oral health.** Compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural residents are less likely to have visited a dentist in the past year, less likely to report having excellent or good teeth, and are more likely to have some or all their teeth removed due to gum disease or decay. Rural counties account for 60% of the nation's dental health professional shortage areas. Rural residents are less likely to have dental coverage, often tied to higher wage or governmental employment, and Medicare doesn't offer dental benefits. Many rural water supplies aren't fluoridated, and rural residents are more likely to be tobacco users.



*“Nearly two decades ago, what started out as a tribal-led effort to expand dental care to Alaska Native people has grown into a community- and tribal-led movement to ensure people can get dental care when and where they need it in their home communities.”*

—La June Montgomery Tabron, president and CEO, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

One response to the rural dentist shortage is increasing the number of **dental therapists**, mid-level providers similar to physician's assistants in primary care. First implemented in Alaska with state and national foundation funding to serve native Alaskan communities by the Kellogg,

Rasmuson and Robert Wood Johnson, and Paul G. Allen foundations, dental therapists are licensed to do certain types of extractions, fill cavities, and provide a variety of basic preventative care services. By 2021, licensed dental therapists were working in 12 states and with several tribes, and more than 20 states are moving towards licensure. Other areas of emerging rural oral health support include medical and dental integration; behavioral health and dental integration; and virtual or teledentistry.

**Economic development.** The demise of local agriculture, basic manufacturing and extraction industries in rural America has been well chronicled for decades. For every success story of a rural community renaissance built on recreation, tourism and telecommuting, there are many stories of rural communities struggling to survive not just the loss of business activity, but the resultant loss of civic and social capital as residents move to other communities or are forced to commute long distances. Further, for some rural communities, there has never been a stable bank of economic

resources that allow residents to pursue opportunities for themselves and their families.

Capital to start or expand rural businesses and to develop the technology and infrastructure necessary to attract business has always been a challenge. Due to the limitations of federal rural policy structures, corporate agriculture has outsized access when only 1 in 5 rural counties depends on agriculture. A dizzying array of 88 federal rural development programs reside in 16 federal agencies. Coupled with the disappearance of locally owned banking institutions in rural places and the uncertainty of the future of many rural economies, rural businesses are challenged to find capital access points that are accessible and scalable for rural investment, especially when their efforts don't promise to yield thousands of new jobs.

The Regional Economist found that from 2012 to 2015, urban areas experienced an average GDP growth rate of 1.97% compared to 1.68% growth in rural regions, with the study noting a broader range of GDP growth within rural regions than in urban ones – further supporting data showing vast differences in the quality of life experienced by rural people from community to community.

In 2021, the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis issued a major compilation of new work on rural economic development titled “Investing in Rural Prosperity.” Its 79 chapters touch on a wide range of topics, including entrepreneurship support, workforce development, energy-efficient manufactured housing and digital inclusion. The guide provides case examples as well as recommendations supporting the benefits of investing in rural communities from business, governmental and philanthropic perspectives.

### Grantee Spotlight



The High Desert Food and Farm Alliance (HDFFA) addresses the challenges of food access and production in the high desert region of Central Oregon. The majority of its funds support programs improving food security for low- and limited-income families. HDFFA is supported by a number of foundations and corporate sponsors including the Roadhouse Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust and the Central Oregon Association of Realtors.

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation is one of the few consistent funders supporting rural economic infrastructure. Its most recent program, Emerging Collaborations, provides matching funds to encourage and accelerate collaborations between two or more entrepreneurship support organizations working together with Heartland entrepreneurs in Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas.

In January 2023, Invest Appalachia announced it had secured \$19 million of its \$40 million goal for a regional blended capital vehicle with interests in energy, healthcare, food/agriculture and creative placemaking. Most of these funds came from outside of the region and included support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Laughing Gull Foundation and United Health Group, among others. Invest Appalachia may serve as a model for rural, regionally based, flexible funding with a patient capital mindset.

The Vermont Community Foundation (VCF) is a leader in supporting rural community development as a partner with state government and business-led organizations. VCF believes that rural small businesses and entrepreneurship play key roles in local wealth-building, leadership development and economic resilience. Grantmaking in these areas supports employee ownership, businesses owned by women and other historically marginalized groups, and growing the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Vermont. VCF also works with natural resource and outdoor recreation leaders to stimulate investment in economic development based on the natural assets of Vermont regions.

In east Texas, The TLL Temple Foundation recently created the ROC-ET Initiative to address the

complete absence of community development finance institutions (CDFIs) in the area and the need of rural communities to have direct access to affordable and accessible financial services.

## Rural Perspectives on Equity

Across the philanthropic sector, formal commitments to integrate equity into giving practices, strategy and mission/values have increased dramatically over the past decade, including among rural funders. What was once the sole province of funders working from a publicly progressive stance, support for equity work has reached even some of the most established and historically conservative foundations. Shifts toward philanthropy with an intentional racial equity lens had begun well before the murder of George Floyd in 2020, but Floyd's murder and the racial justice movement activities that followed accelerated many urban funders' commitment to a racial equity basis for their work—with a significant number of rural-serving funders following suit.

**Inclusion of rural BIPOC communities.** It cannot be stated often enough that the makeup of rural America has never been representative of a monolithic white racial demographic, given the country's tragic history of slavery as well as the taking of land from American Indian/Alaskan Natives and Latinos. The 2020 U.S. Census found that from 2010 to 2020, the percentage of rural people of color increased from 20.2% to 24% and a 2022 study by the University of New Hampshire indicates that this demographic trend is likely to persist and even increase. In 2020, almost two-thirds of rural counties consisted of at least 10% people of color, one-third were over 25% people of color, and nearly 10% of rural counties are majority people of color. COVID-19 outbreaks among rural people of color provided further proof of "Who

really lives in rural America,” notwithstanding that fully 90% of America's entire rural Black population is concentrated in the South. This Black rural majority lives in the Black Belt, which stretches across Alabama and Mississippi into the Southeastern coastal plain and encompasses some of the poorest rural counties in the nation.

Examples of rural equity work squarely targeting longstanding and emerging structural racism abound. In 2015, the Community Foundation of Dubuque established an equity index developed to provide data on how systems in their urban and rural service areas impact people from different backgrounds in ways that can differ dramatically. Concurrently, the foundation established a Rural Equity Network intended to bring diversity, equity and inclusion to the forefront of discussion amongst their rural affiliates and the small city hub of Dubuque. Community Foundation of Dubuque was also one of the first rural-serving community foundations to bring on a staffer with specific equity-strengthening responsibilities.

Healthcare Foundation of Georgia supports the Two Georgias Initiative. In 2017, HFG selected 11 rural health coalitions for a five-year commitment focused on supporting dialogue and problem-solving on many seemingly intractable issues related to social determinants of health, such as housing, food access, transportation, physical activity and parks. Many of these coalitions represented rural communities with historically disadvantaged populations of color. The final results, to be presented with an extensive research report later in 2023, show significant increases in community engagement, action and optimism about local ability to change circumstances that drive improved health.

“Equity was the North Star throughout the Initiative,” said Lisa Medellin, Healthcare Georgia Foundation’s director of programs. “Often, programming similar to this can have equity as a side issue or as an extension. We put equity at the center and really leaned in on that – and I think that was hugely beneficial to the communities for their growth on their equity journey.”

## Program Spotlight



Borealis Philanthropy's Disability Inclusion Fund (DIF) supports groups and organizations run by, and for the benefit of, people with disabilities. Launched in 2020, the fund recently granted \$3.5 million to 49 disabled-led organizations. The DIF gives funding priority to those most impacted by injustice and exclusion including BIPOC, queer and gender non-conforming, and women disability-led organizations.

In January 2023, the Neighborhood Funders Group’s Integrated Rural Strategies held its third annual multiracial Rural Equity Summit, designed by a large group of partners and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. They came together to increase collaboration and deepen the accountability of their network, bolster funders in their network to move boldly together and inspire and motivate funders to deepen their commitment to advance and resource justice and equity for rural communities. Examples of lead advisors to the summit with a direct equity focus included Black Joy Oregon, Food Chain Workers Alliance and the Hmong American Farmers Association.

In 2022, 11 North and South Carolina funders established the Investing in Leaders of Color Initiative, which is intended to support this initial cohort of leaders of color while also providing a conduit to help funders learn to better support organizations led by people of color. Eight of the 12 initial class of fellows live and work in rural areas.

“We began talking with other funders throughout the Carolinas about pooling resources and developing an approach to build a broader, stronger ecosystem of support for nonprofit leaders of color, many of whom wield enormous influence within their communities yet haven’t been given access within the larger world of philanthropy. How could we be more proximal to communities that have been marginalized?” wrote Rhett Mabry and Tamika Williams of The Duke Endowment.

In 2022, Ascendium and the Mariam Assefa Fund announced the establishment of the Rural Immigrant Success Exchange, a grantmaking program to support a 10-organization learning

cohort with financial support and technical assistance on how best to support immigrants, refugees and migrant workers in rural areas to break down barriers for education, employment and job training for workers. This meets a need for both current and prospective employees, rural employers and economic developers who struggle with the recruitment and retention of workers.

“Immigrants and refugees comprise a significant and growing proportion of rural populations and are well positioned to fill key talent gaps and contribute to their local communities,” said Lauren Crain, associate director of U.S. programs and strategy at the WES Mariam Assefa Fund.

#### **Inclusion of Rural LGBTQ+ Communities.**

There are an estimated 3 million LGBTQ+ people living in rural America. In 2019, the Movement Advancement Project released *Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America*, the most comprehensive look at the social and political context within systems like education and health, and provided a comprehensive list of recommendations for how these and other structural systems can better serve and support. Also of particular interest to funders are how nonprofits and advocacy groups can better support LGBTQ+ communities by explicitly incorporating rural challenges and opportunities. The Pride Foundation, supporting rural advocates in the Northwest, is a standard bearer for rural LGBTQ funding.

#### **Inclusion of Rural Disability Communities.**

A 2019 report in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* indicated that rural residents are 9% more likely to report having any disability; 24% more likely to report having three or more disabilities; and more likely to report specific

**Grantee Spotlight**



**GLACIER QUEER ALLIANCE**

Established in 2019, the Glacier Queer Alliance is new to the LGBTQ+ funding space. According to its website, the queer community in the Flathead Valley is “not very visible to allies in the community who wish to support them.” GQA is providing safe and positive community resources to people of all gender identities and sexual orientations. Supporters include the Pride and Whitefish Community foundations.



disability types (ranging from 7% more likely to report a cognitive disability to 35% more likely to report a hearing disability).

Philanthropic attention to disability is still dominated by major foundations like RWJF and the Heinz Endowments – often lacking rural considerations. Grantmakers in Aging, through its emphasis on the intersection of rural older adults and philanthropy, has highlighted rural transportation innovation focused on those with disabilities. The Borealis Disability Inclusion Fund has included some rural-serving disability groups as part of its grantee portfolio. Currently, however, disability inclusion does not have the necessary momentum in the rural philanthropic space.

**A New Framework for Rural Equity.** The Aspen Institute’s Community Services Group (CSG), with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and in consultation with rural practitioners and researchers, recently developed the Thrive Rural Framework in an effort to unite around a shared vision for “a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.” The framework is grounded by a focus on race equity, class equity and place equity, recognizing the importance of understanding and dismantling the historical and ongoing structural discrimination across these areas. Discrimination based on place, race and class vary from place to place, but they affect every aspect of life – from who is included in decision-making groups to the design of policies and regulations.

Critically, this new framework lifts up the intersectional and compounding effect of racial, class and geographic inequities. Recent book, “[The](#)

[Injustice of Place](#),” based on research funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, makes these intersections and their impacts palpable.

## Funder Strategies and Trends

Rural-interested funders, like all funders, have choices to make, beyond the recipients of grantmaking itself, regarding how to achieve the best results for their organizations and their rural communities. There is no consensus on a single model of rural philanthropic strategy. In fact, the hallmarks of effective rural philanthropy, interview subjects told us, are not bound in prescriptive models. Below are strategies that leading local, regional and national rural funders employ, and are gaining traction in the field.

**Brokering relationships.** One of the recurring issues for rural communities is the lack of access to people and institutions of power. Funders, no matter their size, often have access to influencers in ways that provide real value to grantees and rural communities. This brokering function is an underused strategy for funders working in rural places and of particular value when funders are working on behalf of traditionally underrepresented rural populations.

**Cultivation philanthropy.** A small but influential group of funders like the LOR Foundation and the Missouri Foundation for Health are testing out models of staff/community engagement that places staff much closer to the work of the communities themselves. Often, the object is to assist communities in identifying and implementing community-led actions and solutions to social sector issues. The role of funders as active listeners in elevating issues and strategies is sometimes referred to as “cultivation philanthropy.”

**Collaborative funding.** Similar to public/private partnerships, collaborations with other private funders where funds are pooled toward a single rural strategy or rural place can help spread the risk, accelerate the learning, and create a broader group of stakeholders.

## Framework Spotlight New Thinking on Rural Equity

*“To achieve equitable rural prosperity, we need to shift the underlying structures and conditions that disadvantage rural people and places. The Thrive Rural Framework focuses on shifting conditions that disadvantage rural people and communities based on place (size or location of the community), race (racial, immigrant or cultural identity), and class (wealth or income)...We can’t achieve equitable rural prosperity without addressing historic and ongoing discriminatory practices – at every level – that keep rural people and places at a disadvantage.”*

– Foundational Element: Dismantle Rural-Discriminatory Practices. Thrive Rural Framework, the Community Services Group of the Aspen Institute

**Embracing Limited Scale.** Opportunities for issue-focused funders surface in rural settings related to scale. Many funders want to be integral to “causing” something to happen for the betterment of the community. In rural philanthropy, the scale of the education or parks and recreation systems, as examples, may impact on the majority of a school district’s children or a county’s outdoor enthusiasts. This causal connection often satisfies the funder agenda, as well as supports fundamental rural community change that can sustain over time. As one example of embracing limited scale

and driving sustainable rural community change, the Greater Clark Foundation in Winchester, Kentucky, developed a large, community-designed park on on hospital property as part of the hospital sale that provided the foundation’s initial funding.

**Tailored place-based concentrations.** Because the threads of the rural social sector are often so intertwined due to limited institutional and human capital, many rural funders choose strategies that are adaptive to local conditions, have flexibility across types of funder support and consider multiple issues concurrently. This strategy also considers that rural leaders are often involved in multiple roles across multiple issues – some as professionals, and some as volunteer civic leaders. Other elements include changes in evaluation methods and goals, use of culturally competent, rural-friendly language, and intentional engagement of local and state government – an area of special importance given the dominance of government institutions in many rural places.

**Policy and Advocacy.** Effective rural funders understand that local and regional policy/advocacy work on rural issues can be the missing component if funders focus solely on program and nonprofit support. While perhaps initially seen as overtly political by rural-serving foundation boards, funder-supported rural policy and advocacy may be just the intervention to challenge the status quo in an informed, community-empowering manner.

**Public/Private Partnerships.** Because of the dominance of governmental organizations in many rural settings, funders often find that a local or regional government or government-affiliated organization (e.g., Council on Aging, community college) can be an anchor partner in lieu of a well-resourced, experienced nonprofit.

**Using Intermediaries.** Funders without direct experience in a specific rural region or with rural issues can choose to designate a rural-centric nonprofit or governmental agency to do regranting – essentially serving as the funders’ eyes and ears in local rural communities where the funder lacks history or networks. Variations of this strategy proved effective during the pandemic; for example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s support of regranting dollars in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to the Con Alma Health Foundation in New Mexico.

**Supporting Data Collection.** Rural communities are seldom afforded the time or resources to examine data about themselves that might provide insights on changing demographics, economies, governmental funding streams and state/national trends. Funders can support data availability for rural communities in ways that are relevant and actionable, and may serve to provide enhanced access to governmental funding.

## Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

*“Community development as a whole, is incredibly effective with holistic approaches that work on affordable housing, workforce development, social justice, the social determinants of health, but as a sector receives little love. Not as easy to explain as Feeding America or Saving the oceans. But critical to local economic ecosystems and to helping those in historically disinvested communities.”*

—Fundraiser, Katonah, New York

# Introduction to a Growing Community of Funders

This section, detailing some of the leading funders supporting rural communities, is far from comprehensive. Partly because a brief of this nature can only begin to name a few examples of valuable work by rural-focused funders across the nation. But also because the methods for collecting data on rural giving are less than optimal. The subsections that follow our discussion of data provide a snapshot of just a few key funders, but there are many more that future research could capture.

## Data on Rural Giving Is Scarce

For decades, rural advocates, rural communities and rural-interested philanthropy have lamented the lack of comprehensive and current giving data to capture investments in rural America. The need for this data varies between stakeholders, but can be grouped around some common themes:

- For rural advocates, accurate data is needed to better advance the argument that philanthropy is ignoring rural America. This would allow for more effective declarations of a culture of philanthropic under-investment, particularly in areas like equity, leadership development and rural climate change.
- For rural communities, an accurate snapshot of rural giving in their state may reveal new partnership opportunities and inform grantseeking strategies.
- For rural funders – or funders interested in pursuing rural funding – better giving data would allow for a more accurate look at places for funder collaboration and provide specific identification of rural places that have been overlooked by funders over time.

There are few reports that have achieved any widespread use that present rural giving data. Primary among these is a report from the Economic Research Service of the USDA authored by John Pender and released in 2015. Pender took a sample of 1,200 to 1,400 of the largest foundations and found that grants to rural-based organizations accounted for 5.5% of the total grantmaking of this sample covering the years 2005 to 2010. Adding in grants to urban-based organizations with obvious rural connection (e.g., agriculture, rural development, and rural health) upped the grant proportion to 6.2%. Pender followed with a closer look at samples of both large and smaller funder grants and found similar distributions within those samples, with smaller funders rural giving samples topping out at 7.5%.

A second report on rural giving is “The Power of Rural Philanthropy,” commissioned by New Ventures in Philanthropy, an initiative of the Forum of the Regional Association of Grantmakers. The report cited data from a 2004 study conducted by the Southern Rural Development Initiative showing that, although more than 7,500 endowed foundations were located in rural America, their total assets represented only 3% of all foundation assets nationwide, or an estimated \$15.1 billion. The distribution of these assets was concentrated primarily in 10 wealthy rural counties (27%) with another 53% of assets distributed across 50 counties. Overall, more than two-thirds of rural counties had philanthropic assets of less than \$1 million and many had none at all. According to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, “rural philanthropic assets are overwhelmingly located in

predominantly rural white counties; rural counties with high populations of nonwhite residents have 75% fewer philanthropic assets.” So not only is there disproportionately low philanthropic investment in rural America, there is also even less investment in rural communities of color, following the presumption that rural-based philanthropists invest in “their own” communities.

### Funder Spotlight



Established in 1986, the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund has provided more than \$76 million in grants and program support to nonprofit organizations in Kansas. Current grantmaking programs include Access to Care, Thriving Children, and Engaged Congregations and Communities. Its Access to Care program has a strong focus on rural areas.

The limitations of these two reports amplify the need for more current and comprehensive rural giving data. We don’t know enough about the giving patterns of philanthropic dollars invested in rural counties by non-rural based funders. While the bulk of the attention in philanthropic advocacy circles has been focused on underinvestment in rural places by national funders, the more pressing question may be whether local, state and regional funders based in urban communities but with explicit commitments—legal or strategic—to rural regions are, in fact, living up to those commitments. Complicating these discussions is methodology that is insufficient to accurately describe the rural components of grants to statewide or regional organizations. Mix in the various and conflicting definitions of rural (or “not

urban”), and it’s clear why there is an ongoing sense of frustration regarding rural giving data.

Finally, as many of those concerned with these data deficiencies realize, more refined reporting and cataloging of rural grantmaking by funders to both the Candid and the Internal Revenue Service databases is necessary before real progress can be measured. Since 2008, the El Pomar Foundation (Colorado) has sponsored the “Foundation Giving in Colorado” report, breaking down the giving of funders participating in the annual study by region and, importantly, asking respondents to designate grants that have a specific rural intent or presence.

Embedded in some of the funder reporting challenges are grants management systems that may not easily capture this rural giving data, as well as finance and audit practices providing limited or incomplete project descriptions on the mandatory 990 submissions. These are surmountable structural challenges that can and should be addressed on a scalable level by state and national funder groups.

### Health Conversion Foundations

Although relative newcomers to the rural philanthropic space, the emergence of healthcare conversion foundations in rural America represents the single largest ongoing source of new rural philanthropic resources in the last 40 years. Formed from the sale of nonprofit healthcare assets (e.g., healthcare plans, hospitals) to for-profit purchasers, these foundations are present in almost every state. There is no complete database of these conversion foundations, but limited data suggests there are at least 350, with some projections of over 400. Assets range from a few million to over \$4 billion at the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation serving New York State.



The distribution is not equal across states, however, with Colorado, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia experiencing more than 10 conversions, but deeply rural states like Maine and Wyoming with only one each. Importantly, many conversions have significant rural geographic commitments, often serving the same client/patient footprint of the asset that was sold. Because of their size, the influence of these conversions can dwarf the already existing philanthropic landscape or, in some cases, be the first significant rural philanthropic dollars available to these communities.

As conversion foundations evolve over time, many have become less exclusively focused on healthcare access and have moved toward a broader portfolio of issues, often including “social determinants of health,” which often leads to support for equity, education, food systems, economic development and environmental concerns.

Twenty-three gifts from mega donor MacKenzie Scott to rural-serving healthcare conversion foundations in 2022 dramatically elevated the status of these organizations. These gifts ranged from \$3 million to \$20 million and recognized funders from Maine to Montana to New Mexico, and many states in between. The gifts were based on the rural equity work of the foundations.

Health conversion foundations have had a strong rural philanthropic presence since the 1990s, with many working well outside of their healthcare origins. Given the dynamic healthcare business environment, more health conversions are likely to launch, such as the recent establishment of the Dogwood Trust, a \$1.6 billion endowment for a predominantly rural region of western North Carolina.

Conversion foundations are important in the rural space not just because of their outsized asset base. They often have regional or statewide footprints allowing them to support and collaborate on a larger scale than the typical funder. Similarly, in closely knit rural communities where change may be difficult, conversion foundations are often positioned to serve as convenors and neutral voices to explore new ways of thinking. Without robust nonprofits or well-resourced community or family foundations in many rural places, these conversion foundations can be critical to facilitating tough conversations.

## Funder Spotlight



Since 2005, the Danville Regional Foundation has committed more than \$160 million to organizations working in Danville, Virginia; Pittsylvania County, Virginia; and Caswell County, North Carolina. Like many rural community funders, DRF focuses its grantmaking on economic development, health, workforce opportunity, and education. Grantees include the Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex and the Danville Neighborhood Development Corporation.

**Danville Regional Foundation** focuses its philanthropic efforts on the Dan River Region, spanning both Virginia and North Carolina. Since its establishment in 2005, the foundation has concerned itself with improving community and economic development, financial stability, education and community wellness. Differing from many rural-serving healthcare conversion

foundations, DRF has been a leader in downtown revitalization and nonprofit and civic infrastructure development. DRF has supported initiatives and engaged in partnerships with local schools and colleges, as well as local governments. Neighborhood revitalization is a focus for the foundation, with an ongoing project, Opportunity Corridor, aiming to raise the quality of life for three neighborhoods in Danville by supporting resident-driven action and implementation.

**Health Foundation for Western and Central New York** focuses on improving the health of children ages birth to five and older adults impacted by poverty. The foundation is one of the few rural serving funders with a long-time focus on older adults and aging. Since its inception in 2002, it has awarded more than \$50 million in grants to 16 mostly rural counties in western and central New York to support advocacy and community health improvement. In 2020, the foundation announced its intent to continue focusing on young children and older adults, but through the lens of racial and socioeconomic equity. In addition to its grants programs, the foundation has complementary work aiming to cultivate pre-kindergarten social-emotional skills, support young, disadvantaged families and bolster community health capacity.

## National Foundations with Significant Rural Giving

While national private and family foundations were a dominant force in rural giving going back to the early days of organized philanthropy, their presence and influence have lessened over the years as a result of their diminished interest in local and place-based work and the growing rural interests of other types of funders. Funders like the Ford and Gates foundations continue to provide occasional

rural-themed initiatives or individual grants, but rural work is a small part of their broader portfolios. However, there are examples of national foundations that maintain a sustained rural focus.

**Helmsley Charitable Trust** is a global philanthropic organization with a multi-issue and geographic portfolio that includes rural healthcare in the midwestern United States with engagement in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Wyoming, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana and Nevada. Helmsley makes strategic rural investments in three areas: telemedicine, expanding local access to behavioral health services, and ensuring rural healthcare providers are equipped with the necessary equipment and technology. Specific grantmaking projects include providing hospitals with updated CT scanners, increasing the availability of mammography, and equipping rural hospitals with modern X Ray technology. In 2019, Helmsley launched the First Responder AED (automatic external defibrillator) Initiative, recognizing that law enforcement, often first responders to scenes of a medical emergency in rural communities, could save lives with the right equipment. Since then, Helmsley has awarded more than \$60 million to provide 25,000 AEDs in eight states. Helmsley has an influential rural philanthropic presence, given its focus on several states that have few large statewide place-based philanthropies.

**Annie E. Casey Foundation**, founded in 1948 with the assets from the early legacy of United Parcel Service, has supported a number of rural initiatives and collaboratives over the years, including one of the first rural collective impact initiatives, work on juvenile detention reform and efforts to promote broad economic opportunity for rural residents. In partnership with multiple federal

agencies and other foundations, Annie E. Casey Foundation supported one of the first public-foundation partnerships in the rural space with Rural IMPACT, providing 10 rural pilot sites across the country with technical assistance aimed at better parent and family outcomes.

## Regionally Focused Foundations

As described elsewhere in this brief, regionally focused private and family foundations are consistent leaders in rural philanthropy, both in elevating rural issues and in providing investment of financial and social capital. With wealth often generated in rural communities, family interests are likely to be sustained over time, while influenced by the interests of second-, third- and fourth-generation family members as they assume leadership roles.

**Blandin Foundation** is a family foundation based in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, with an intentional focus on rural Minnesota. Its mission is to "connect, fund and advocate for ideas and people to inspire resourcefulness and move rural places forward." It provides grants, leadership training and other

resources to support rural communities. Under the direction of Tuleah Palmer, named president and CEO in 2020, Blandin recently announced a new strategic direction. Influenced by the multiple crises that unfolded from 2020–2022, the revised strategy focuses on the impacts of demographic shifts, energy transitions and digital equity. Blandin is a national leader in rural broadband advocacy, rural civic engagement and rural civil society work.

**Ford Family Foundation** is a statewide, \$1.2 billion regional funder based in the small southern Oregon community of Roseburg (along with a portion of rural Northern California) and with a predominantly rural portfolio. Its work engages with over 100 rural Oregon communities with community-building support, sometimes with early childhood or economic development as the initiating need. These technical assistance, coaching and engagement supports are delivered by FFF staff who are tasked with developing close local relationships, supporting community-based decision-making and bringing value to rural communities. This is a newer model for FFF, which formerly depended on consultants and contractors to serve in those roles.

In 2022, the Ford Family Foundation released a report detailing the challenges that rural communities face in applying for federal and state funding. The report laid out five recommendations for funders and communities to consider and partner on to leverage federal and state funds in local communities. The foundation also provided a matching grant for the Oregon legislature's \$500,000 Oregon Rural Capacity Fund, designed to support economic development districts in hiring grant writers and administer grants.

### Funder Spotlight



In 2022, Invest Appalachia (IA) announced \$900,000 in funding for its inaugural round of community-focused "catalytic capital" to nine economic development projects in Central Appalachia. Recipients include Black by God, Appalachian Impact Fund, and the Nikawasi Initiative. IA plans to invest at least \$2 million through its Catalytic Capital Pool by the end of 2023.



**Patterson Family Foundation** (PFF) has been investing in rural health care, education and economic opportunity in Kansas and western Missouri since 2007. With an endowment of \$1.2 billion, it is one of the largest foundations in the nation that is explicit about its primary focus on rural people and places. PFF supports nonprofits in their service region through program, operations, equipment and capital grants. The foundation's leadership remains in the family, led by the four adult children of the organization's founders, Neal and Jeanne Patterson.

**Pride Foundation** is a regional funder working in the Pacific Northwest, serving Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington, and the only LGBTQ-focused community foundation in the region. Pride Foundation was founded in 1985 in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis and has since awarded more than \$70 million in grants to support its vision of "a world in which all LGBTQ+ people live safely and openly as our whole selves in the communities we call home." Funding supports policy advocacy, academic scholarships, grants to community organizations, and other initiatives such as Community Advocacy, Research, and Education (C.A.R.E.). This initiative supports culture change efforts, including developing narrative-shifting messages to create a culture more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people. In 2022, the foundation began approving multi-year grants through its Community Grants Program as a strategy to enable and empower lasting change for communities that are at risk due to racial, LGBTQ+ and other forms of discrimination. Of those Community Grants, 70% support LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas or small towns.

**Roundhouse Foundation**, founded in 2002, centers its work on supporting rural communities

by funding arts and culture, environmental stewardship, social services and education, all with a focus on rural Oregon and its tribal nations. In 2022, Roadhouse expanded its work and awarded more than \$12.5 million in grants for access to healthcare and child care, workforce development, mental health and disaster preparedness. Executive Director Erin Borla, a second-generation family member of the Columbia Sportswear founders, co-chairs the Center for Family Philanthropy's Rural Funders Peer Network.

## Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

*"The child care system could be on the verge of collapse without a blended funding model and government funding. This will adversely affect low-income families. Not only will this have a huge impact on our children, but the economy as well. Also, we continue to see attrition of mental health therapists as we cannot fund high enough salaries for their emotionally draining jobs."*

—Fundraiser, Missouri

**Sapelo Foundation**, founded in 1949, is a family foundation based in Savannah, Georgia. While it was initially created to support environmental research on Sapelo Island, a marshy barrier island along the Georgia coast, it expanded its mission in 1976 to become a statewide grantmaker through partnership with University of Georgia. The foundation currently focuses on environmental protection, social prosperity and civic power with an emphasis on communities of color and rural communities. In 2019, the Sapelo Foundation made the decision to align its financial investments with its mission, and in 2020, in response to growing needs from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased its

endowment spend from 5% to 8%. In 2020, recognizing that a local, place-based approach is a key component for long-term change efforts, the foundation began investing in three rural Georgia communities to advance systems change.

**Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation** is a statewide Arkansas funder with a 50+ year legacy of leadership and advocacy for community colleges, access to capital, and reading achievement. Current priorities of the foundation are 100% focused on economic, educational, social and racial equity. Their rural work is strongly influenced by an asset-asset-based orientation, with significant staff time spent in rural communities across the state.

## Community Foundations

Rural-serving community foundations have been on the upswing since the McKnight Foundation created the six Minnesota Initiative foundations in 1986, followed by the Lilly Endowment's work in rural Indiana in the 1990s, and continuing today. Many of these rural-serving community foundations have modest discretionary grantmaking funds but serve important community leadership roles. In states like Maine, North Carolina and Oregon, statewide community foundations serve to provide donor and community engagement opportunities outside of the geographies of the more urban-focused community foundations and United Ways.

**Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley**, representing a rural Colorado county of 17,000, was formed in 2007 from the merger of the Gunnison Area Community Foundation and the Crested Butte Community Foundation. CFGV continues the work of each of the foundations with a powerful, unified and informed response to local community needs. It supports community grants,

nonprofit capacity-building, academic scholarships, and the Imagination Library. An innovator, the CFGV has helped to lead an immigrant rural Welcoming Initiative and was a part of the Rural Welcoming Initiative cohort in 2022.

**Humboldt Area Foundation** serves a four-county region in rural Northern California and southern Oregon as well as the region's 27 tribal nations. In 2021, Humboldt Area Foundation partnered with Wild Rivers Community Foundation to create a joint strategic plan that supports a philanthropic vision for the region. Their shared vision is to create a region that is "thriving, just, healthy and equitable." To achieve this vision, the two organizations have committed to goals in four issue areas: racial equity, a just economy and economic development, healthy ecosystems and environments, and thriving youth and families. Humboldt Area Foundation is a national leader in rural racial equity work.

**Vermont Community Foundation** is a statewide community foundation guiding hundreds of Vermont-based philanthropies and funds. Founded in 1986, the foundation manages and distributes over \$30 million a year to local organizations in and beyond Vermont, a state with only one federally designated metro area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the foundation focused its capacity on the creation of the VT COVID-19 Response Fund, which focused on short- and long-term recovery efforts, including food security, support for youth and seniors and access to high-speed internet in rural Vermont. VCF is a national philanthropic leader for child care systems development and advocacy, rural career and workforce development and rural place-based economic viability.

**Southwest Initiative Foundation** is located in southwest Minnesota and serves 18 counties, as well as two tribal nations. Founded in 1986 by the McKnight Foundation, it serves as the home for 30 local community foundations to improve the quality of life in Minnesota through community impact grants, economic development programs, and building relationships with other place-based funders. The foundation provides business loans to small and for-profit businesses, as well as child care providers. It also provides leadership education through its Growing Local: Emerging Leaders program. In 2016, the foundation made a 10-year commitment to a “Grow Your Own” cradle-to-career initiative, focusing on economic development, and community impact on children and the systems that surround them.

## Corporate Funders

Corporate funders come in three varieties in rural philanthropy. One, companies with corporate leadership living in rural communities like the Walmart presence in northwest Arkansas or smaller, regional banks, as examples. Two, corporations with major manufacturing or service center operations in rural communities like Procter & Gamble and Humana. Three, national/regional companies with rural charitable interests related to its ongoing corporate business interests, like Aetna or Truist Bank.

**Ascendium Education Group** is a for-profit company that comprises student loan guaranty services, education philanthropy, Attigo, Campus Sonar and NorthStar financial services. Ascendium focuses on investments in rural postsecondary education across the nation. It gives directly to educational institutions, intermediaries and researchers for provision of technical assistance, and research and policy initiatives aimed at

improving rural students’ postsecondary success. Studies and analyses of interest include work on issues related to access, affordability and student success in rural higher education, as well as advocating for policy changes at the federal and state level. Ascendium is relatively new entrant in the national rural philanthropic discussion and is viewed as an issue leader and partnership supporter.

**Rural King** is a 15-state chain of farm and ranch supply stores that sponsors the Foundation for Rural America. The foundation grants funds to rural organizations like 4-H and Future Farmers of America but, uniquely, also accepts donations to extend the reach of the foundation.

## Funder Spotlight

The logo for Dogwood Health Trust features the word "dogwood" in a lowercase, rounded font. The "o" in "dogwood" is stylized with a yellow-to-orange gradient. Below "dogwood" is the phrase "health trust" in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font.

The Dogwood Health Trust awards grants to organizations working in western North Carolina. Giving priorities including housing, education, economic opportunity and health and wellness. In 2022, the trust awarded over \$74 million in grants and \$5.4 million in impact investments. Recent grantees include Appalachian Mountain Community Health Centers, Buncombe County Schools Foundation and Family Place of Transylvania County.

## Major Donors

There are significant individual donors in most every rural community. The potential problem for fundraisers, though, is that these individual donors may be supporting national charitable organizations or colleges and universities that are located well outside the rural region. Giving may

also be directed by family offices or personal attorneys that can be difficult to identify and access. Supporting a culture of local, rural individual giving can be the role of community foundations, but also can be led by partnerships of nonprofits actively engaging with wealthy individuals. The online platform Giving Compass serves as a one-stop resource hub to inform donors of high wealth and their representatives. The site has given significant coverage to rural issues and philanthropy aimed at rural communities over the last couple of years.

Examples of major donor interests in rural America include Dolly Parton’s ongoing support of the residents of rural Sevier County, Tennessee, and the Ballmer Group’s support of advancing rural mental health services in rural Washington through support of the Seattle Times Mental Health Project.

## Intermediaries & Associations

Just as with other topics in philanthropy like the arts, education, health or women and girls, rural philanthropy includes not just individual foundations doing direct grantmaking to individual local organizations but a broader landscape of intermediaries and support organizations. This broader philanthropic space includes (1) philanthropy-serving organizations: funder membership groups organized around geography, issues, population, or philanthropic practice; (2) Funder intermediaries: organizations formed or supported by funders to conduct regranting in rural areas; and (3) funder collaboratives formed to provide technical assistance on specific issues. The effectiveness of these organizations is critical in the rural space to accommodate funder needs to do better local granting and to provide hands-on local assistance. Following are examples:

## Integrated Rural Strategies Group.

Neighborhood Funders Group’s Integrated Rural Strategies Group (IRSG) is developing a shared understanding among funders at a national scale of what it takes to build community-led capacity to advance justice and equity for rural communities. Using a place-based approach, IRSG is bringing funders together to address local needs and gaps in rural organizing infrastructure and develop shared agendas to support rural organizing and justice-advancing efforts. One product is a set of recommendations for funders seeking to support rural grassroots organizations in New York State as part of a larger transformational movement strategy to build statewide power.

### Funder Spotlight

## Ford Foundation

Ford’s latest \$75 million social bond investment in the American South includes a more than \$22 million commitment to organizations in the Deep South and Rural South. The funding supports historically underresourced nonprofits working in multiple fields including arts, civic engagement, economic justice, racial justice and education.

**Cypress Fund** was created in 2019 by a team of organizers and donors rooted in North and South Carolina. The fund holds a deep belief that “the best solutions for our communities are built through people-powered, grassroots organizing and led by Southern folks deeply impacted by the conditions on the ground.” The fund mirrors the development of a series of social justice funds across the country promoting social change through donor organizing

and democratizing philanthropy, but represents the first fund in the U.S. South where grantmaking decisions are made by social justice organizers.

**The Federation of Southern Cooperatives** was founded in 1967 to empower rural communities to be self-sustaining by promoting economic development and land retention. The organization serves Black farmers, landowners, cooperatives and other low-income rural people in the South. They assist with land retention and development and support programs that increase income and provide other opportunities for their membership. They support an Advocacy Institute that builds the capacity of membership to advocate for their needs and develops policy recommendations.

**First Nations Development Institute**, founded in 1980, is a national organization focusing on improving economic conditions for Native Americans. Since 1993, FNDI has awarded over \$55 million in grants to 2,702 grantees across the country. Programs and initiatives that FNDI supports include financial education and asset-building programs, business development and entrepreneurship training, and initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture and food systems.

**Grantmakers Concerned for Immigrants and Refugees** is the only funder network in the country with an exclusive focus on immigrants, and they help connect over 140 philanthropic organizations and 1,200 individual grantmakers, many with dedicated rural interests. GCIR also leads three initiatives, all of which are designed to mobilize and align dollars in support of immigrant and refugee communities. One of these initiatives, the California Dignity for Families Fund assists new migrants and refugees with asylum and resettlement and has distributed nearly \$11 million

in grants. Delivering on the Dream, a second initiative that was launched in 2012, has supported legal services, mental health services, crisis response, and education for immigrants by working with funding collaboratives in 21 states to align action and coordinate funds.

**Hawaii Workforce Funders Collaborative** was created through a partnership of philanthropic foundations, including the Harold K.L. Castle, Harry and Jeanette Weinberg and the Hawaii Community foundations, and is committed to creating equitable access to living wage jobs in Hawai'i through strengthening public-private partnerships and systems. It serves the big island of Hawai'i and neighboring islands, including rural and underserved areas. The organization is the newest member of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, which includes 34 regional collaboratives focused on advancing worker and employer collaboration and problem solving.

**Native American Agriculture Fund** is a charitable trust, and the largest philanthropic organization in the United States focused entirely on serving the Native American farming and ranching communities. It was established with funding from the settlement of a class-action lawsuit, *Keepseagle v. Vilsack*, filed in 1999 by two Native American farmers, George Keepseagle and Marilyn Keepseagle, against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In 2010, the lawsuit was settled and resulted in a \$760 million settlement that included cash distributions to Native American farmers and ranchers, farm-debt loan forgiveness, and established the NAAF. The fund provides grants to eligible organizations for business assistance, agricultural education, technical support and advocacy services to support Native farmers and ranchers. In 2022, the fund

distributed grants to 48 tribally affiliated farming organizations and/or projects across the country.

**Native Americans in Philanthropy** serves a membership of both funders interested in supporting Native American issues and Native-owned philanthropies. Increasing in public visibility over the past five years, NAP helped lead a major policy victory in 2022 with the formation of the Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP) in partnership with the Department of the Interior. OSP is intended to broker leadership and funding opportunities between the federal government, philanthropy and tribal nations.

**Rural Funders Learning Network**, operated by Philanthropy Colorado, serves as a convener of funders and government agencies investing in rural areas across the state. RFLN helps support its partners to develop a deeper knowledge and awareness of the needs of rural communities across the state, provides opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and strategies, and develops and enhances funders' roles as engaged and intentional rural partners. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate economic instability and racial injustice, RFLN released a new strategic roadmap for 2021-2022 that was created in partnership with its members. The strategic roadmap reflects RFLN's vision for "an equitable and sustainable future for Colorado" and commits to advancing equity through collaboration, expanding policy and advocacy work, and committing additional resources to support culture change, within its membership and beyond.

**Southern Partners Fund** serves rural grassroots and community-based organizations working toward racial, economic and environmental justice in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia,

**Intermediary Spotlight**



**FIRST NATIONS**  
DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

First Nations Development Institute's programs focus solely on strengthening American Indian economies and supporting healthy Native communities. Its grants support organizations in 45 states, Washington, D.C., and American Samoa. In addition to its grantmaking, First Nations also offers fellowships and scholarships. Recent grantees include the Lakota Language Consortium and the Hannahville Indian Community.

Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. It allocates 60% of its funding to three core initiatives: education reform, immigrant rights, and voter rights and civic engagement. The remaining 40% is distributed across diverse program areas including healthcare reform, housing reform, disability rights and incarceration reform. Since 1998, SPF has granted more than \$15 million, supported the voting registration of 300,000 and assisted 50,000 illegally detained immigrants. SPF's governing Board of Directors is elected by its members "made up entirely of people of color grassroots leaders from rural communities," in the 12-state region in which the organization serves.

**Sustainable Agricultural and Food Systems Funders** amplifies the impact of philanthropic and investment communities in support of just and sustainable food and agriculture systems. Its work centers on climate change, consolidation,

and land access, all of which intersect the more than 60 topical areas in which its funder partners invest. SAFSF's work has become more prominent among funders as rural foundations seek to create systemic change around food access and systems.

**United Philanthropy Forum** is the largest network serving philanthropy in America, leading a network of nearly 100 regional and national philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs). The Forum is leading an RWJF-supported initiative to advance rural racial and health equity in rural places through connecting and convening philanthropy. Through this initiative, the Forum is working to connect and convene its members to build and disseminate a base of rural equity knowledge and practice and also to connect and convene Forum members' more than 7,000 foundation members around this work. The initiative includes a regranting program to support PSOs in that rural connecting and convening. This is the first national

philanthropic effort bringing together the interests of every type of funder with rural equity as the uniting theme. Working Group members have developed a set of ten principles to guide rural philanthropic engagement and case stories of funders who actualize these practices. Undergirding the Forum's rural equity work are Ten Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement developed through the initiative.


## Individuals to Know in Rural Philanthropy

Rural philanthropy, like the broader philanthropic world, has many funding leaders who are influential because of their effective and passionate advocacy for the sector, their innovations in philanthropic and their elevated ability to connect with rural communities with respect and understanding. Some of these leaders are new to philanthropy and/or their organizations. The following represents just a small sample of the sector leaders – with intentional inclusion of many with rural equity considerations at the forefront of their drive and motivation.

**Kim Davis, Walton Family Foundation.** As the senior advisor for the Walton Family Foundation's Home Region Program, Kim Davis focuses on creating equitable opportunities for residents in the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta to learn, achieve financial security, and become leaders in their communities. Prior to joining Walton, Davis worked as the director of education and workforce for the Northwest Arkansas Council and was appointed by the governor to serve on the Arkansas State Board of Education.

Davis is a leader with the Delta Philanthropic Forum, a group of funders, intermediaries,

**Funder Spotlight**



**APPALACHIAN  
COMMUNITY FUND**

The Appalachian Community Fund works toward making durable and sustainable change in the communities it serves. Encouraging grassroots social change in Central Appalachia, the fund awards grants to organizations addressing issues related to race, economic status, gender, sexual identity, disability and the environment. Recent grantees include Morehead Pride, Knoxville Abortion Doula Collective and the West Virginia Trainers Project.

researchers and government agencies focused on the Mississippi Delta and its residents. He is determined to elevate interest in the region for other funders, advocates and those with ties to rural regions. “One thing that is interesting as I travel the country is how many people have connections to rural communities and how many people who ask, ‘How can I assist?’”

**David Jordan, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund.** Jordan serves as president and CEO of this statewide health funder serving Kansas with a focus on rural and underserved communities. Jordan, in his fifth year of leadership, has moved the organization from direct program support to a strategy of deep engagement in convening and policy advocacy with health equity and early childhood issues as primary interests—an intentional choice, given its modest \$70 million endowment. Previously, Jordan worked on several state and local campaigns to extend healthcare to broader sectors of the population and spent seven years as an advocate for building an innovative field of practice for oral healthcare.

“We need to be focused on rural America because there are activities—farming and industries—critical to America. It’s critical to sustaining the country,” Jordan said. “There is a lot of innovation. We can pilot innovative models, which don’t need to be partisan and bring tested solutions to scale. No foundation has enough resources to do everything it wants, so it can go further with a partner in government—which has more resources.”

**Denise Herrera, Con Alma Health Foundation.** Herrera is the executive director of this statewide health conversion foundation in New Mexico. Denise previously worked at St. David’s Foundation

in Austin, Texas, as well as with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Con Alma Health Foundation works to advance health equity by engaging meaningfully with partners and grantees to improve health in underserved communities throughout New Mexico. Before returning home to lead Con Alma, Herrera co-lead collaborative and transformational rural philanthropic work in Texas, serving as one of more than 20 founding members of Texas Rural Funders.

She has shared that each funder had a different goal or focus—environment, health or education—but they all agreed on one thing: Broadband was critical to both their funder missions and the future of Texas rural communities. Herrera views the work of the Texas Rural Funders group as one of the greatest collaborative funding victories to date. “When I think about rural communities, what’s most fulfilling to me is reaching communities most in need of access to health and healthcare,” Herrera said. “In many New Mexico communities, people must drive four to five hours to the closest doctor’s office or health center. As someone who has dedicated my whole life to health equity, that means a lot to me.”

**Nichole June Maher, Inatai Foundation** (formerly Group Health Foundation). Maher is the first president and CEO of this Washington State funder. It is one of the country’s new mega health conversion foundations, holding assets of \$2.45 billion. Maher previously led the Northwest Health Foundation in Oregon for six years. Maher has also worked as the executive director of the Native American Youth and Family Center in Portland, Oregon, an organization well known for its innovative wraparound services model for Native American families.



In her first 18 months as President and CEO, Maher traveled to all of Washington’s 39 counties, and she was clear about who she and her team would meet with – tribal communities, immigrant communities, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, those with LGBTQ+ identities, Black people, and other communities of color. “We found incredible richness there. When I share in philanthropy where I have visited and who I have met, people say ‘you must be exhausted’ – but I am so excited and so energized.”

Under Maher’s leadership, the Inatai team of 55 staff includes 10 people who run its in-house financial management company for its \$2.45 billion under management. In 2018, the team got their bank account, and they are disrupting the field by taking impact investing to the next level. Two of many examples include investing 5% of their endowment in PRIs for the Northwest and

offering options to their peers in the field with a cost-sharing model. “We offer smaller, values-aligned foundations that are interested a shared cooperative model where we just share costs with the [other] foundations. So there is a no [profit-making] fee for smaller foundations.” She added that this helps her smaller foundation peers: “Their size prohibits them from growing because they are stuck in a consultant model. So smaller foundations can have access to the same size of investment. We don’t market. We just created it. We aren’t in the sales business. It has been really great for people, and the most excited are smaller foundations in more rural geographies. We have been kind of flying under the radar to do our work well first. We are more comfortable talking about it now.”

### **Margo Miller, Appalachian Community**

**Fund.** Miller is the executive director of the fund, founded in 1987 to provide new resources to groups working for progressive social change in Central Appalachia (East Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, Southwest Virginia, and West Virginia). The fund has awarded close to \$7 million to more than 300 organizations working for justice.

Miller is an Appalachian native with a multiple-generation family history in the region, and part of a legacy of Black Appalachians across the 14-state Appalachian region. She has been active in leadership of the Appalachian Funders Network but is perhaps best known for her three decades of commitment as a convenor and facilitator bringing people together across all sectors and perspectives.

“Not all funders are from rural backgrounds. Not everyone is as passionate about it as I might be. So I hope to be a little contagious and let that passion rub off,” said Miller. “More broadly... a lot of rural areas have suffered because people have not

## **Inatai** FOUNDATION

*“If we are in the business of making a difference, there is no mathematical justification for excluding communities of color or rural communities... We need to interrupt centering our institutions in large cities. At **Inatai Foundation**, we have team members who live all over our state. We have seen a very clear pattern that the places our team members live, have deep expertise, and genuine relationships significantly increase in the number of grants we make, and our grants are much more impactful.”*

—Nichole June Maher, president and CEO, Inatai Foundation

invested or because they have actually removed funding. If philanthropy could invest in some infrastructure along with this new federal funding and align it with the movement, that could make a huge difference.”

**Tuleah Palmer, Blandin Foundation.** Palmer has been the president and CEO of Blandin since 2020. After a 20-year history of nonprofit management—much of it leading tribal serving organizations—she is determined to bring the perspective of the grant seeker. “It is worth sharing —there is a disconnect between the grant-seeker and the grantmaker, when we all really want to effect change,” Palmer says. “The dynamic of power is really critical. When you come from a place of scarcity and desperation, you are subjugated to the folks that have the resources.”

**Tressie White, Montana Healthcare Foundation.** White, an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and a descendant of the Rocky Boy Chippewa Cree Tribe, is the director of the American Indian Health program at this health conversion foundation. White leads strategy development for its American Indian health work, grantee work, programmatic support and technical assistance; she also administers the Meadowlark Initiative, a program integrating prenatal care with behavioral health services to improve health outcomes for Montana women, infants and families.

White has been instrumental in bringing together Montana’s eight rural and five urban Indian Health Center Directors for the first time on an ongoing basis. A major focus for the Indian Health Center Directors has been culturally appropriate residential treatment for substance use disorders. Tribes are spending significant financial and

human resources on sending people out of state to tribally led or culturally appropriate facilities. This group brought in a team of consultants to take this idea into a strong planning phase with financing packages, designs, facility locations and business plans. “They brought their idea to life, and that could not have happened without building relationships, in-person, for years—that’s been pretty amazing.”

“My greatest hope is that other funders don’t give up working in the space,” White says of rural philanthropy. “Our tribes are very, very low capacity. Very severe poverty and health disparities for our tribes. The health disparities are so much. Oftentimes, funders will come in and expect a lot of results from a grant and tribes don’t always have it. Funders need to be more flexible and build relationships with the tribes. They are sovereign nations. Each tribe has its own political system. Be more flexible.”

## Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

*“In the Deep South, we still have not had a large investment from some of the big-name foundations such as Ford, Open Society Foundations, McKenzie Scott, Gates. Mary Reynolds Babcock and Marguerite Casey are leading contributors in Alabama.”*

—Fundraiser, Birmingham, Alabama

# An Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges

While funders have made philanthropic investments in rural America for over a century, a consensus on what a field of rural philanthropy should look like is still evolving. This would include key questions about choices in philanthropic practice regarding grantmaking and community engagement strategies, equity commitments, rural-centric success measures and staffing structures for both funders and intermediaries.

**Invest in anchor institutions.** Nonprofit infrastructure in most rural places is less developed, and in some cases, considerably weaker than in more resourced urban or suburban environments. This makes support for anchor institutions even more important. Anchor institutions would include public/nonprofit organizations found in most rural regions like libraries, community colleges, rural and statewide community foundations, agriculture extension, religious organizations, nonprofit associations and civic groups. These organizations often serve as proxies for a nonprofit sector. As funders open their eyes to the possibilities of philanthropic support in rural places, many opportunities exist with these anchor institutions as grantees, partners or fiscal sponsors.

**Use PSOs.** Some regional and national philanthropy-serving organizations like the National Center for Family Philanthropy, Neighborhood Funders Group, Council of Michigan Foundations, Philanthropy Northwest and Philanthropy Colorado have standing rural interest groups within their structures. In addition, a number of regional PSOs are playing important leadership roles in engaging philanthropy in rural communities, given the large rural footprint in

their service regions, such as Philanthropy West Virginia, Iowa Council of Foundations, North Carolina Network of Grantmakers, Philanthropy Southeast, Appalachia Funders Network, and others. Many more peer learning structures are needed to serve not only the interests of current rural funders but to put rural issues and practices before urban/suburban funders and policymakers. Other structural options would include examples like the Texas Rural Funders Group, which operates under the umbrella of a family foundation and has made a great deal of progress in supporting and advancing rural community broadband needs and interests. On the national scene, RWJF has funded United Philanthropy Forum's initiative on rural equity, which includes, among other educational, regranting and research efforts, a community of practice with eight rural PSOs and providing regranting dollars so PSOs can develop and advance a rural agenda.

**Develop a central learning and networking hub for rural funders, researchers and advocates.** Further undermining the possibilities of synergy are the inconsistent relationships between the rural funder, research and advocacy communities – particularly at the state and local levels. Why? It will take an organized group of larger state and regional, rural-interested funders, rural research institutions and advocates to support a start-up national organization that would bring together interested parties with learning, information and field advancement – no matter what the level of experience.

**Support equity work in rural places.** As discussed throughout this brief, rural America is

not a monolithic, homogenous group of static and isolated people. Funders who are committed to equity and social justice work will find both opportunity and need in the rural equity space. The history of governmental exploitation of rural peoples of color provides strong direction for funder engagement, whether reflecting injustices connected to slavery, Native American oppression or migrant worker exploitation.

### Initiative Spotlight



RuraLead describes itself as a “learning initiative” in an effort to understand impactful leadership qualities and development in rural communities across the country. The initiative hosted a series of video conferences to help connect rural and Indigenous leaders and funders, as well as share ideas and perspectives that present the best ways to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

**Hire people with rural backgrounds in foundations and intermediaries.** The need for staff from rural backgrounds to lead philanthropy from inside the walls of funders is significant and pressing. It is directly tied to any equity commitments of funders working in rural places and must include similar staffing commitments from funder intermediaries, who generally have few staff with any rural connectivity. This need is

particularly urgent for funders and intermediaries serving rural communities of color.

**Provide long-term financial support.** Long-term funder commitments to rural communities are necessary. This speaks to the speed of change that one can expect in places with fewer human and capital resources that face multiple challenges concurrently. While these long-term commitments are contrary to much of funder practice, whereby grants are often allocated in one- or two-year chunks, longer-term commitments are a necessary underpinning of maximally effective rural philanthropic strategies. The commitments do not necessarily have to be to a particular intervention or program, but to rural people and places in ways that allow for learning and adaptation.

**Create rural philanthropy liaisons in state government.** Michigan and North Carolina, as examples, have philanthropic liaisons embedded in state government. A similar approach could be to develop a rural philanthropic liaison that is part of a state Office of Rural Health or state Rural Community Development Division, as examples. The benefit of these roles is the heightened alignment of public and private investment dollars, as well as more consistent knowledge sharing of changing local rural dynamics.

**Support of Rural Leadership Development.** In 2020-22, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported a national consortium of rural leadership and advocacy organizations for a collective effort known as RuraLead. The work looked at the state of rural leadership development programs around the country and collected a massive amount of input and insight from rural leaders. The work of RuraLead developed numerous recommendations

for funders, notably (1) ways to increase diversity and voice within rural leadership structures and (2) how to support new definitions for leadership that go beyond those with formal titles and positions.

**Convene people across regions.** One of the unfortunate truths of rural America is that communities that are geographically proximate don't consistently have great collaborative working partnerships due to history or competition for scant resources. Good rural philanthropic work nurtures and incentivizes work across counties and regions, and even states. This strategy also responds to funder needs to do work that has the scale and heft to attract funder interest.

## Program Spotlight



The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's Entrepreneurship program supports the start and growth of new businesses in historically disinvested and underrepresented communities. Focusing its work in America's Heartland, Kauffman takes a broad approach to its entrepreneurship strategy, including research, policy, learning and support, economic trends, and capital innovation.

# Resources

Anarde, S. (October 19th, 2019). [The “Ripple Effect” Of Investing in Rural America](#). Rural LISC.

Asante, A. & Moore, W. (September 19th, 2022). [Strengthening Social Connection and Opportunities in Rural Communities](#). Grantmakers in Health.

[Ascendium Education Group](#).

Beer, J. (January 31, 2018). [Philanthropy and Rural Life: What is Being Done](#). Philanthropy Daily.

[Blandin Foundation](#).

Briseño, E. (July 24th, 2021). [Con Alma Health Foundation Names New Executive Director](#). Albuquerque Journal.

Brown, W. (June 26th, 2022). [Walton Family Foundation unveils Delta Strategy for Pine Bluff, Jefferson County region](#). Arkansas Delta Informer.

[Bruce Karmazin](#). (n.d.). National Center for Family Philanthropy.

[Building Forward Together](#). (April 2021). Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees.

[Cambia Health Solutions Commits \\$11.5 Million to Address Mental Health Needs in Rural Communities](#). (January 6th, 2021). Cambia Health.

Carlson, C. & Cook, J. (December, 2021). [Rural America: Philanthropy’s Misunderstood Opportunity for Impact](#). FSG.

Center for American Progress. (December 6, 2018). [America’s Child Care Deserts in 2018](#).

Coffey, M. (May 17th, 2022). [Rural Communities Need Federal Child Care Investments](#). Center for American Progress.

Cohen, R. (September 10th, 2015). [Agriculture Secretary Vilsack Calls Out Philanthropy for Decreased Investment in Rural America](#). Nonprofit Quarterly.

[College Readiness Funders: Ascendium Education Group](#). (n.d.). Inside Philanthropy.

[Collaborative Approaches to Well-Being in Rural Communities](#). (n.d.). Rural Health Information Hub.

[Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley](#).

[Community Resource Center](#). (2023). 2022 Foundation Giving in Colorado.

Cooper, Tyler. (April 10, 2023). [Municipal Broadband 2023: 17 States Risk BEAD Funding Delays](#). Broadband Now.

[Creative Capital](#). (n.d.) Rural LISC.

[Cypress Fund](#).

[Danville Regional Foundation](#).

[Kim Davis](#). (n.d.). Walton Family Foundation.

Dorwart, L. (July 24th, 2019). [“Health, Not Just Healthcare.” How a Key Funder in Texas Looks Beyond the Doctor’s Office](#). Inside Philanthropy.

Dornauer, M. & Bryce, R. (October 28, 2020). [Too Many Rural Americans are Living in the Digital Dark. The Problem Demands a New Deal Solution](#). Health Affairs Forefront.

Easterling, D. & Smart, A. (March 18th, 2015). [Place-Based Philanthropy in Rural Settings: Increasing the Potential for Whole-Community Change](#). Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust.

Edin, K., Shaefer, H.L. & Nelson, T. (August 8, 2023). [The Injustice of Place](#). Harper Collins/Mariner Books.

[Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#). (n.d.) [Emerging Collaborations](#).

[Facts about Mental Health in Rural America](#). (n.d.). Rural Minds.

[The Federation of Southern Cooperatives](#).

[The Ford Family Foundation](#).

[First Children's Finance](#). (n.d.). Rural Child Care Innovation Program.

[First Nation's Development Institute](#).

[Freund, J.](#) (December 9th, 2019). [Does Charity Still Start at Home? Exploring the State of Place-Based Giving](#). Inside Philanthropy.

[Foundation Funding to Improve Rural Health Care](#). (2019). *Health Affairs*, 38(12), 2109–2110.

[Georgia Grants for Nonprofits: The Sapelo Foundation](#). (n.d.). Inside Philanthropy.

[Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees](#).

[Greater Texas Foundation](#). (January 24, 2019). [Grant Announcement: Roscoe Collegiate ISD will Advance College and Career Readiness with Support from GTF](#).

[Gregg, J.](#) (n.d.). [How Philanthropy Can Strengthen Rural Communities](#). Arabella Advisors.

[Grieco, E.](#) (April 12, 2019). [For many rural residents in US, local news media mostly don't cover the area where they live](#). Pew Research Center.

[Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative](#).

[Health Foundation for Western & Central New York](#).

[Healthcare Georgia Foundation's CDFI investments](#). (n.d.). Rural Health Information Hub.

[Heartland Fund](#). (n.d.). Rural Climate Partnership.

[Hegle, J.](#) (2021). [Bringing Broadband to Rural America: The Role for Philanthropy](#). Investing in Rural Philanthropy. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

[Helmsley Charitable Trust](#).

[Henley, J. R. & Adams, G.](#) (October, 2018). [Insights on Access to Quality Child Care for Families Living in Rural Areas](#). The Urban Institute.

[Denise Herrera](#). (n.d.). Con Alma Health Foundation.

[History of the Native American Agriculture Fund](#). (n.d.). Native American Agriculture Fund.

[Housing Assistance Council](#). (September 2018). [Rental Housing for a 21st Century Rural America: A Platform for Preservation](#).

[Humboldt Area Foundation](#).

[Hutchinson Community Foundation](#). (n.d.)

[Impacts of COVID19 on Rural Mental Health](#). (January 6th, 2021). American Farm Bureau.

[Invest Appalachia](#). (January 26, 2022). [Invest Appalachia Launches Fund with \\$19 Million for Community-First Impact Investing in Central Appalachia](#).

[David Jordan](#). (n.d.). United Methodist Health Ministry Fund.

[Karmazin, B.](#) (July 27th, 2016). [It's Time for a Strategy on Rural Philanthropy, Not Just Shaming](#). The Chronicle of Philanthropy.

[Katz, S. & Soskls, B.](#) (December 5th, 2016). [Looking Back at 50 Years of U.S. Philanthropy](#). Commissioned for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's 50th Anniversary Symposium.

[Let's Grow Kids](#). (n.d.).

[Love, H. & Loh, T.](#) (December 8th, 2020). [The 'rural-urban divide' furthers myths about race and poverty-concealing effective policy solutions](#). The Brookings Institution.

[Lyn Hunter](#). (n.d.). Council on Foundations.

[Nichole June Maher](#). (n.d.). Inatai Foundation.

[Mattheissen, C.](#) (November 18th, 2021). [How Philanthropy Helped Launch a New Approach to Dental Care in Alaska- and Beyond](#). Inside Philanthropy.

[Mattheissen, C.](#) (November 16th, 2022). [For MacKenzie Scott, Health Foundations Offer a Path to Advancing Equity in Rural America](#). Inside Philanthropy.

McGregor, A. & Chaney, B. (2005). [The Power of Rural Philanthropy](#). New Ventures in Philanthropy.

Meit, M., Beatty, K., Mathis, S., Kearley, J., Wahlquist, A. (September 2022). [Examining the Burden of Public Stigma Associated with Mental Illness in the Rural United States](#).

[Mental Health Grants: Funding Trends](#). (n.d.). Inside Philanthropy.

Meybell, M. (February, 2021). [Serving Rural Communities: Patterson Family Foundation Annual Report](#). Patterson Family Foundation.

[Margo Miller](#). (n.d.). Appalachian Community Fund.

Mississippi River Basin Ag & Water Desk. (July 26, 2021). [\\$1.4 million grant to Missouri School of Journalism helps create network of journalists focused on Mississippi River Basin](#).

[Mother Cabrini Health Foundation](#). (n.d.). Inside Philanthropy.

[Moving Beyond Grants: How a Kansas Community Foundation creatively invested to fast track rural internet access](#). October 2021. Hutchinson Community Foundation.

Muir, P. (September 1st, 2018). [New leader Sharon Miracle has big ambitions for Yakima Valley Community Foundation](#). *Yakima Herald*.

Muller, N. (May 6th, 2021). [Mental Health is Health...and we cannot afford not to fund it](#). United for Global Mental Health.

Mzezewa, T. (December 12th, 2022). [In Appalachia, Margo Miller Leads From a 'Place of Courageous Joy'](#). *New York Times*.

National Center for Education Statistics. [Common Core of Data, Public School Data, 2021-2022 School Year](#).

[Native American Agriculture Fund](#).

[Nichole June Maher](#). (n.d.). Group Health Foundation.

Ochs, A. (September 6th, 2019). [Iowa Grants for Nonprofits: Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque](#). Inside Philanthropy.

Ochs, A. (September 21st, 2021). [What Minnesota Nonprofits Should Know About the Blandin Foundation](#). Inside Philanthropy.

[Oral Health in Rural Communities](#). (n.d.). Rural Health Information Hub.

[Oregon Community Foundation](#). (n.d.). Community Impact: Education.

[Our History: The Praxis Project](#). (n.d.). The Praxis Project.

[Our Story: The Road to Newbern](#). (n.d.). Rural Studio.

[Tuleah Palmer](#). (n.d.). Blandin Foundation.

[Pathways to Securing Rural Federal Funding](#). (January 7, 2022). Ford Family Foundation.

[Patterson Family Foundation](#).

Pender, J. (June 2015). [Foundation Grants to Rural Areas from 2005 to 2010 Trends and Patterns](#). USDA Economic Research Service.

Perrin, A. (August 21st, 2020). [Digital gap between rural and nonrural America persists](#). Pew Research.

Peterkin, E. (July 5th, 2022). [Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative Names New Executive Director](#). Pacific Business News.

Petrovich, J. (December 2018). [Philanthropy and Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria](#). Red de Fundaciones de Puerto Rico.

[Philanthropist Donates \\$6 Million to Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health](#). (November 16th, 2022). Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health.

[Philanthropy Colorado: Rural Funders Learning Network](#).

[Pride Foundation](#).



[Public Health Funders: Maine Health Access Foundation.](#) (n.d.) *Inside Philanthropy*.

Ramirez, M. (January 5th, 2022). [Why Philanthropy Continues to Underfund Rural America- and What Grantmakers Can Do.](#) *Inside Philanthropy*.

Ramirez, M. (April 10, 2023). [Here Are Five Grantmakers Funding the Rural Midwest.](#) *Inside Philanthropy*.

Reilly, C. (January 25th, 2018). [The Regional Funders Backing Early Childhood Learning—With a Twist.](#) *Inside Philanthropy*.

Reilly, C. (April 5th, 2019). [Census 2020: Inside Efforts to Make Sure Rural Communities Count.](#) *Inside Philanthropy*.

Report for America. (July 14, 2022). [Report for America opens newsroom applications, expands opportunities to hire more journalists.](#)

[Resources for Philanthropic Engagement.](#) (n.d.). National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health.

[Revealing Rural Realities: What Fuels Inaccurate and Incomplete Coverage of Rural Issues?](#) (May 1, 2020.) Aspen Institute, Community Strategies Group.

[Roundhouse Foundation.](#)

Rosenboom, V. & Blagg, K. (January 2018). [Disconnected from Higher Education: How Geography and Internet Speed Limit Access to Higher Education.](#) Urban Institute.

[Rural counties drive the 2000-2011 growth in U.S. onshore production of oil and natural gas.](#) (February 21st, 2014). USDA Economic Research Service.

[Rural Giving: Strategies for Philanthropic Families.](#) (n.d.). National Center for Family Philanthropy.

[Rural Health.](#) (n.d.). Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

[Rural Health Equity Research Center.](#) (n.d.). East Tennessee State University.

Rupinsky, S. (January 20th, 2022). [How Climate Change Offers Opportunities to Revitalize and Reconnect with Rural Communities.](#) Colorado State University School of Global Environmental Sustainability.

Rural Health Information Hub. (n.d.) [Rural Suicide Prevention Toolkit: Suicide in Rural Areas.](#)

Rush-Marlowe, R. (2021). [Strengthening Rural Community Colleges: Innovations and Opportunities.](#) Association of Community College Trustees.

[The Sapelo Foundation.](#)

Save the Children Action Network. (2023). [Rural Voters Support Investments to Address Hunger & Provide Quality, Affordable Child Care.](#)

Schaefer, A., Mattingly, M. J. & Johnson, K. M. (Winter, 2016). [Child Poverty Higher and More Persistent in Rural America.](#) University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policy.

Simpson, A. (October 21, 2019). [As Local News Outlets Shutter, Rural America Suffers Most.](#) The Pew Charitable Trusts.

[Small Towns Need Big Investments: Bridging the Rural Philanthropic Gap.](#) (n.d.). Giving Compass.

Smart, A. (December 4th, 2018). [Will These Big New Foundations Pay Attention to Rural America?](#) *Inside Philanthropy*.

Smart, A. & Ault, A. (November 6th, 2022). [The State of American Philanthropy: Giving for the Northwest.](#) *Inside Philanthropy*.

[Southern Partners Fund.](#)

[Southwest Initiative Foundation.](#) (n.d.) Early Care and Education.

[State of Philanthropy in Rural Areas.](#) Rural Health Information Hub.

Stitzel, J. & Cohen, R. (November 18th, 2015). [Improving Dental Care Access in Rural America.](#) Pew Trust.

[Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders.](#)

[Sweirzewski, R. Rural Philanthropy: Building Dialogue from Within. \(August 2007\). National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.](#)

[Texoma Health Foundation.](#)

[The Power of Capital in Rural Entrepreneurship. \(September 22, 2020\). Center on Rural Innovation.](#)

[The Power of People and Place: How the Humboldt Area Foundations Transforms Philanthropic Giving. \(December 14th, 2020\). Borealis Philanthropy.](#)

[The Roundhouse Foundation Story. \(n.d.\). The Roundhouse Foundation.](#)

[Tressie White. \(n.d.\). Montana Healthcare Foundation.](#)

[United Philanthropy Forum.](#)

[United States Department of Agriculture. \(n.d.\) Economic Research Service. Rural Education.](#)

[United States Department of Commerce. \(May 13, 2022\). Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration’s “Internet for All” Initiative: Bringing Affordable, Reliable High-Speed Internet to Everyone in America.](#)

[The Vermont Community Foundation. \(n.d.\).](#)

[W.K. Kellogg Foundation. \(n.d.\). Dental Therapy.](#)

[Weeks, O. \(May 21, 2021\). Q&A: Sociologist Mil Duncan on the Plight of “Transitioning” Rural Communities. The Daily Yonder.](#)

[Weeks, O. \(November 11, 2022\). Q&A: What Data Tells Us about Rural Housing Cost Burdens. The Daily Yonder.](#)

[What is Rural? \(n.d.\). Rural Health Information Hub.](#)

[Williams, T. \(July 29, 2016\). This Corporate Funder is Prioritizing STEM Shortfalls in Rural Areas. Inside Philanthropy.](#)

[Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.](#)

[Zimmerman, K. \(June 29, 2020\). Mental Health Needs to Be a Top Priority for Philanthropy. Here’s Why. Inside Philanthropy.](#)

## Photo Credit

W.K. Kellogg Foundation [La June Montgomery Tabron Reception](#). La June Montgomery Tabron, President and CEO, W.K. Kellogg Foundation. March 6, 2014. Used with permission under [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic](#) license (CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0).

# Thank You

*Thanks to the individuals who were interviewed or provided valuable background information for this report:*

Nichole June Maher, Inatai Foundation, Washington  
Kim Davis, Walton Family Foundation, Arkansas  
David Jordan, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Kansas  
Denise Herrera, Con Alma Health Foundation,  
Margo Miller, Appalachian Community Fund, Appalachia  
Tuleah Palmer, Blandin Foundation, Minnesota  
Tressie White, Montana Healthcare Foundation, Montana

## Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project. Each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in September 2023. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at [managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com](mailto:managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com).