

2009 Philanthropy and Rural America Conference

Outcomes and Recommendations

Examining the Challenges and Opportunities Facing Rural America

August 2009

Hosted by the Council on Foundations,
the National Rural Funders Collaborative,
the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation,
Arkansas Community Foundation,
and the Clinton Presidential Center



COUNCIL *on* FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

The Council on Foundation's 2009 Philanthropy and Rural America Conference drew more than 150 foundation and community leaders from across the country to develop a strategic plan to get rural America back on the agenda of the philanthropic sector. The conference—co-sponsored with the National Rural Funders Collaborative, the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Arkansas Community Foundation, and the Clinton Presidential Center—produced specific priorities and proposals for action.

This brief report summarizes the priorities and proposed next steps for each of four tracks on which the conference focused: Building Rural Philanthropic Capacity; Economic Development; Energy/Environment; and Education. Every participant selected one track and followed it throughout the conference.

The report also includes several general priorities that surfaced during plenary speeches and concurrent sessions.

As you will see, this was not a conference created for the purpose of deciding what others should do on our behalf. Rather, this gathering of rural philanthropic leaders looked at the role philanthropy can play in building rural America's future. These recommendations will serve as stepping stones to further action by rural America's philanthropy—both today and tomorrow, on its own behalf. The journey is just beginning.

Building Rural Philanthropic Capacity Track

PRIORITY

The Council, Congress, and the USDA should move forward a public initiative to build philanthropic rural development endowment funds and capacity in and for the underserved communities of rural America.

Rationale

Recognizing the breadth and diversity of our philanthropic community, our mission calls upon the Council on Foundations to promote a vibrant and growing sector and to provide the opportunity, leadership, and tools needed by philanthropic organizations to expand, enhance, and sustain their ability to advance the common good. Building rural philanthropic capacity is an essential component for the success of these efforts to promote philanthropy.

Rural communities must capitalize on the intergenerational transfer of wealth now taking place to build community-based endowments. These permanent funds can generate new, locally controlled capital for investing in and restructuring local economies and, ultimately, lead to better economic outcomes for every citizen.

Proposed Action

- Work with the United States Department of Agriculture to expand, enhance, and sustain rural philanthropy in America. (As part of the Public–Philanthropic Partnership, the Council already has requested a meeting with the USDA’s rural development team to continue the conversation about a proactive partnership in building rural philanthropic capacity.)
- Form a subcommittee of the Council’s Public Policy Committee to consider the Council’s role in supporting the ongoing efforts aimed at building rural philanthropic capacity.
- Using the Rural Philanthropy Growth Act of 2009 as a model, consider how tax incentives and capacity-building grants can be used to encourage the growth of philanthropic resources in rural counties.
- Collect and share best practices of rural American philanthropy to help advance expansion of rural philanthropic efforts and effectiveness.

Economic Development Track

PRIORITY 1

Establish a working group to identify best practices in rural philanthropy that the Obama Administration could use as models for government initiatives.

Rationale

Rural communities have developed a wide range of pioneering innovations. But many of those innovations have gone unsung—a fact that many rural philanthropies know only too well.

The Obama Administration's focus on building on proven and promising innovations gives rural communities an unparalleled opportunity to share their outstanding but often unrecognized work. The Administration's commitment to public-private-philanthropic partnerships can provide rural communities with the resources they need to replicate or adapt these promising efforts. In fact, the Department of Agriculture recently issued a list of five key priorities, including:

1. Rural communities create wealth so they are self-sustaining, repopulating, and thriving economically.
2. National forest and private working lands are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to climate change and are managed to enhance water resources.
3. America leads the world in sustainable crop production and biotech crop exports.
4. America's children and the world's children have access to safe, nutritious, and balanced meals.
5. USDA's constituents understand and appreciate what the agency can do for them every day in every way because USDA employees are engaged, valued, and productively serving the people of America and the world.

Proposed Action

- Identify the strongest examples of rural innovation.
- Use access to the Administration to ensure these programs are on the radar screen in terms of receiving the appropriate attention from the Administration.
- Establish an inventory of best practices of such partnerships that can become a guide for all rural philanthropic opportunities.

PRIORITY 2

Organize a coordinated approach philanthropy can use to convince policy makers of the need to invest a significant portion of the \$7 billion in broadband funds (part of the stimulus funding) for the benefit of rural communities and families.

Rationale

Within the Administration's stimulus package, the resources set aside to expand broadband access could have the greatest potential for revitalizing rural communities and families. For these benefits to materialize, rural communities must be able to participate effectively in the competitive awards process with well-designed strategies that ensure both short-term and sustainable impact.

Proposed Action

- Encourage philanthropy to advocate for rural perspectives, circumstances, and conditions to be well-represented and well-considered as federal guidelines for future notice of fund availabilities are established.
- Use the Council's Public-Philanthropic Partnership website as a place to share information regarding rural broadband, and specifically the role philanthropy can play in advancing this opportunity, to our members.
- Identify and disseminate the most promising models for achieving the greatest impact with these funds, including models—if any—that integrate and blend with other American Recovery and Reinvestment Act resources.

Energy/Environment Track

PRIORITY 1

Encourage foundations and other philanthropic organizations to advocate for a unified national energy policy that ensures full accounting of the impacts of energy projects so that we have a level playing field.

Rationale

Quite often, a rural area's natural resources are its primary economic assets and main source of wealth. Our nation relies on rural areas to tap those assets to solve our collective energy needs.

While this provides development opportunities for rural communities, it also presents potential downsides. Many rural areas have or are experiencing a "gold rush" on their resources with devastating impact. We've seen too many examples of this, including: strip mining in Appalachia; oil and natural gas extraction in the Rocky Mountain West; hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus Shale in the Catskills and Delaware River Valley; liquidation logging in the Northeast.

Proposed Action

Foundations can advocate for restoring natural resources so those resources can continue to provide the full range of environmental, economic, and social benefits not only to rural areas, but also throughout the nation. We encourage foundations to consider, as part of their mission, education and philanthropic investments that:

- Encourage philanthropy to advocate prevention of overharvesting or unsustainable extraction of natural/economic assets that can result in long-term damage or destruction to a rural area.

- Encourage philanthropy to ensure that if a region's natural/economic assets are used to create wealth that is exported to other parts of the country, corresponding wealth is created within the region.
- Encourage philanthropy to ensure that, by consolidating rights to critical resources, these resources are not put out of reach of local land-owners and communities.
- Encourage philanthropy to advocate for eliminating structural bias in federal, state, and local regulations that would put rural communities at a disadvantage.

PRIORITY 2

Encourage philanthropy to provide intentional, specialized support for players on the ground, intermediaries, and foundations so they can educate rural communities about protecting their resources.

Rationale

Philanthropy has a vital role to play in protecting rural America natural resources, ensuring rural America's contributions are valued, and developing a win-win framework to make certain that rural contributions are sustainable.

Proposed Action

- Encourage rural philanthropy to engage in public policy, community organizing, and capacity building to ensure community members are at the ownership and decision-making tables.
- Encourage rural philanthropy to affect public policy at the federal level by raising funders' awareness and adding to their knowledge.
- Build the field of community development practitioners working on energy issues in rural areas.

Education Track

PRIORITY 1

Launch a coordinated funders' campaign to eliminate funding and program policies in upcoming federal education and workforce development legislative reauthorizations that could discriminate against rural areas.

Rationale

With the upcoming reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's Title I programs and the Workforce Investment Act, philanthropy has a real opportunity to advocate on behalf of rural America. Currently, some funding and program policies do not work well for rural areas, ultimately preventing long-term solutions to rural poverty, child and adult education deficiencies, and regional economic decline. The philanthropic sector should seize this opportunity to ensure policy makers understand that "business as usual" could further harm rural America's future.

Proposed Action

- Encourage philanthropy to support programs that bring together a visible coalition of philanthropic, rural education, and workforce development stakeholders to demonstrate how and why current federal funding formulas and program designs inadvertently discriminate against rural America.
- Encourage philanthropy to support programs that encourage an alternative discourse on the broader dimensions of transformative change to truly achieve impact for disadvantaged rural populations.

PRIORITY 2

Urge public and private funders to support proven, family-based education approaches that enhance both child/youth and adult learning by successfully leveraging multiple funding streams and employing cross-generational treatments.

Rationale

Any successful pathway to positive transformative change in rural communities must respect the unique differences in America's rural regions. Therefore, to renew and sustain rural populations and economies, philanthropy can support programs that look to a wide range of approaches and tailor services across generations.

Proposed Action

- Encourage philanthropy to support programs that provide timely, holistic, family-based interventions along the education and life-long learning continuum.
- Encourage philanthropy to fund and promote coordination across funding streams to achieve long-term solutions to the root causes of illiteracy and student deficits.

General Priorities

PRIORITY 1

Develop resources that enable philanthropic organizations and others to partner and collaborate more easily and effectively to address rural challenges and opportunities.

Rationale

Rural communities are so spread apart—and grants so small (usually under \$10,000)—that exchanging best practices and collaborating are often difficult.

Proposed Action

- Support efforts that enable rural philanthropists and foundations to find each other and network.

PRIORITY 2

Support the creation of a grassroots movement aimed at improving rural education.

Rationale

Often separated by long distances, and often lacking crucial networking skills and an awareness of what works best in education, rural residents don't have the clout they need to advocate for better education practices.

Proposed Action

- Philanthropy can invest in grassroots movements that encourage rural community residents to develop and implement education best practices.

PRIORITY 3

The challenges of rural America remain dependent upon some level of support from our large national foundations that have previously invested in rural America. Thus, we seek new strategies to engage large national foundations to partner with rural philanthropy and rural communities in ways that enhance large foundations' ability to place their people with local organizations so they can better understand the issues confronting small communities.

Rationale

Program officers for large foundations often do not have enough on-the-ground experience within the communities they fund. Instead, they glean a lot of their information from applications and briefings.

Proposed Action

- Rural philanthropy should invite more program officers of larger foundations to spend time in rural communities and see the real effect their grant funding can have.
- Large national foundations should use that information to better understand the issues facing rural communities and disburse funding more effectively.

Priorities (continued)

PRIORITY 4

Raise awareness of the vital role nonprofits have in communities and how they fuel local economies.

Rationale

Nonprofits play a vital role in the economies of communities by providing jobs and job training, thus creating a more skilled workforce. Nonprofits also administer numerous other services that local government could not sustain otherwise.

Proposed Action

- Rural philanthropy should fund initiatives that promote public, governmental, and business understanding of the role nonprofits play in sustaining local economies; building awareness of the essential services nonprofits provide.



Conclusion

As a voice and vision for philanthropy committed to both member service and sector leadership, the Council on Foundations seeks to support our rural philanthropic leaders as they advance these proposals.

For more information or to answer any questions, please send an email to publicpartnerships@cof.org