

Building a Field of Rural Philanthropy: The Case for Creating a Rural Philanthropic Network



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Why Rural?

Rural America represents more than 60 million people and 80% of the geography of the United States. Rural America is also the source of much of our food, water and other natural resources. Rural states have a significant, disproportionate influence in the United States Senate. Many state legislatures are controlled by rural lawmakers. Increasingly, rural residents make up the majority of our country's next generation of teachers, nurses, armed forces, and skilled manufacturing workers. Rural communities are the places where our nation's social fabric is woven, where innovations are seeded and nurtured, where clean air and water are preserved, and where generations of future leaders are born and raised.



Why Rural Philanthropy?

Rural America is a complicated set of interconnected people and places with diverse backgrounds and dramatic differences from coast to coast. The differences are topographic, cultural, and historic, influenced by decades of extractive industries, climate change, loss of agricultural and manufacturing jobs, increasing suburbanization, and, in some cases, increasing isolation. Contrary to much of current public discourse, rural America is not populated by a homogeneous group of people with similar values and backgrounds. Thirteen million rural people of color live in every state in the United States – some with histories in our country that date back thousands of years and others newly arrived.

Importantly, people living in rural communities are much more likely to suffer from chronic disease like diabetes and obesity. Their lifespan is on average two years shorter and can be as much as 25 years shorter when compared to the longest urban life span in some states. Rural people of color have, on average, even shorter life spans and suffer from even greater disparities in preventable diseases. People in rural places also are more likely to experience higher rates of poverty.

While philanthropy in the United States is exploding with \$410 billion in charitable giving compared to \$200 billion in 1995, Rural America is not getting its fair share. *Twenty percent (20%) of the country's population lives in rural places, yet only 7% of foundation giving is directed to rural.*

But a sense of fairness aside, rural communities are the places where funders can achieve deeper, lasting, transformative community impact with fewer dollars. They are also the places where funders can work directly with entire communities to develop new ideas that work, and then scale those solutions to larger populations.



What are Opportunities for Funders in the Rural Space?

There is no single “rural” solution. Instead, opportunities for engaging in rural communities are as varied and dynamic as the communities themselves. Rural philanthropy gives funders a unique opportunity to re-think processes and improve effectiveness by:

1. **Expanding the definition of “grantee”**— While there may be fewer large non-profits, there are a number of anchor institutions like libraries, hospitals, community colleges, extension offices and parks and recreation districts that are trusted local entities with long histories of serving folks across their rural communities.



2. **Working with informal leaders and leadership networks** — Rural communities generally have leaders that operate without formal title or role; they just get things done and are trusted voices within their communities. Think faith community, small business and youth athletics. These are the leaders who will deliver change in rural communities.
3. **Collaborating with local funders** — Place-based rural funders are excited to explore partnerships with regional, state and national funders since they have the insider knowledge, even if they don't always have the financial or human resources necessary to fully implement strategy.
4. **Making smaller grants** — Funders interested in the rural space don't always have to make major financial or programmatic investments. Big impact can be stimulated by grants of less than \$100,000, or sometimes less than \$10,000.
5. **Revisiting the definition of “return on investment”**— The metrics used to measure ROI, as well as other notions of philanthropic success, must be rethought in rural philanthropy to better capture concepts around community change, positioning for the future and renewed energy. Rural philanthropy can make a big difference by helping people advance their vision of their own community and tackle longstanding issues.



What structures currently exist to support rural philanthropy?

With the shutdown of the 10-year-old National Rural Funders Collaborative in 2011, philanthropy has lacked for a nationally identified commitment to rural communities. Rural Funders Collaborative leaves a strong legacy, and the time is right to take their recommendations and move towards integrating much of the existing funder work that is currently going on in the rural space. *We need a nationwide vehicle for rural communities and rural funders to exchange ideas, develop relationships and work mutually towards sustaining and growing rural America.*

The field is not without pockets of interest. There is a great deal of energetic discussion. Rural funder groups are forming within states, regionally and nationally to begin to set an agenda for the next stage of rural philanthropic focus. Similarly, some national issue-focused funder groups are having discussions about rural advocacy, and issues like the 2020 census, broadband access and opioid abuse are bringing together funders to better align resources and strategies. Almost all existing funder groups have rural-serving members and have inherently rural-specific work embedded in their agendas.

The fact remains, however, that there is no generally identified umbrella for those interested in rural philanthropy, its practice, and its connection to rural communities to learn, seek peer support, advocate, or develop best practice. It's time to develop a true rural philanthropy network that takes advantage of all these energized discussions taking place around the country: not to replace or supplant current efforts, but as a value-added structure that draws upon existing rural philanthropic work in a meaningful way. We are not suggesting another national affinity group. Instead, a hybrid alignment that can bring local and national funders, existing funder affinity groups, and rural communities together with a common agenda for practice and learning.



Who are the important stakeholders for a rural philanthropic network?

This effort will need to engage funders, rural communities and others working in and around rural communities. This cannot be a funder-only movement nor can leadership be held solely by large regional or national funders. The real chance to effectively support more and better rural



philanthropy is through expanding the notion of who is “important” or “who needs to lead and who needs to follow.” Here is a starter list of rural philanthropic stakeholders:

1. Rural communities—especially those with historically inequitable histories
2. Existing place-based rural funders
3. Urban-based funders with rural geographies in their service areas
4. Newly forming funders
5. National funders with rural issue interests or looking to partner with local and regional rural funders
6. Government funders at all levels that are interested in partnership with private funders
7. Existing funder networks
8. Rural researchers, evaluators and intermediaries



What are the key functions of a rural philanthropic network?

The functions of a rural philanthropic network represent those core building blocks that are, in most cases, completely absent from the landscape. These functions are both tactical and field-building. Some utilizing the network may be interested in only one of the functions while others may be interested in all. The goal is for participants to be able to find their colleagues with similar interests and needs. Key network functions might include:

1. Supporting technical assistance around strategic implementation concepts like reinventing the rural program officer role, staffing models and internal operational systems necessary to best respond to rural grantees and communities;
2. Curating the best of rural philanthropic programs;
3. Elevating issues of rural importance;
4. Providing a rural-urban philanthropy bridge;
5. Advancing the cause of rural equity;
6. Developing philanthropic models of regional rural implementation (and variation);
7. Integrating rural researchers and evaluators into broader discussion;
8. Documenting and developing successful rural leadership models and supports;
9. Supporting peer learning between funders and between funders and rural communities, and
10. Providing real-time opportunities for rural funders to connect with and learn from one another.



How can this rural philanthropic network be structured and sustained?

The creation of a rural philanthropic network needs to deftly combine both new and legacy rural funders and thought leaders, emerging rural networks and those working for and with philanthropy—communities, researchers and intermediaries. At this early stage, the effort should move ahead with an understanding that:

- a. A new independent center with potentially unsustainable staffing structures is neither tenable nor desirable;
- b. Existing networks and related efforts will need to align within a unifying effort to add value, and the catalyst/convener role for that alignment can likely be housed within an existing entity or entities (e.g. grantmaker association or national rural group, etc.); and
- c. Financial support will likely include fee-for-service technical assistance, membership fees and initial core operating support grants along with other options (e.g. conferences, workshops, etc.).





The first steps towards creating a rural philanthropic network are threefold:

1. Moving to an intentional planning phase in 2019 that will be explicit about the proposed offerings of such a rural philanthropic network
2. Identifying various “homes” for distinct aspects of the network—perhaps separating the peer learning, field development and technical assistance offerings
3. Developing a sustainable financial model that is not majority dependent upon large operating support commitments from funders



What can we expect the results to be from a national rural philanthropic network?

If the demand for a rural philanthropic network is longstanding and pervasive, the results should clearly advance the field in both thinking and resources. Here is a preliminary list of the real change and results that we may expect to see:

1. A standard model of private and public rural funder alignment with explicit understanding of rural regional variation;
2. Widely implemented application and reporting formats that understand issues around rural scale and influence as they affect impact;
3. Widely implemented use of grantmaking selection criteria that puts rural projects (and their communities) on level playing field with urban applicants;
4. More foundation staff tasked specifically to rural learning and grantmaking;
5. More foundation staff hired from rural personal and professional backgrounds;
6. Unified voice in rural policy and advocacy settings;
7. A recognition and understanding of both legacy and new equity issues in rural communities by private and public funders, and
8. Increased private and public funding to rural communities headed towards reaching an equivalency with the proportion of population that is rural—20%.



Why be part of this network?

The field of rural philanthropy is gaining strength and recognition as a vital part of philanthropic activity nationwide. By joining the network, foundations demonstrate and act upon shared values and strengthen their impact through a shared community of practice. As philanthropic commitment and impact increase in rural America, so will the outcomes for rural Americans.



Shared Values

1. We believe that rural philanthropy has distinct elements that are critical for funder-community success
2. Our commitment to rural work is long-term and adaptive
3. We believe that current funder practice has often marginalized rural voice rather than growing leadership
4. We believe that the history and demographics of rural America demand new and better rural philanthropic approaches
5. We believe and understand the best rural philanthropic work looks at communities as people and places rather than sites for isolated content-driven initiatives

