

Pathways to Securing Rural Federal Funding



RURAL PROSPERITY
PARTNERS



January 7, 2022

Prepared by Rural Prosperity Partners for
The Ford Family Foundation





Contents

Introduction	1
Executive Summary	2
Audience	3
Methodology	3
Survey Results	4
Focus Groups Poll Data	5
Thematic Areas	6
Sub-Themes	13
Partnerships	15
Recommendations	17
Conclusion	19
Appendix A: Focus Group Questions and Interviews	20
Appendix B: About Rural Prosperity Partners	21



January 25, 2022

Dear Readers,

For many years, the staff of The Ford Family Foundation have observed that rural nonprofits and agencies have had challenges accessing public sector funding streams from federal and state governments. This pattern was pronounced after the federal COVID-19 relief packages — the CARES Act and ARPA — were passed in 2020 and 2021, and we are concerned that it will persist as the funds from the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act are deployed. There is an opportunity to access and utilize these funds for the betterment of rural communities in Oregon and Siskiyou County, Calif. that we cannot ignore. As we discussed this issue with other organizations and leaders in the fields of economic development and social supports, we learned that the challenges we have been seeing affect small organizations everywhere as well as those serving populations of color.

We asked Rural Prosperity Partners to undertake research that would add evidence to our anecdotes, analyze the causes of inequitable access to public funds and develop recommendations for addressing the problem. We are grateful to the interviewees who were so generous with their time and insights. Their wisdom is woven together and forms the recommendations presented here.

Readers will note that the report recommends an ambitious range of actions, both short- and long-term. It is beyond the capacity of The Ford Family Foundation to act on all these recommendations. To make significant progress on this challenge, many funders, technical experts and organizational leaders will need to work on various pieces of the strategies outlined in this report. As a region, we have a rich history of accomplishing difficult and great things together. And it will take many of us, working in coordination, to progress from opportunity to community impact.

We thank Rachael Maddock-Hughes and Sherry DeLeon for articulating a path forward so clearly. We hope this report is disseminated widely and inspires action from all sectors.

Anne C. Kubisch, President

Kathleen Flanagan, Director for Community Economic Development

Max Gimbel, Director for Ford Institute for Community Building



Executive Summary

The Ford Family Foundation contracted with Rural Prosperity Partners to conduct a study of the challenges faced by rural communities in securing federal funds. This report includes the findings from the data collected. The primary audience was rural nonprofits and rural jurisdictions across the state of Oregon. A mixed methodology was used for this project. Data was gathered through an online survey, two focus groups, and one-on-one interviews.

The three greatest challenges faced by rural entities in securing federal funding, in order of importance, are: lack of capacity, lack of expertise, and external resources. Additionally, there were two sub-themes: 1) diversity, equity, and inclusion; and 2) networking/coalition building. This report provides short-term, mid-term, and long-term recommendations for all three challenges. Additionally, it outlines potential partnerships and recommended next steps.

The top five recommendations to address these challenges include:

1	Create a cohort model of grant-writing/project management teams across Oregon based in existing rural organizations
2	Establish a pre-planning/engineering, coalition building and grant application grant fund
3	Establish a federal matching grant fund
4	Create a live federal prospects document
5	Provide federal grant-writing training to rural entities

Audience

For the purposes of this report, our research focuses on nonprofits, foundations and jurisdictions in rural Oregon.

The full list of entities, focus groups and survey questions is listed in Appendix A.



Methodology

This report sought to identify challenges and opportunities for rural nonprofits in Oregon in leveraging federal funding. The primary audience was rural nonprofits and rural jurisdictions across the state of Oregon.

A mixed methodology was used for this project. Data was gathered through an online survey, two focus groups and one-on-one interviews with 18 entities. Exploratory research was conducted on the challenges of rural entities in accessing federal funding. Both primary and secondary research was conducted, using a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Constituent selection: The Ford Family Foundation provided recommendations of rural organizations, foundations and jurisdictions for surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews. The Nonprofit Association of Oregon provided recommendations of nonprofit organizations for the online survey. Eighteen nonprofit executives were engaged in one-on-one interviews, 27 nonprofits participated in focus groups, and 33 nonprofits received the online survey.

A 15-question survey was translated into Spanish and distributed electronically. Of the surveys sent directly by Rural Prosperity Partners, 30 were returned, for a 90% response rate. Sector intermediaries such as NAO and the United Way of Linn, Benton, & Lincoln Counties also distributed the survey to their network.

Two focus groups were also conducted. The primary audience was executive directors and development officers. Eleven participants attended the first focus group and 16 attended the second. Participants were asked a series of questions, including three live polls during the focus group.

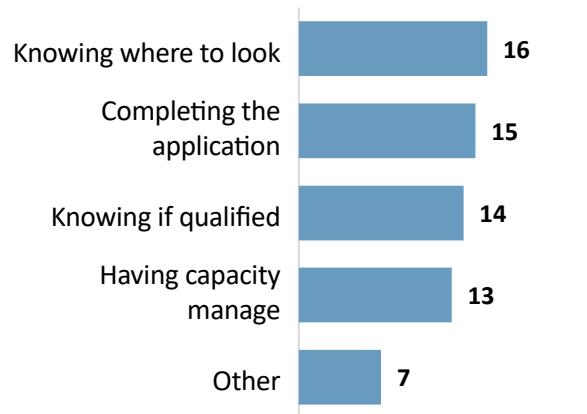
Survey Results

For the survey, there were a total of 30 responses.

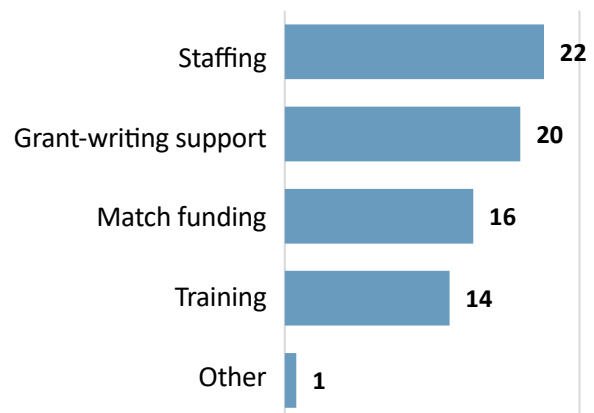
90%	of the respondents represented nonprofits.
13.3%	of the respondents said their entity was "culturally specific"
50%	of the organizations represented applied for federal funding since the pandemic began.
67%	of respondents represented entities with budgets of less than \$500k.
46.7%	of respondents were aware of federal funding opportunities that they might qualify for.
83%	of respondents plan on applying for federal funding in 2022.

The biggest challenges for respondents seeking to apply for federal funding are knowing where to look for opportunities; completing the application; knowing if they are eligible for funding; having the capacity to manage federal funding; and other.

What is your biggest challenge to seeking federal funding opportunities?



If you have applied for federal funding opportunities, what has been the most challenging part of the application?



Culturally Specific Organizations

Only four out of 30 respondents considered themselves “culturally responsive.” Of those, two had budgets under \$500,000 and two had budgets over \$2.5 million. Seventy-five percent of these organizations had not applied for federal funding since the pandemic began and 75% of these organizations were not aware of federal funding opportunities they may be eligible for, a higher percentage than the general group.

The culturally specific organizations who had \$2.5 million budgets or above identified the following as the biggest challenges in seeking federal funding: knowing where to look for funding; knowing whether they qualify for funding; and completing the application.

Of the culturally specific organizations with budgets under \$500,000, none of them had applied for federal funding prior to the pandemic, none were aware of funding opportunities they might be eligible for, none applied for federal funding during the pandemic, and only 50% were planning on applying for federal funding in 2022.

These organizations identified the following as the biggest challenges in seeking federal funding: knowing where to look for funding; knowing whether they qualify for funding; completing the application; and having the capacity to manage federal funding.

Regardless of their budget size, culturally specific organizations identified the following kinds of support that would allow them to be better positioned to apply for federal funding: staffing; match; grant-writing support; and training.

Organizations with Budgets Under \$500,000

Respondents from organizations with budgets under \$500,000 had much lower numbers in terms of previously applying for federal funding (30%), being aware of opportunities they are eligible for (40%), and applying during the pandemic (40%) as compared to organizations with budgets over \$500,000. Of the organizations with larger budgets, 70% had previously applied for federal funding, 60% were aware of opportunities they were eligible for, and 80% applied for federal funds during the pandemic.

Organizations with budgets under \$500,000 who applied for federal funding had similarities to their larger-budget peers in their challenges completing the application, however, they noted more challenges with using grants.gov and navigating the DUNS/SAM registration process.

Focus Groups Poll Data

2 focus groups, 27 total respondents

Did you apply for federal grants?

No 55%

Yes 45%

Who is responsible for writing grants in your agency?

Development staff 23%

Executive director 54%

Other 23%

Are you planning to apply for federal funds?

Yes 78%

No 22%

What support is most useful?

More internal staffing 45%

External grant writer 13%

Understanding eligibility 9%

Match 22%



Thematic Areas

The three greatest challenges that emerged from data collected during this project were:

1. Capacity
2. Expertise
3. Match/External Resources

Each theme is listed below in weighted order. In addition, there were two recurring sub-themes that were woven throughout: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Networking/Coalition Building.

Theme #1: Lack of Capacity

Based on the data collected from surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews, we identified lack of capacity as one of the three greatest challenges to nonprofits in applying for federal funding.

As evidenced by the focus group and survey data, 67% of participants had an organizational budget of less than \$500,000. Most of these organizations had fewer than three paid staff members, with the executive director assuming the role of development officer/grant writer. Interviewees affirmed that there is no redundancy in staffing at small nonprofits, and leadership often wears multiple hats, creating capacity constraints.

Furthermore, nonprofits have a high employee turnover rate (Bur, 2017) due to excessive workloads, inflexible schedules and lack of mobility. According to Amy Jester of the Humboldt Area Foundation, securing internal staff in rural areas is challenging as people tend to move to big cities. Another focus group participant, Chuck Trent of the Boys & Girls Club of Western Lane County, said that staff in rural nonprofits wear four to five hats and are short-staffed. This lack of capacity prevents rural organizations and jurisdictions from applying for federal funding.

Federal funding opportunities often require a quick turnaround (four to six weeks) from posting to deadline. For short-staffed nonprofits, there is not enough lead time to secure the letters of support, match confirmation, and develop an application while balancing other staffing duties, such as management and payroll. According to one Siskiyou County resident, “There is a challenge of the funds coming fast with short deadlines.”

Federal grants require readiness. Initial steps such as securing a DUNS number, SAM registration, and access to grants.gov can take several weeks.

“There is a challenge of the funds coming fast with short deadlines.”

Marie Caldwell, SiskiyouWorks

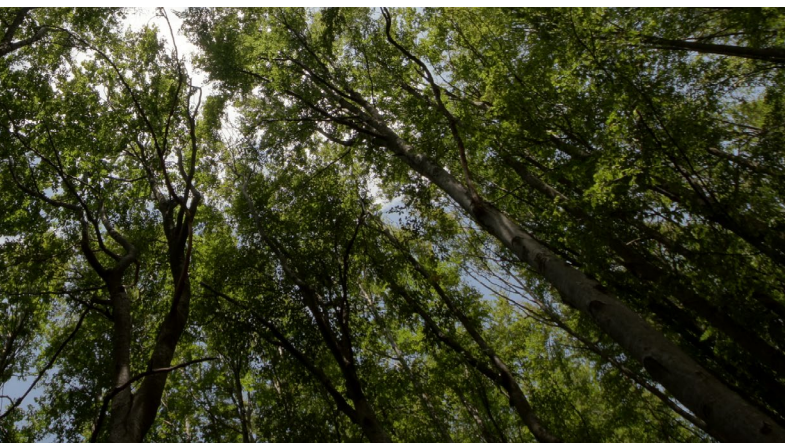
Rural organizations and jurisdictions with few staff members often don’t have the time to complete the pre-registration process, yet need to have this information ready when an opportunity is published. Infrastructure grants require applicants to be shovel ready. Yet rural organizations and jurisdictions often don’t have the capacity nor the funding to do the required feasibility studies and engineering reports to meet the shovel-ready requirements.

Furthermore, federal grants require extensive estimates, quotes and financials as part of the submission package. Many small rural organizations and jurisdictions do not have the capacity to produce these materials within the timeframe required for submission and may not have a designated financial officer who can assist in producing these materials.

Many rural organizations and jurisdictions have participated, at one time or another, in some type of grant-writing training. However, one-off trainings don’t really work well unless they are paired with mentorship and technical assistance that helps an organization work through an actual grant. Meredith Howell at NeighborWorks Umpqua has been providing non-federal grant-writing training to nonprofits for years. Her instruction receives rave reviews, according to The Ford Family Foundation. Howell says this is due to the experiential nature of her training—she helps organizations walk through an application that they are currently working on. They come out of the training with a useful product and have been able to put theory into practice with the help of a mentor.

It may not be in the best interest for smaller rural organizations with limited capacity to seek federal funding by themselves. Federal grants have high reporting and accounting requirements. If a rural organization or jurisdiction is not able to properly manage the reporting and paperwork related to the grant, it may not be in their best interest to apply. In fact, according to Kristin Monahan of Kelly Nonprofit, it may end up costing the organization more than they received in grant funding, due to the extra staffing and time required to manage the award. An alternative for these organizations would be to organize a coalition with other groups seeking funding.

Lastly, some rural jurisdictions may only need to apply for federal funding on an irregular basis. If so, it may not be worth the time and effort of investing in extensive training or capacity building around federal grants. It makes more sense to hire a grant-writing consultant and a temporary program manager for the life of the grant. According to USDA's Jill Rees, an example would be a project to replace a water system, which may only be needed every 50 years. In this instance, it would be more practical to hire short-term external support to manage the project, as it is not a recurring long-term program.



Lack of Capacity: Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

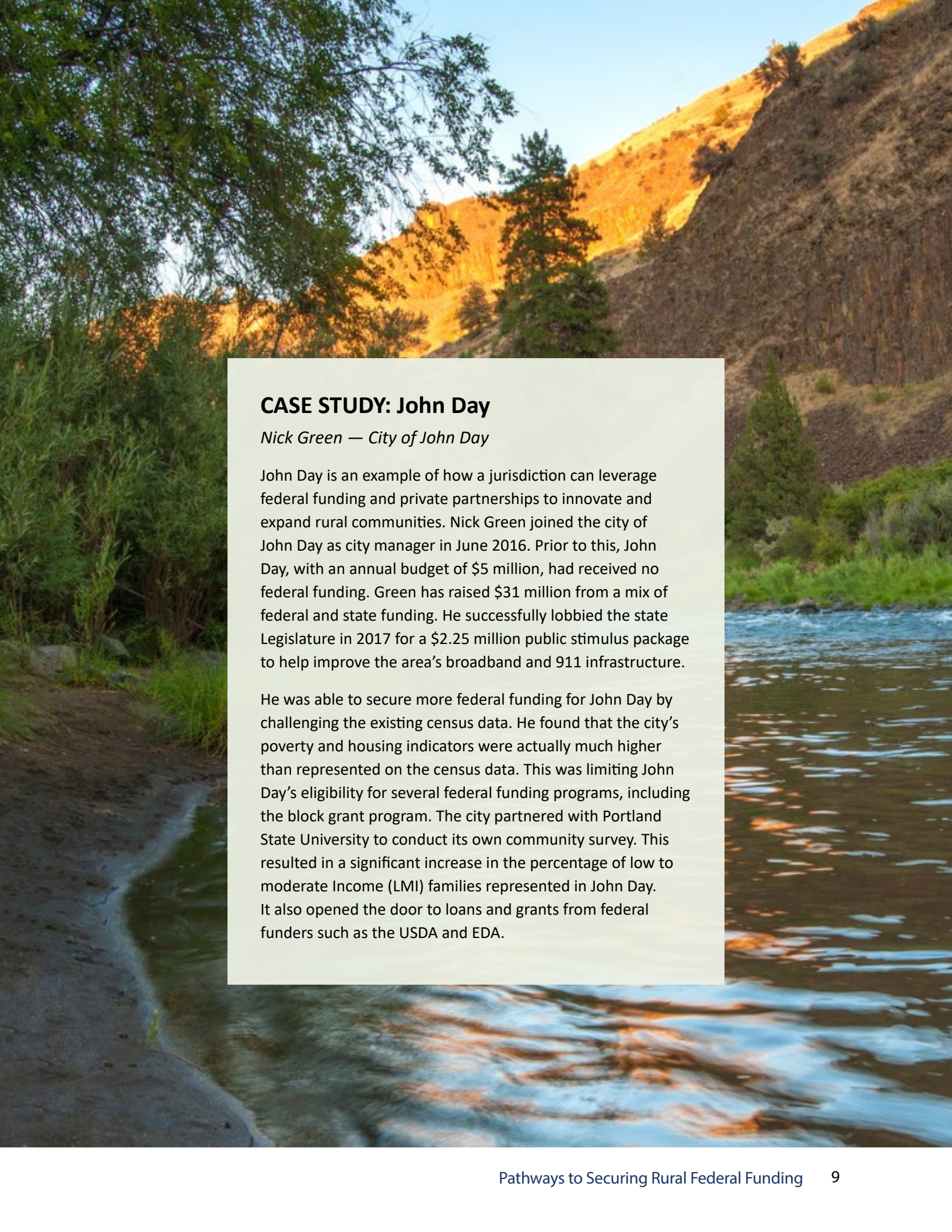
1. Create and disseminate federal grant readiness assessment.
2. Connect small, rural organizations and jurisdictions to existing coalitions (match-making).
3. Provide grants for planning, engineering and design, coalition building and to hire grant writers.

Mid-term recommendations

1. Based on the outcome of the readiness assessment, provide grants and technical assistance (training, or one-on-one mentoring) to help rural organizations and jurisdictions build their capacity towards being federal-grant ready.
2. Provide multi-year grant support for internal staff for small rural organizations and jurisdictions.
3. Provide federal and state grant-writing training directly to rural organizations and jurisdictions to build their long-term, internal capacity.

Long-term recommendations

1. Create a cohort model of grant-writing/project management teams across rural Oregon that are based in economic development districts, community action agencies, or other organizations that have taken on similar work in a region.



CASE STUDY: John Day

Nick Green — City of John Day

John Day is an example of how a jurisdiction can leverage federal funding and private partnerships to innovate and expand rural communities. Nick Green joined the city of John Day as city manager in June 2016. Prior to this, John Day, with an annual budget of \$5 million, had received no federal funding. Green has raised \$31 million from a mix of federal and state funding. He successfully lobbied the state Legislature in 2017 for a \$2.25 million public stimulus package to help improve the area's broadband and 911 infrastructure.

He was able to secure more federal funding for John Day by challenging the existing census data. He found that the city's poverty and housing indicators were actually much higher than represented on the census data. This was limiting John Day's eligibility for several federal funding programs, including the block grant program. The city partnered with Portland State University to conduct its own community survey. This resulted in a significant increase in the percentage of low to moderate Income (LMI) families represented in John Day. It also opened the door to loans and grants from federal funders such as the USDA and EDA.

Theme #2: Lack of Expertise

The lack of expertise in both knowledge and access to tools was one of the top three challenges.

The process of identifying potential opportunities was a challenge for many respondents.

“I don’t have hours to search grants.gov four hours a day to find them. I am currently reaching out to federal partners to get on their radar to send me grant notifications that even mention arts and culture. But that takes time” —Baker County resident

Some respondents used grants.gov, but many were notified of opportunities through formal and informal networks. There was no systematic way in which respondents accessed information about potential opportunities.

Once respondents had identified opportunities, many were challenged to understand if they were eligible or not. Eligibility is complex for both the entity and the project. In addition, different federal agencies often use different definitions of “rural,” making it hard to understand eligibility. The city of John Day, population about 2,300, applied for one grant where the definition of “rural” was under 250,000 people. According to the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture:

“Researchers and policy officials employ many definitions to distinguish rural from urban areas, which often leads to unnecessary confusion and unwanted mismatches in program eligibility... seemingly small changes in the way rural areas are defined can have large impacts on who and what are considered rural. Researchers and policymakers share the task of choosing appropriately from among alternate rural definitions currently available or creating their own unique definitions.”

“As for the applications - the most challenging part of the applications is usually figuring out what they want. The questions are often confusing and repetitive”

Wallowa County resident

It isn’t just eligibility that matters, but also competitiveness. You may have a project that qualifies “technically,” but isn’t actually competitive. In addition, many agencies are predisposed to specific subcategories of projects (which isn’t specifically stated in the grant guidance. There are unspoken aspects to a grant application process that rural organizations and jurisdictions won’t know if they don’t have strong relationships with agency funders.

Understanding the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) was also highlighted as a challenge.

“As for the applications - the most challenging part of the applications is usually figuring out what they want. The questions are often confusing and repetitive” —Mona Williams, Helping Hearts

NOFOs can be 20-40 pages long, with links connecting to other documents as background reading. They are complicated and take experience to understand. Once a potential applicant has read through the NOFO, a big part of the work is understanding how to align their project within the framework of the grant opportunity. Some communities may think their project doesn’t align, when in fact it would with some slight reframing.

If a community then decides to apply, one of the biggest challenges is data. This includes knowing what data is available, being able to use data sources like census.gov, and tracking organizational impact data. There are a myriad of data sources available to prospective applicants. However, even experts in the field of grant-writing are constantly

discovering new resources. Navigating data sources can be challenging. Many smaller organizations rely on story-driven data to make their case. However, federal applications have an extremely high standard for data, so if organizations have not invested in tracking both quantifiable as well as story-driven data, they will not be able to make their “need” case strong enough to be competitive.

Many grant writers around the state specialize in particular agency grant applications. This is because each agency has a set of both written rules and tips and tricks that aren’t apparent until you’ve done several applications of the same type. It often takes years to acquire in-depth knowledge of one agency’s process, rules, forms and applications. An example is Business Oregon’s Community Development Block Grants. The process for applying is so arduous and complicated that many smaller jurisdictions actively avoid this funding source.

Statewide expertise is also lacking. The Ford Family Foundation, as well as the Gordon Elwood Foundation, have both made investments to build the next generation of federal grant writers. However, in the case of TFFF’s cohort, many of those participants have retired or are no longer engaged as federal grant-writing consultants. Some have taken on jobs with specific agencies where their time is limited. The Gordon Elwood Foundation trained a cohort in Southern Oregon in 2020. They had great success, but there is still significant need beyond the supply of existing federal grant writers. The partners at Rural Prosperity Partners, as well as Kelly Nonprofit, can attest to the demand outweighing the supply of grant writers, especially during the pandemic. A larger number of grant writers needs to be trained or identified to support the demand in rural Oregon. Efforts to build a new cohort of professional federal grant writers needs to be cyclical, such as running a project every other year or every three years.

Lack of Expertise: Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

1. Create a live federal prospects document (or online tool) that is easily searchable and updated on a bi-weekly basis.
2. Staff data-navigator position(s) for rural communities.
3. Staff prospecting/eligibility navigator position(s) for rural communities.

Mid-term recommendations

1. Engage agency-specific grant writers to create cheat-sheets for specific agency funding opportunities.
2. Provide training on monitoring, evaluation and learning systems (ME&L) for small organizations.
3. Initiate a third type of grant-writing training (see earlier sections above for first two) for beginning federal grant writers who are “free agents,” or not necessarily connected with an existing organization.

Long-term recommendations

1. Engage in advocacy on aligning rural definition standards for the federal agencies that provide the most funding in Oregon.
2. Support advocacy on simplifying federal and state applications so that rural areas are not left out of the process.

Theme #3: External Resources

Resource challenges was a recurring theme by both survey and interview respondents. Most EDA (U.S. Economic Development Administration) and USDA grants require cost sharing. Less experienced rural organizations and jurisdictions often struggle to identify eligible match within the timeframe of the application. Many rural organizations and jurisdictions may not have access to qualified matching funds or even have an understanding of the types of funding that will qualify as a match. For example, while most federal agencies will not allow other sources of federal funding to serve as a match, they will accept loans from federal agencies such as the USDA. This is often not understood by potential applicants.

According to Jessica Metta, Mid-Columbia Economic Development District, “Another major challenge is finding the match dollars required to apply.”

Even when rural organizations or jurisdictions identify funds that are eligible for cost share, documenting this funding is challenging as it often requires a resolution and/or letter of commitment that can take several weeks to secure.

Letters of support are also critical to most applications, yet require significant lead time and established relationships. Some rural nonprofits and jurisdictions don’t recognize the significance of the letters of support or the necessity of having letters representing multi-stakeholder (public, private, non-profit) collaboration and community input. All federal grants want to see a strong collaboration between the lead agency and external stakeholders, and this is evidenced by letters of support.

External Resources: Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

1. Provide letters of support for communities applying for federal funding.
2. Develop a responsive match fund pooled among multiple foundations to allow rural organizations and jurisdictions to meet the eligibility requirements for cost share.

Mid-term recommendations

1. Provide training and resources to rural organizations and jurisdictions about ways to explore multiple-funding scenarios, such as “one-stops” (a meeting held with multiple funders at one time).



“Another major challenge is finding the match dollars required to apply.”

Columbia County resident

Sub-Themes

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Since 2020, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and climate change have taken on new importance in the scoring of grant applications. According to USDA's Jill Rees, some opportunities at her agency award priority points for factors such as climate change, COVID impact, or DEI. This often creates an added barrier for rural communities. Some criteria are quantitative and based on census or other geographically based data that will qualify or disqualify a region. This is true for equity and COVID-impacted areas. In other cases, such as climate change, the organization can make a narrative case as to why they should receive priority points in this category. This requires training and expertise in researching data to support their case and understanding which priority categories require empirical data and narrative.

According to the U.S. Census, in Oregon counties with 50,000 population or less, about 79% of the population is white. While this only represents one characteristic diversity, it is often the measure used by rural organizations and jurisdictions to substantiate diversity. Some organizations believe that they are not eligible to apply because they lack racial diversity. And rural organizations and jurisdictions often lack the capacity and knowledge about how to engage diverse communities and work to promote inclusion, which would provide better programming and more competitive applications.



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Recommendations

An investment in DEI initiatives in rural communities is needed, including capacity-building efforts to promote inclusion and tools to appropriately engage diverse communities. We believe these efforts should be immediate and sustained.

1. Invest in diversity, equity and Inclusion initiatives in rural communities, including in capacity-building efforts to promote inclusion, and in tools to appropriately engage diverse communities, including paying people with lived experience for their participation in DEI activities.
2. Support rural areas in developing coalitions to promote inclusivity and ensure that minority populations are represented and have active voices in decision-making activities.

Relationships + Coalition Building

Coalition building is a critical part of securing federal funding but rural organizations and jurisdictions frequently cited a lack of capacity and skill in this area. Coalition building is particularly important for rural organizations and jurisdictions that may be too small to be competitive on their own, aren't eligible because of their entity type, or don't have the capacity to manage a federal grant on their own. Coalition building should happen months in advance of an application to a federal funding source to be competitive, but many rural organizations and jurisdictions can't afford this upfront investment. Rural organizations and jurisdictions often need an external expert to help them with this because they are at- or over-capacity with their own staff. Without dedicated, sustained leadership, these coalitions often fail. Coalitions can also bring in external stakeholders who can provide letters of support, which are critical for federal funding applications but require existing relationships and lead time.

Federal funding disseminated through state agencies can be a significant opportunity for rural communities. Local elected and community leaders can help advocate for their communities to secure this funding. However, many do not have a firm grasp of how to engage state-level decision-makers or face barriers that deny them access. Often, local leaders rely on statewide intermediaries, such as professional associations, to influence how state legislators or agencies spend federal funds. However, according to early insights from community engagement led by Janet Soto Rodriguez at Foundations for a Better Oregon, rural communities recognize drawbacks in this approach. Intermediaries broadly understand challenges in rural Oregon but often cannot articulate the nuances of what rural communities need. This disconnect risks generalizing rural

Oregon as a monolith and misrepresenting the needs and hopes of Oregon's diverse rural communities. Rural organizations and jurisdictions need and crave a clean line of communication with their state legislators and other state-level decision-makers.

While some respondents noted that they had good, working relationships with federal funding agencies such as USDA, EDA and Business Oregon, many others did not. As resource development experts, Rural Prosperity Partners would never submit an application without serious consultation with the funding agency. "Cold" applications are rarely successful. This is where a lack of capacity and knowledge are hampering the ability of rural organizations and jurisdictions to establish important relationships that could help them secure more funding.

Relationships + Coalition Building: Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

1. Provide grants for coalition building.

Mid-term recommendations

1. Provide training to coalitions on relationship building with congressional representatives and federal agencies, as well as the basic federal grant opportunity cycle.

Long-term recommendations

1. Provide training on the legislative process and how it impacts funding streams
2. Advocate with federal agency representatives to do more outreach in rural jurisdictions.

Partnerships

Partnerships between public and private funding will be critical to building long-term capacity in rural communities to secure federal funding. In our interviews, we heard a common theme of wanting to work together more systematically moving forward. This sentiment was expressed by the Nonprofit Association of Oregon, United Way of Linn, Benton & Lincoln Counties, Gordon Elwood Foundation, Benton Community Foundation, Foundations for a Better Oregon, Business Oregon and many others.

One thing that came to light is a need for more clarity on what types of initiatives foundations are best suited to help address, and what agencies like Business Oregon can do—and how these can dovetail together. For example, The Ford Family Foundation has done amazing work around coalition building. For example, their support allowed A Greater Applegate to do initial community engagement and coalition building, leading to a large federal grant. Business Oregon expressed a very serious interest in working more closely with foundations. The United Way of Linn, Benton & Lincoln Counties expressed a desire to help underwrite the creation of a federal grant training specifically for rural Oregon. Benton Community Foundation has promised to underwrite scholarships for BIPOC community members/organizations to attend grant-writing trainings. The Nonprofit Association of Oregon has expressed interest in hosting federal grant-writing training for its members, as well.



Partnerships: Recommendations

1. Set up a structured engagement between foundations, Business Oregon, state agencies that disseminate federal funds, and regional federal agency representatives to discuss roles and how to best leverage each other's work.
2. Convene community foundations, United Way chapters



CASE STUDY: A Greater Applegate

Seth Kaplan-A Greater Applegate

The story of A Greater Applegate is an example of how an organization has engaged the community through collaboration and community input to help transform a rural community. Applegate is centrally isolated, nestled between Grants Pass and Jacksonville. The Applegate Valley is defined by the Applegate River, which flows from its headwaters in the Siskiyou Mountains of Jackson County to its confluence with the Rogue River in Josephine County. The Applegate Valley lacks infrastructure. It lacks basic community facilities such as community centers, bike paths and meeting places. There was also no mechanism to coordinate projects.

In 2017, A Greater Applegate approached The Ford Family Foundation for a one-year grant to reorganize the community. This was followed by a two-year grant to support the design process leading to a three-year grant to support vision, planning and implementation. Through a community listening process and funder engagement, the Applegate Valley has defined itself as a place and has begun to transform into a vibrant rural community. Leveraging the work from the Foundation, the organization was recently awarded a USDA Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge grant of \$246,310 to create a plan for Applegate Valley to make the community vibrant and livable. Through this grant, AGA will work with USDA to build a community action team to implement projects in Jackson and Josephine counties in Oregon.

A Greater Applegate builds community by sustaining and enhancing local connections that promote the environmental, economic and social vitality of the Applegate Valley. AGA demonstrates that community values, vision, and voices lead to meaningful community action through neighborhood connections and business and nonprofit networks.

Recommendations

1. Create a cohort model of grant-writing/project management teams across Oregon based in existing rural organizations.

Economic development districts, community action agencies and similar organizations play a critical role in helping their regions move forward in securing federal funding opportunities. In most cases, they are well-established and financially stable. They have the internal infrastructure to support applications better than smaller jurisdictions, and the ability to bring together coalitions. Investing in these organizations' capacity will have an exponential impact on rural communities' ability to secure funding. We recommend partnering with other funders (such as the Business Oregon Rural Capacity Fund and other foundations) to pay for existing staff or hire new staff to be trained over the period of one year. Ideally, each organization would have an internal team made up of a grant writer, a project manager and a finance manager. However, a grant writer alone would suffice. These cohorts would then be provided with mentorship and in-depth training on the grant cycle for one year. Training should include: identifying opportunities, coalition building, determining eligibility, securing match, specific agency training (USDA, EDA, etc.), grant management, and establishing relationships with funding agencies and elected officials. By connecting multiple cohorts across the state, a peer network of support is created that will contribute to success. We recommend running this type of program for at least three to five years, building more cohorts across the state across different agencies. In addition, these cohorts could then take on local federal grant-writing training (see #5 below), and they could serve as local response teams who help secure federal resources during emergencies (such as COVID or natural disasters).

Actionable Items

This report is an important first step in creating a supportive ecosystem for rural nonprofits and jurisdictions to secure more federal funding. Recommendations for next steps for The Ford Family Foundation include:

- Share this report with those interviewed.
- Share it with other key stakeholders as needed for input.
- Gather a group of key stakeholders to discuss how to move this issue forward based on recommendations.
- Build a very high level two- to three-year road map.
- Develop a core team, ideally as a partnership/coalition, with dedicated capacity to lead the road map.
- Celebrate and reflect on accomplishments, challenges and opportunities regularly.

2. Establish a pre-planning/engineering, coalition building and grant application grant fund

Working with other foundations across the state, establish a pooled grant fund that is specifically designated for pre-planning/engineering, coalition building and grant-writing support. Rural jurisdictions often lack both the capacity and funding to engage in critical pre-grant activities, as well as the expertise to do the actual grant writing. Ensure these funds are flexible and can be used for either in-house staffing, or external support from consultants is ideal. This will be particularly important in securing funding in 2022, as most entities will not be able to hire new staff in enough time with current workforce challenges. Coalition building and grant-writing funding ideally would be multi-year awards to allow grantees to build capacity in these areas.

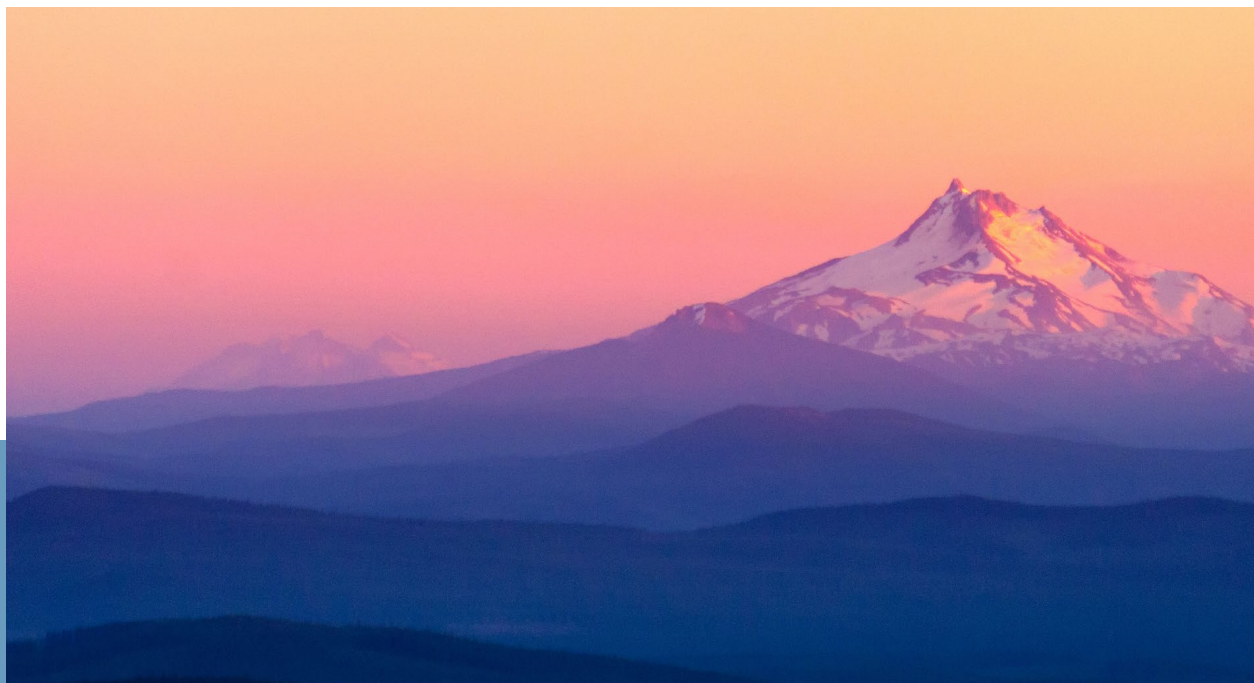
3. Establish a federal matching grant fund

Working with other foundations across the state, establish a pooled grant fund that is specifically designated for use as matching funds for state and federal applications. Matching fund requirements can be 20-50% of the total project cost, which is prohibitive for many rural jurisdictions and nonprofits and discourages them from applying. These funds could be available for federal grant applications, and paid out only after the federal grant has been awarded.

4. Create a live federal prospects document. Funding opportunities are posted on a regular basis, but few rural jurisdictions or nonprofits have the capacity to consistently be on the lookout. This tool should be updated on a bi-weekly basis to stay current with opportunities. With additional investment, this tool could become an online, searchable database that allows potential grantees to identify federal opportunities, understand eligibility, identify contacts, and notify rural jurisdictions and nonprofits of potential opportunities based on their identified programmatic interest areas.

5. Provide federal grant-writing training to rural entities

Provide federal and state grant-writing training directly to rural organizations and jurisdictions to build their long-term internal capacity. This training should include one-on-one technical assistance/mentoring hours and be experiential to ensure rural organizations and jurisdictions are able to fully leverage the training. There should be refresher courses on different aspects of the grant cycle offered throughout the year to keep organizations current. Specific subtrainings could be offered on federal agencies (such as EDA, USDA, etc.) as well.. We recommend either using an established curriculum from a proven source, or creating something specifically for rural Oregon that can be licensed (curriculum and methodology) by the Foundation to other organizations, such as NAO and United Way.



Conclusion

Based on the data and results of this research, there is a need to increase capacity, expertise, networking ability and match for rural organizations and jurisdictions. Feedback from respondents indicates that they often feel left out and not competitive for federal opportunities, despite their significant need. This year will bring an unprecedented amount of federal funding opportunities that could greatly address rural needs, but unless significant resources are invested in capacity, rural areas are likely to miss out and fall further behind. Urgent action is needed by all stakeholders who are engaged in rural development to ensure rural representation and equity in the distribution of these funds.

Appendix A:

Focus Group Questions and Interviews

Focus group questions included:

- What was your biggest challenge when applying for federal funding?
 - If you did not apply, why not?
 - Are you planning on applying for federal grants in 2022?
 - What would have helped you in the application process?
 - If you received federal funding, what was the grants management process like?
 - What would provide the most support in applying for federal grants?
-

1:1 Interviews.

Interviews were conducted with 18 individuals representing the following entities:

- LOR Foundation
- Association of Oregon Counties
- Bean Foundation
- Benton Community Foundation
- Business Oregon
- Cascades West Economic Development District
- City of John Day
- Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council
- Columbia Pacific Economic Development District
- Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians
- Foundations for a Better Oregon
- Kelly Nonprofit Consulting
- Nonprofit Association of Oregon
- Oregon U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development
- A Greater Applegate
- United Way of Southwestern Oregon
- United Way of Linn, Benton & Lincoln Counties

The following organizations participated in the Rural Federal Funding Survey:

- Children's Center
- Willamette Art Center
- Coalición fortaleza
- Camp Taloali
- Oregon Coast Aquarium Inc.
- NeighborWorks Umpqua
- Dolphin Playhouse
- South Coast Development Council, Inc.
- Hoffman Center for the Arts
- Wally's House - Curry Child Abuse Intervention Center
- Wild Rivers Land Trust
- Oregon Alliance of YMCAs
- Crossroads Carnegie Art Center, Inc.
- Oregon Shores Conservation Coalition
- First Church Love
- Citizens4Community / Sisters Country Connects
- Jacksonville Community Center
- Astoria Arts and Movement Center
- Project DOVE
- Oregon Human Development Corporation
- First 5 Siskiyou Children and Families Commission
- St. Helens Main Street Alliance
- Kids Club of Harney County
- Adrian 2040
- Oregon TRIO Association
- Boys & Girls Club of Western Lane County
- Helping Hearts
- Amani Center
- Rural Development Initiatives

Appendix B: About Rural Prosperity Partners

Rural Prosperity Partners is a women-owned business located in the Willamette Valley focused on helping rural communities thrive. Rachael Maddock-Hughes, founder and principal of Rural Prosperity Partners, started the agency based on her experience growing up and working in rural communities in Oregon—and seeing funding and opportunities being left on the table because of lack of capacity and expertise.

Rural Prosperity Partners provides resource development and new initiative support for rural jurisdictions, special districts, and nonprofits. Our team has over 40 years of experience in resource development, senior leadership, and strategic initiatives in the nonprofit, education and government sectors. Since early 2020, Rural Prosperity Partners has secured nearly \$10 million in funding for clients ranging from COVID-19 emergency programming to childcare, housing, infrastructure, emergency wildfire assistance, art and economic development.

Rachael Maddock-Hughes

Founder and Principal

Rachael Maddock-Hughes has 20 years of professional experience in the nonprofit, government and social enterprise sectors, with nearly a decade in senior leadership roles. She began her career as a humanitarian aid worker and has since worked for local nonprofits and government. Rachael has led numerous multisector partnerships, raised millions of dollars for communities around the globe and helped respond to emergencies from COVID-19 to conflict in Afghanistan. She is an experienced fundraiser, partnership and program development expert, with a background in impact design.

Sherry DeLeon

Senior Consultant

Sherry DeLeon has more than 20 years of experience working in the nonprofit and education sectors. She began her career with the American Red Cross and has worked for large national nonprofits and small grassroots organizations, both in the United States and globally, as an executive director and lead for development and advancement activities. She has successfully raised more than \$50 million through foundations, major donors, bequest and corporations. She also serves as an adjunct faculty member at North Carolina State University in the Leadership in the Public Sector program for the past 12 years.



RURAL PROSPERITY
PARTNERS