Strong Foundations for Rural Advancement

Investing in Rural Development Systems Change for Meaningful Progress

October 5, 2026

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Introduction

Rural development in the United States is at a key inflection point. Rural geographies are highly productive contributors to national and global wealth and rural development practice is flourishing. Examples of dynamic local leaders and inspired place-based initiatives abound. And yet, rural communities face headwinds as the result of macroeconomic policy decisions, economies built around a single industry or employer, an increasingly consolidated economy, and the legacy of discrimination; too often its wealth continues to be extracted from the people and places producing value for the nation. “Rural” as an economic space is synonymous with development inequalities that disproportionately impact communities of color, persistent-poverty regions, and Tribal Nations, alongside a broader set of rural communities affected by industrial restructuring, disinvestment, and demographic change—all of them holding untapped potential

After decades of observing the contrast between the inspirational, energetic leadership of rural actors and the slow pace of meaningful progress to create opportunity in rural places, it is increasingly clear: (1) systemic change—via changes in policy, capital and ownership arrangements, and the removal of other structural barriers—is the only way to truly accelerate the development energies of rural America in way that reaches the full breadth and diversity of rural people and places; and (2) that systemic change depends on working to align rural voices across sectors, geographies, political boundaries, and federal/tribal/state/local levels of governance to build a shared vision, institutional relevance and power at a meaningful scale. Systemic change also benefits from strong urban and rural relationships that recognize

interdependence and responsibility for shared prosperity. Strong Foundations for Rural Advancement (SFRA) initiative is focused on building strategy and funding for that needed alignment and network development.

What is Rural Community Economic Development? A Place-Based and Asset-Based Approach. SFRA defines Rural Community and Economic Development broadly as "doing economic development differently." Frameworks such as the Community Capitals Framework, Asset-Based Community Development, WealthWorks, the Thrive Rural Framework, and the Foundational Economy expand upon the traditional fields of community development (historically centered on housing) and economic development (historically centered on business recruitment). This paper uses the term "Rural Development" to encompass local, regional, state, and federal efforts that create thriving, vibrant, healthy, and just communities where local and regional market growth and locally generated wealth remains in place to benefit residents. In 2021, leadership at the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) publicly acknowledged the need to update the national economic development toolbox—validating the innovative models that on-the-ground organizations have practiced for decades. This evolved understanding of rural development places people and equity, at both individual and community scales, at the center of the decision-making process. This asset-based approach prioritizes existing community capitals—such as natural, cultural, and social capital—and builds upon them, rejecting deficit-based narratives and frameworks that prize financial capital and GDP growth above all other considerations. Crucially, this strategy ensures that local investments, infrastructure developments, and structural changes directly generate wealth for community members, specifically prioritizing the residents who most require support, opportunity, and investment.

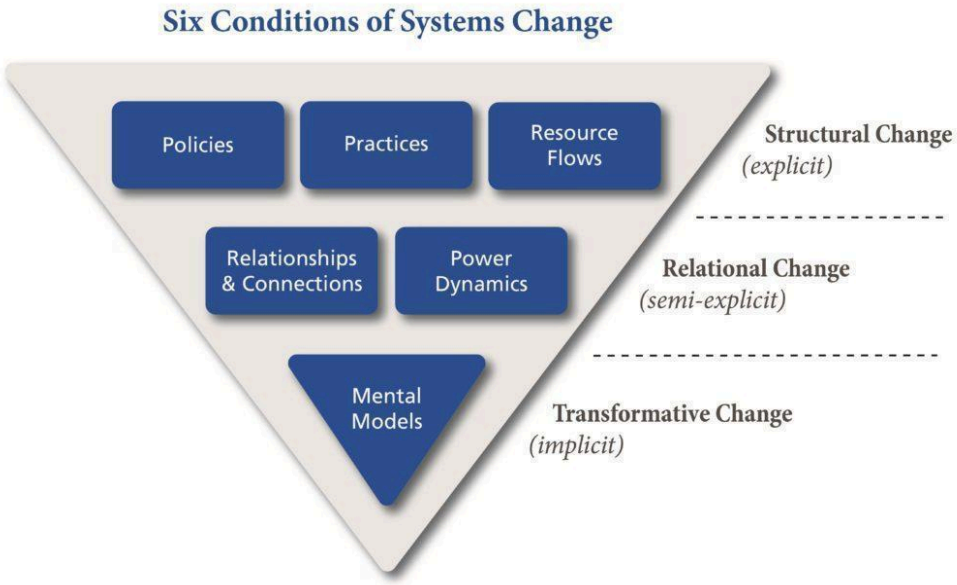
As a foundational building block of a comprehensive rural development systems change strategy, SFRA assembled this report to assess the opportunity for alignment and coalition-building present in the current U.S. rural development ecosystem. Emerging from the shared vision of a steering committee of experienced rural advocates and developed with input from rural practitioners, intermediaries, policy experts and funders, the report provides a strategic framework for investing in effective systems change infrastructure. To date, a Steering Committee has provided initial guidance on the process and a total of more than 50 field leaders and rural funders contributed via an interview, a survey, and several virtual and in-person meetings in Washington, D.C. and Denver.

This paper briefly reviews why rural development cannot reach its full potential without a systemic approach and establishes the importance of strategic and aligned investments in systems change architecture and why SFRA aims to build a field to make systems change happen. The remainder of the paper describes the current state of key components of the rural development systems change ecosystem defined by SFRA–rural capacity and leadership, advocacy and rural voice, policy and strategy, research and data, narrative change, and philanthropy and funders—and models for systems change investment within and across these components. The paper concludes with summary recommendations for short-term, mid-term, and long-term investments aligned with building greater capacity for systems change.

An Architecture for Rural Systems Change

Rural development challenges in the United States remain stubbornly intractable because of a structurally extractive economy, an urban-biased policy apparatus, and a history of short-term,

uncoordinated resource flows that hold the current structures in place. At the same time, while local communities frequently exhibit immense resilience and self-reliance, persistent capacity constraints limit the transformative potential to expand, replicate and share local innovation. Many rural institutions and places are adapted to work within the current system, creating path dependency that can slow change. Nor can policy ideas alone achieve true transformation. Overcoming these interlocking mechanisms requires a formal systems change architecture—such as the "water of systems change" framework shown here.



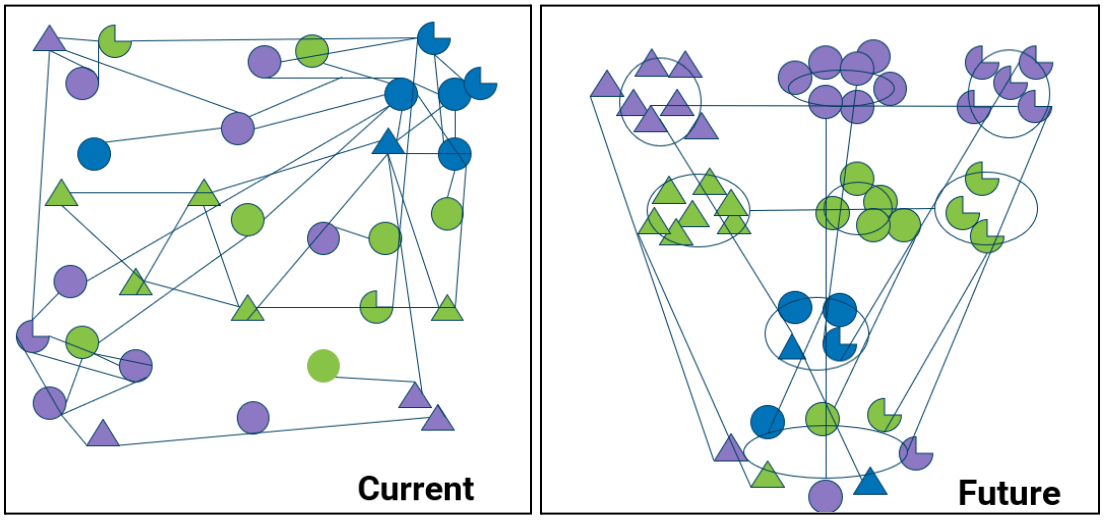
Lasting structural reform requires an intentional shift beneath the surface, directly altering the implicit mental models (simplified explanations of how things work that can entrench negative attitudes about rural), entrenched power dynamics, structural capital flows, and fundamental relationships that dictate how the entire system behaves.

Because of the systemic nature of rural development challenges and given the enormous talent and expertise across rural development practitioners, a strategic approach that includes and coordinates separate areas of rural expertise into a unified field has hugely transformative potential. Currently, fragmentation isolates practitioners working across distinct focus areas—such as housing, entrepreneurship, workforce development, finance, family economic security, healthcare, and education—preventing them from joining forces or utilizing a shared strategic language. Also, notably few organizations within the current ecosystem are meaningfully connected with efforts to build a fair, resilient, wealth-building, or equitable economy that works for working families and communities left behind.

SFRA participants told us about many creative and powerful models and success stories that remain localized, endemic to the standout leaders, practitioners, and organizations driving vital work across the U.S. in regions as diverse as the rural South, Appalachia, the Pacific Northwest, the Heartland and many more. They operate with severe resource constraints and face an

uncoordinated philanthropic environment marked by prescriptive, short-term grant cycles. They are eager to connect, share lessons, learn from peers, and build a whole larger than the parts.

Figure 2: SFRA begins to define how the rural development field can move from a state of high action with low alignment (left) to a position of significant, unified alignment (right) without compromising local momentum.



Despite the critical need for alignment, the broader landscape of rural development has yet to be assessed for its networking potential (and limitations). Researchers and practitioners recognize that a weak, uncoordinated field limits the collective capacity to build national relevance and power; however, the field has lacked a comprehensive mapping of existing networks to identify where capacity exists and where structural gaps persist.

This report directly fills that critical gap by delivering a comprehensive assessment of the current ecosystem's strengths and weaknesses and potential models for rural development systems change investments. Between the landscape assessment and the needed investments lies a roadmap for funders, policy makers and practitioners to follow collaboratively. The paper is co-authored by SFRA with direction from a diverse coalition of prominent rural field leaders and practitioners. Built on extensive collaborative data gathered through interviews, targeted surveys, and structured virtual and in-person convenings in Washington, D.C., and Denver, CO, this paper maps the existing capacity within the rural community and economic development landscape and includes ideas for field investment to advance systems change.

Shared Vision for Investing in Rural Development Ecosystem

Place is now widely considered one of the strongest predictors of opportunity. SFRA is focused on building strategy and funding for the capacity, alignment and network development needed to change policies that create rural opportunity and enable rural places to thrive. A high-functioning, powerful rural development field depends on individual organizations, and on the quality of the relationships, collective power, and capital flows that connect them. A healthy ecosystem exhibits clear characteristics: bidirectional learning, trust, leverage across scales and sectors, strategic narrative and data ownership, and horizontal cohesion across geographies and organizations.

SFRA is organized around six essential systems roles, and the infrastructure necessary to bridge gaps between them to translate on-the-ground rural practice into effective high-level systems change. A robust ecosystem replaces institutional turf battles with collaborative infrastructure, demonstrating a collective willingness to invest in shared platforms.

SFRA participants stand ready to engage systematically, contributing their strengths to an ecosystem that builds collective power. The ecosystem assessment and strategies below explicitly prioritize investing in existing capacity, institutions, and networks and building on proven models before creating new infrastructure to strengthen systems roles and address identified gaps. Successful models that demonstrate how to build a network larger than the sum of its parts leverage the *Water of Systems Change* framework at the Transformational Level (Narrative Change), Relational Level (Rural Capacity & Leadership, Rural Voice & Advocacy) and Structural Level (Policy & Strategy, Research & Data, and Philanthropy & Funders). This paper initiates that work, recognizing that comprehensive implementation requires deeper engagement, continuous ideation, and long-term planning.

A. Rural Capacity and Leadership Development

A foundation of effective rural development practice is local innovation and resilience which SFRA identifies as a genuine strength of the field. Operating primarily at the *Relational Level* of systems change capacity and leadership development restructures connections and power dynamics across the field—moving from isolated, individual leader support to networked, institutional capacity.

SFRA points to several effective regional networks and to established intermediaries as examples of where things are already working, and as potential models for additional investment. Despite pockets of strength, the overarching assessment is, however, that capacity is a significant constraint. Models that aggregate and deploy resources to regional networks, provide strategic advice, structured fellowships, and community engagement, and tangible support that arms practitioners and sectors with specific training and technical assistance on ways to immediately and tangibly change their community provide the foundational scaffolding

required to transform localized efforts into a unified, influential, and resilient rural development ecosystem.

SFRA participants agree current programming is effective but remains uneven. Existing programs focus disproportionately on elected officials while neglecting emerging leaders aged 16 to 24 and create a persistent gap between theoretical training and real-world application. Furthermore, this narrow emphasis on individual leaders routinely undervalues critical systemic vulnerabilities, including low relative compensation, widespread practitioner burnout, and a lack of formal succession planning. To reverse these trends and stabilize the field, future capacity-building initiatives must restructure curricula to teach how systems operate, prioritize practical implementation skills, and invest heavily in initiatives that bridge rural and urban communities. Capacity building and technical assistance initiatives need to be aligned and complement one another, and they should intentionally build networks that can connect, which is a cornerstone of the Economic Recovery Corps program. Ultimately, transforming rural capacity requires embedding rest, retreat, and competitive compensation as core tenets of a deliberate workforce retention strategy rather than treating them as afterthoughts. The following six capacity building and leadership development models offer ideas to build on existing capacity and strengths.

Capacity and Technical Assistance Models

Within the rural development ecosystem, capacity-building and technical assistance is performed by intermediaries with distinct functions. Effective investment strategies must recognize and support four models: (1) funding aggregators and regranters that facilitate resources going directly to local organizations; (2) national and regional backbone entities that facilitate network functions for local rural development organizations; (3) specialized service providers that directly supplement rural administrative and organizational capacity; and (4) sector-specific field builders that deliver direct grants, training, and technical assistance to on-the-ground practitioners. Intermediaries may provide one or all of these functions.

The Trust for Civic Life, Resource Rural, Just Transition Fund, and the Rural Democracy Initiative (RDI) are examples of national or regional capacity-building intermediaries aggregating funding and providing vital resources and infrastructure to align efforts across geographies by supporting on-the-ground organizers and civic leaders. For example, the Trust for Civic Life focuses deliberately on participatory democracy and civic engagement outside of the formal political system and the Just Transition Fund has worked to provide coal-dependent communities with support in securing funds for economic diversification, infrastructure investments, and workforce development. Partners for Rural Impact offer another example focused on cradle to career support to improve outcomes for rural youth and their communities while RootEd Alliance helps rural college students achieve career success and strengthens America's skilled workforce. These examples demonstrate how capacity-building intermediaries can collaboratively construct shared infrastructure and execute aligned approaches to place-based rural development efforts of many stripes.

Partners for Rural Transformation, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, Resource Rural, and Trust for Civic Life all support and engage with mission-driven intermediaries and hubs that provide critical regional infrastructure as well as support for local rural development. Aspen CSG has identified Rural economic and community development hubs (RECD hubs) as vital because they build regional wealth, align partners, deliver technical assistance, data analytics, and peer-learning networks, and retain value locally over time. The Trust for Civic Life supports rural civic hubs, which play an essential role in leadership capacity building, trust building, civic engagement, and democracy work. Just as importantly, this type of infrastructure is not present in all rural areas, leaving gaps in critical capacity. There is a need to better organize and formalize this infrastructure; doing so alongside significant investments could expand the reach of key organizations in priority regions, provide the space required to create a shared learning agenda, clarify shared priorities, and articulate a forward-looking agenda across these networks to advance the broader ecosystem.

Another model connects experienced practitioners with deep expertise in federal and state rural development funding programs and implementation capacity and experience with small towns and rural counties effectively supplementing local staffing and expertise that many rural communities lack. One effective effort pairs small-town mayors with former mayors from larger communities and former regional administrators who possess proven track records of winning and managing federal grants. The EPA Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers (TCTAC) and USDA Rural Partners Network, and local examples such as Local First Arizona offer a public model that leveraged relationships and expertise, including by embedding dedicated liaisons directly within rural communities, to help communities access federal resources to meet local needs. Just as important is the expertise and capacity to effectively deploy capital and implement programs when funding is secured.

Finally, sector-specific field-building intermediaries provide direct capital, technical assistance, and professional training to local organizations actively delivering affordable housing, community infrastructure, and individual prosperity. NeighborWorks America exemplifies this model by delivering direct grant funding, rigorous practitioner credentials, and operational support to a nationwide network of nearly 250 local housing and community development organizations. Similarly, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) strengthens local rural housing entities through targeted capital deployment, technical assistance, research, and specialized education. These entities directly fortify local practitioners—ensuring community-based developers, housing providers, and local leaders possess the technical expertise and financial stability required to build, preserve, and manage essential community assets.

Additional examples of rural-serving organizations and backbone entities include the National Association of Rural Health Clinics, National Rural Water Association, National Rural Education Association, American Association of State Colleges and Universities Rural Serving Institutions members, and the Rural Community College Alliance.

Leadership and Professional Development Models

A cohort-based fellowship model that places rural practitioners within national think tanks and state policy organizations builds institutional recognition for community leadership in diverse policy circles. Fellows help collectively define success, outcomes, and key deliverables across scales and sectors before returning to their communities equipped with advanced systems knowledge and network access. Existing models like Aspen ASCEND demonstrate the viability of this approach. In addition to a rural-to-state and federal exchange, a reciprocal program that embeds national thought leaders, including executive branch and legislative staff and officials in rural communities is needed. National actors will become rural ombudsmen, advocating that policy design and implementation is "rural proofed."

Additionally, dedicated entry points within the rural ecosystem are necessary to build a pipeline of young professionals possessing both academic credentials and practical, on-the-ground experience in rural community and economic development. Programs like the Economic Recovery Corps, the American Connection Corps, and the Bill Emerson Hunger Fellowship Program serve as valuable examples of this pipeline infrastructure. Peer learning networks, such as the Rural Affinity Group that the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) convenes among its membership, are important mechanisms for sharing best practices and learning from each other. Professional development training and curriculum that is specific to rural development is also needed. IEDC organizes a Rural Retreat that is currently held every other year and could be built on as a key professional development opportunity.

B. Durable and Visible Rural Voice & Advocacy Infrastructure

In the context of this paper, rural voice and advocacy represent the permanent civic infrastructure that moves the field from episodic local reactions into a sustained, non-partisan movement for structural change. Advocacy infrastructure directly confronts the *Relational Level* (power dynamics) of systems change, building a permanent community-level and community-led voice that can advocate for systems change.

The current rural organizing landscape operates on an episodic, under-resourced, and reactive basis, leaving it structurally disconnected from sustained, foundational, on-the-ground community engagement and empowerment. True civic power grows from foundational civic engagement in response to local needs and desires rather than second-order, agenda-driven and external advocacy campaigns. Underinvestment in foundational, non-partisan organizing enables polarization and partisan activities to take root and for commercial industry trade groups to dominate and sideline public-interest needs. Because voicing political dissent within small communities often carries personal and economic risk, the field requires a coordinated "inside/outside" strategy that protects local practitioners while safely projecting resident and practitioner priorities into state and national policy arenas.

Some of the strongest consensus among SFRA participants emerged here: the field desperately needs a shared rural agenda that is primarily informed by rural voices and people, reflects current rural realities, and has widespread attention and support from rural people across the diversity of rural America. A national structure to amplify rural voices should build on this foundational vision, which must be firmly rooted in rural people and places. The models below suggest ideas and existing capacity to leverage.

Advocacy Models

Durable systems change requires a clear distinction between non-partisan community organizing and policy advocacy. Advocacy drives targeted policy outcomes and legislative reform. Organizing builds foundational civic power by engaging residents, fostering trust, and cultivating a permanent base of local leaders and voices. Organizing is a precondition for authentic advocacy. Without community-based and community-led coalitions, policy campaigns risk becoming episodic, top-down interventions disconnected from local realities.

Proven non-partisan organizing frameworks—such as Hoosier Action in Indiana, Up North Advocacy in Michigan, and SOWEGA Rising in Georgia (all supported by the Rural Democracy Initiative's network), Rural Progress, the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), and the State Voices network—demonstrate the effectiveness of year-round civic engagement in lifting authentic rural voices around local priorities. Furthermore, these networks expand local capacity by organizing across political divides on cross-ideological issues, such as managing the local impacts of data center development. Supporting this organizing infrastructure requires investing in shared campaign tools, legal compliance training through partners like the Alliance for Justice, and equity-centered governance models informed by the Praxis Project, the Industrial Areas Foundation, and the Burns Institute.

State and federal advocacy coalitions translate community power into legislative action, secure public funding, and defend rural places against harmful policies. Organizations like the Center for Rural Affairs and Partners for Rural Transformation demonstrate that effective advocacy works best when it continuously draws from and reinforces rural engagement. Crucially, statehouse and Washington, D.C.-based advocacy relies on national stakeholder groups and multi-sector coalitions to push policy changes and direct resources to rural communities. Pre-existing architecture—such as The Rural Network, Land O'Lakes' American Connection Broadband Coalition, Housing Assistance Council (HAC), Enterprise Community Partners, Habitat for Humanity, Rural-Local Initiative Support Corporation (Rural LISC) and the National Association of Counties (NACo's) Rural Action Caucus—demonstrates how mutually interested organizations can successfully aggregate influence into advocacy campaigns. By connecting place-based community organizing directly to these sophisticated national advocacy coalitions, the field establishes a coordinated "inside/outside" strategy that projects resident priorities directly into decision-making arenas.

A high-level, highly visible council of influential leaders could help reframe national narratives of rural and mobilize significant political and financial capital. "Grass-tops" efforts at the federal-

and state-level that mirror models like the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition would engage private-sector CEOs, philanthropic executives, and prominent cultural figures—cultivating unlikely champions from Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and traditional rural industries to change perceptions of rural people and advocate for effective rural policy.

An organized influencer network of social media personalities with rural credibility can elevate a rural voice and can actively counter prevailing tropes of rural decline, instead highlighting rural America as a diverse hub of strategic innovation. Finding and funding “rural influencers” will allow them to increase the number of followers, expanding the reach of positive rural advocacy messages. A rural-urban alliance that collectively form a multi-sector multi-geographic, multi-racial alliance of organizations could be another powerful voice in the sphere.

Finally, SFRA contemplated the extent to which the public-interest field must build robust 501(c)(4) capacity to challenge dominant lobbies and narratives and directly influence the legislative process. A scaled, national, non-partisan C4 entity could provide the field with the tools required to hire dedicated lobbyists, fund targeted issue campaigns, and legally shield advocacy efforts. Crucially, this infrastructure recruits, trains, and supports place-based rural practitioners to run for public office, ensuring that leaders with authentic, on-the-ground experience reach office.

C. Policy & Strategy Capacity

In the context of rural development, policy and strategy represent the institutional mechanisms that translate ground-level knowledge and practice into scalable legislative frameworks. Policy and strategy interventions operate at the explicit/structural level of the *waters of systems change* framework, converting ground-level practitioner wisdom into adoption-ready legislative frameworks, statutory reforms, and state tax policies.

SFRA emerged in part to address the disconnect that persists between real community needs and the legislative credibility and power of a cohesive field to address those needs in a systemic way. Misalignment and a scarcity mindset among rural development stakeholders can prevent the field from joining forces and working collectively, as urban and corporate interests have done much more successfully. Furthermore, the field lacks mechanisms for state-to-state peer learning, leaving local actors unprepared to respond to state policies that disadvantage or are harmful to rural communities, let alone bring forward alternative proposals designed by and for rural. Rapid technological and industrial shifts—such as AI expansion and data center placement—create immediate, cross-ideological opportunities to pioneer rural policy frameworks, highlighting the need for effective models that translate and scale local ideas into systemic policy frameworks.

What "National" Infrastructure Means

"National" infrastructure establishes the connective tissue required to think, plan, and act across local, state, tribal and federal scales simultaneously. Proposals for national entities—such as a National Policy Institute—do not call for standalone organizations focused strictly on federal legislation or Washington politics. Instead, the National infrastructure envisioned elevates authentic rural voices directly into national decision-making arenas, bridging ground-level practice with policy design at all levels of governance. National infrastructure can also be a partner to people and organizations working in their own place or system, such as a providing information on how different states are tackling an issue or providing local communities with tools and resources responsive to real-time challenges, data co-op/collective, leadership development, narrative change, and/or advocacy to achieve durable, fundamental transformation.

The policy and strategy infrastructure for rural community economic development remains fragmented, underfunded, and structurally weak across all scales. Exemplary individual policy experts and researchers can be found siloed in think tanks, regional research institutes, and public and non-profit entities, but currently there is no national entity with an explicit rural policy focus, leaving a gap in ability to turn on-the-ground wisdom and practice into policy frameworks, best practices, and model proposals that local, state, and national practitioners and leaders can pick up and run with. Lacking focused national and state policy and strategy capacity and coordination also makes it difficult to secure and retain talent in the field with expertise and essential relationships with practitioners. In a healthy system, local knowledge and lived experience inform policy tables directly and practitioners take advisory roles in national strategy and research coalitions to create a continuous federal-state-local policy learning loops.

National Policy Infrastructure Models

The most frequently named need by SFRA participants is a national policy hub — a central connective entity that keeps coordination going, links advocacy, data, narrative, and policy work, and prevents the field from remaining fragmented. This fragmentation makes it difficult for policymakers to have a pulse on and be responsive to rural priorities. Absent a cohesive rural policy agenda, policymakers are operating in the dark or with limited information about what is actually needed on the ground or what impact a policy will have in rural America. Part of SFRA's rationale for field building is to ensure policymakers design programs and institutions that reflect and are responsive to rural realities.

National policy and strategy capacity and coordination could be stood up using several models, including a national rural institute (e.g., the Center for Fly Over Country) or by strategically scaling and coordinating capacity within existing national policy shops like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the State Innovation Exchange (SiX),American Enterprise Institute, the Center for American Progress, and the Brookings Institution among others. Other examples of nationwide infrastructure that could serve as models include the New Practice Lab at New America, the Center for a New Energy Economy at Colorado State University, National Center for Public Lands Counties or the Resilient Energy Economies Initiative. Regardless of the exact

form or mission of this nationwide infrastructure, a model that leverages existing capacity could build on an existing coordinating entity with staff and resources to enable effective collaboration, such as the Reimagining Rural Assistance Network (RRAN). Work to build an initial, high-level shared policy agenda can begin without a formal and lasting infrastructure as long as it is tethered to on-the-ground experience and perspectives.

Capabilities of a national policy institute/policy network should include dedicated capacity to serve as a systems integrator and aggregator across the field, monitor bills across local, state, and federal tiers, alongside a unified coalition of public-interest lobbyists. This multi-sector apparatus must explicitly work to reform broad legislative vehicles like the Farm Bill and the Public Works and Development Act to center rural community development, provide technical support for community-led legislative drafting, and fund permanent advisory roles for practitioners to bridge the gap between rural realities and institutional power. Providing local voices with ownership and direction of national policy formation provides the credibility and trust that a rural-led national policy framework will work and be supported by a coalition that is diverse geographically, politically, and sectorally.

Another function of importance is providing local entities with tools and information that aligns with local needs (e.g. questions to ask and a template for community benefits agreements with companies siting data centers). An entity like this could also catalyze projects such as creating a research-informed, outcome-oriented framework for how to go about rural community and economic development that is regional/community typology conscious and that key organizations build together and adopt in place of old-school, one-size-fits-all economic development methods focused on business recruitment.

State and Region-Level Policy Infrastructure Models

There is significant variation in state policy infrastructure across the country, both inside and outside state government. Some states have a dedicated rural office or position within state government. The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) is the backbone organization leading a national peer learning network for rural leaders within state government. This network provides a single front door for the federal government, national organizations, philanthropy and other partners to engage, learn from, and collaborate with states who deploy substantial federal resources and state programs to rural communities. IEDC is doing a landscape analysis of current state rural policy infrastructure and opportunities to build on it.

Some but not all states have a statewide rural organization outside state government, and some but not all of these organizations do policy work. Partners for Rural America convenes 14 state rural development councils, which vary in capacity and focus. Statewide, multi-sector organizations focused on rural policy should scale vertically within each state to build a unified voice for rural communities and connect communities to policymakers. And state entities should be networked horizontally and anchored by a backbone institution, such as an existing organization like the International Economic Development Council or a new national association (similar to NACO or the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH)).

Crucially, a state-level model of policy and strategic capacity functions effectively when funders have knowledge and infrastructure to directly resource local and regional practitioners to participate as active partners in state policy design. This continuous loop of vertical and horizontal integration and governmental and non-governmental capacity provides pathways for local leaders and communities to engage directly in defining, crafting and deploying policy that changes the structural conditions for rural progress.

D. Research and Data

Resolving data and research deficits in rural areas must position rural communities as owners of their own intelligence. Research and data initiatives alter both explicit practices *(Structural Change)* and implicit mental models *(Transformative Change)* by shifting rural communities from passive objects of deficit-based comparative metrics to active shapers and owners of research and data.

The arduous processes of searching for data, interpreting academic research, and tracking disjointed policy actions unnecessarily exhaust the daily operational capacity of local practitioners. Traditional quantitative metrics, particularly federal Census data, deliver notoriously poor quality in small-population areas and systematically reinforce deficit narratives. Recent federal budget cuts threaten to dismantle already fragile data collection systems, making critical indicators—such as access to capital by race and rural entrepreneurship success rates—nearly impossible to track. Rigid quantitative metrics overlook the qualitative lived experiences of rural residents and results in incomplete measures of rural development. Rural policy also lacks a cohesive field of academic and think tank researchers evaluating the outcomes of economic policy in rural areas, understanding scale and applicability of innovative local and regional programs, or measuring diversity, equity, and resilience in rural communities. The rural development field requires accessible, relevant, and coordinated data systems. Legacy data metrics and platforms are often outdated. New metrics and measures of impact are required to tell a nuanced systems story about rural economies. Today, rural data and applied research remain deeply underdeveloped, underfunded, and disconnected from on-the-ground development practice.

There is more work to do to understand how to tap into, align, and leverage the substantial research expertise and capacity that exists within academia, local government fiscal offices, consulting shops and beyond. Translating research for practical application on the ground receives far less attention than producing research in the first place. Place-based inquiry and lessons remain outside comprehensive databases or open source libraries. Coordinating, synthesizing, and sharing this body of rural knowledge in a serious way was beyond the scope and expertise of the initial SFRA discussions, but this remains of interest and an important component of field building efforts. For example, rural infrastructure deficits and investment needs across rural communities is not well understood or measured outside local capital improvement plans and unfunded grant applications. Understanding the magnitude of investment needed and the creative funding, shared services, and regional models to fill gaps

will require substantial effort. The models below offer ideas that build research and data capacity endemic to the rural field that will begin to measure and report on rural resilience, diversity, and economy.

Shared Data Platform Models

The rural development ecosystem must build a shared data platform. Reversing the systemic weakness in data quality and accessibility requires direct funding for localized organizational data analysis, giving rural communities the agency and internal capacity to define and evaluate their own performance and outcomes. A shared data platform should aggregate these local qualitative metrics with public datasets, proprietary commercial metrics, academic and think-tank research, and leverage capacity at underutilized public entities like the Federal Reserve, whose Rural Community and Economic Development program acknowledges that aggregate economic data can mask significant differences between urban and rural areas, and that rural communities often face unique challenges. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) produce and leverage rural research and data for rural communities to develop economic development strategies. User-friendly data tools can improve access and synthesize these disparate data streams, allowing practitioners to compare performance across diverse geographies, track trends over time, and establish baseline data provenance. Ultimately, this coordinated, shared platform shifts the focus of rural research away from merely counting transactional outputs toward evaluating the assets and long-term, structural outcomes that matter to communities.

The Rural Data and AI Cooperative Model

A member-driven rural data cooperative can shift the field from episodic project-based data collection and reliance on external datasets to a permanent repository of shared knowledge. A rural data cooperative could be modeled after successful agricultural data cooperatives, which establish neutral, secure, and sovereign data repositories where local governments, Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), and nonprofits generate, store, and own their collective data through collective governance agreements, providing smaller, rural actors with greater access to data and analytics. The cooperative could utilize artificial intelligence as an operational force multiplier built around the specific daily workflows of rural practitioners—automatically tracking federal grant opportunities (similar to Rural Progress' Rural Funding tool), monitoring proposed administrative rules, and translating qualitative evidence generated through place-based research projects, practitioner evaluation, and interview recording and transcripts into comparable and accessible data for policy development. Embedding a rural data cooperative within an institutional home with ownership and trust from the rural development field (e.g., a national rural policy institute) can provide the rapid, real-time feedback loops between local implementation and federal design that enable more effective and responsive rural policy development and delivery.

Collaborative Research and Funding Model

The Resilient Energy Economies (REE) project offers a compelling model for aligning academic and NGO research with place-based policy needs. REE is designed to help energy-transition communities build long-term economic resilience. Supported by roughly $2.5 million split evenly between research grants and network management, REE actively pairs scholars with policymakers to co-develop actionable research on critical transition issues—including identifying growth sectors, mitigating public finance risks, and evaluating community planning strategies. The initiative democratizes academic inquiry by intentionally recruiting researchers from regional and tribal institutions (such as Diné College and Bakersfield College in California's oil patch), mentoring junior scholars, and maintaining dual oversight through an Academic Steering Committee and a Policymaker Advisory Board. To ensure research directly serves local realities, REE embeds scholars within robust relational infrastructure, combining regional site visits (in hubs like Billings, MT, Gillette, WY, and Odessa, TX) and national convenings with monthly virtual brownbags and practitioner listening sessions. Overseen by a specialized leadership team and a dedicated project manager, REE translates rigorous academic findings into accessible policy briefs and direct legislative briefings—demonstrating how shared research infrastructure can effectively bridge academic rigor, practitioner wisdom, and direct policy influence.

E. Narrative Change

SFRA starts from the position that the rural development field should be able to define itself and own the narrative about what rural is and who is a part of the rural story. Narrative change works at the *Transformational Level* of systems change by shaping the implicit mental models and cultural assumptions that underpins policy choices, public perception, and philanthropic capital allocations.

The collapse of local news outlets and entry of national platforms have enabled outdated, harmful, and reductive national portrayals of rural America that suit external special interests, systematically undermining policy attention and philanthropic investment. Biased mental models persist across the political spectrum. Urban-centric frameworks frequently dismiss rural as irredeemably mired in monolithic and partisan-loyal voting. Other viewpoints reduce the diverse rural landscape to narrow commodity sectors like farming, mining, and oil and gas, meant to position outside investment as the savior for rural communities. Both ignore and undervalue the multi-racial, multi-cultural, political complexity and economic realities of modern rural communities, which operate on the frontlines of national imperatives like data center expansion, climate resilience, water scarcity, public land ownership, recreation infrastructure and access, secure domestic supply chains, a false urban rural divide, and economic inequality.

An effective rural development field requires resolving the severe deficit in media choice by building local expertise, supportive regional and national narratives, and dedicated communications funding. Investment can counter damaging external national narratives—which

vacillate between romanticized tropes and structural despair—and internal narratives shaped around scarcity with positive stories rooted in authentic rural voice and character.

The models below offer ideas for investing in narrative change infrastructure.

Models for Building Local Storytelling and Journalism Capacity

Mitigating the collapse of rural media requires direct investment in local public-interest journalism and organic storytelling infrastructure. Philanthropy can scale proven outlets, such as Resource Rural's Story Wire, the Daily Yonder, Deep South Today, the Tiny News Collective, and nonprofit newsrooms that cover rural issues, to expand the depth and breadth of rural storytelling. To rebuild local information ecosystems, innovative capital and philanthropic models, such as the Rural News Fund, can be explored to acquire and sustain local newspapers and radio stations. Concurrently, integrating arts and culture initiatives—such as mobile community events and creative tours—harnesses the power of cultural expression to engage disillusioned residents, uncover emerging civic leaders, and rebuild community connectivity from the ground up. Fiction, film and other creative works are similarly important to changing mental models and shifting narratives over time.

National Rebranding and Strategic Messenger Models

Countering deeply entrenched external stereotypes can include a coordinated, multi-media national campaign to rebrand and modernize the image of rural America. Strategy may include multi-media fellowships with major media platforms where rural journalists, photographers and influencers can participate in replacing outdated tropes with complex, contemporary imagery and stories of modern rural life. A highly visible, unexpected network of rural champions from elite athletics, corporate boardrooms, and cultural industries can advance nuanced and forward-looking narratives and advocate for equitable policy. Supporting organic social media influencers and building dedicated digital infrastructure connects individual rural voices directly to national identity and policy conversations, expanding the reach of positive, place-based advocacy.

Unified Narrative Models

Unifying a fragmented field requires establishing a cohesive narrative frame that links diverse sectors—including housing, broadband, finance, and healthcare—under a shared vision for systems-level change. Building upon frameworks like the Winning Jobs Narrative (as employed by Resource Rural, for example), the Community Capitals Framework, and The Stewardship Economy, this model develops shared tools centered on the "foundational economy." This collective vocabulary enables historically isolated practitioners to see and name the systems they operate within, allowing them to collectively articulate how urban bias systematically disadvantages rural places and turns fragmented local struggles into a powerful, aligned movement for structural equity.

F. Philanthropy and Funders

Institutional philanthropy is one part of a broader rural funding and capital ecosystem. This section of this paper focuses specifically on philanthropy because of the role philanthropy plays as catalyst, partner, and bridge to other sources of funding and capital, both private and public.

Philanthropy's continued investment and increasing interest in rural communities creates an opportunity for the field to reflect on lessons learned, capitalize on current momentum, and strengthen the field's capacity for systems change at this critical moment for rural policy and economic development. Philanthropy can play an important role in this ecosystem by supporting locally rooted organizations and networks, strengthening connections across regions and sectors, bringing rural knowledge and voice to state and federal policy tables, and providing the flexible, patient capital to advance long-term systems change. Funder alignment operates at the *Structural Level* of systems change by shaping resource flows and grantmaking practices and by creating pathways for capital to remain and grow in rural communities.

Philanthropy that is already knowledgeable about and invested in rural people and places is an important ally and partner to rural-focused organizations in increasing overall philanthropic knowledge of and investment in rural development. These engaged funders are uniquely positioned to continue to underscore the importance of recent trends within philanthropy that are make-or-break to rural-serving organizations, such as flexible, appropriately scaled, multi-year capital and mechanisms to retain more wealth, including intergenerational wealth in communities before it exits. An aligned and intentional ecosystem of rural funders can be a catalyst, partner, and bridge to other sources of capital to increase the ambition and scale of what's possible.

The philanthropic landscape for rural development in the United States is diverse and continues to evolve across regions, sectors, and approaches to rural development, equity, and inclusion. This mirrors the diversity across the rural development field, and rural philanthropy must address similar disaggregation and low levels of alignment within their own ranks witnessed across the rural development ecosystem. Philanthropic investment in rural people and places remains a very small share of overall foundation giving –with little more than 3% of foundation grants land in rural communities. Concurrently, both public and private money tends to aggregate in high capacity metropolitan financial centers, creating "philanthropy deserts" across rural America. Investments that do reach rural places are often part of a broader national investment strategy (e.g. workforce, education, health) that may not recognize local contexts, particularly for rural communities.

These realities reveal opportunities for progress. An aligned and intentional funder ecosystem would prioritize greater coordination and alignment of existing networks and bring new funders into the fold to further expand ambition and impact. Public funding remains the dominant financial driver in rural and tribal communities, which underscores the importance of philanthropic investment in systems change. By definition, systems change work takes years making it a poor match for short-term, project- or-program based grants. Building durable

systems-change infrastructure in the rural space will require sustained investment, flexible funding, supporting experimentation, strengthening local capacity, and helping communities leverage public and private resources.

SFRA participants noted that they face structural challenges when working with philanthropy including a funding landscape that remains overly restricted. Corporate philanthropy is often absent, Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs) go untapped, and the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) operates as an active barrier rather than a tool for rural capital deployment. Furthermore, a trust and awareness gap persists between national foundations, rural practitioners and regional and local philanthropies; too often national philanthropy has invested significant dollars without engaging with regional and local philanthropy. Corporations, rural-aligned family offices and other private wealth holders will benefit from stronger connections with established rural development networks, creating opportunities to share learning, identify promising investments, and coordinate capital around community-defined priorities.

From a grantee perspective, national philanthropy sometimes struggles to understand the field or justify investments – particularly because of scale – where a national agenda or focus is not easily achievable in rural communities. Investments in rural areas must be nuanced to place and context, which is sometimes hard for foundations with missions focused on scale. From a funder perspective, program officers with a rural portfolio are often going it alone within large organizations and working to overcome myriad institutional hurdles with too few tools and allies for making the case among urban-focused colleagues, in scale-focused institutions for the potential impact significant investments can yield for both rural communities and the country.

The models below build on successful funder alignment and funding strategies already working for rural economies and provide ideas that may enable more substantial investments in systems change.

Regional and National Collective Philanthropic Alignment Models

Overcoming this fragmentation requires creation of stronger regional funder networks with greater reach. Regional funder alignment models—such as the Texas Rural Funders Network, the Appalachian Funders Network, the Delta Philanthropy Forum, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and the Nebraska Association of Community Foundations— bring philanthropic actors across a region together for greater alignment and impact. Strong funder networks are sustained beyond political and issue cycles and are committed to aligning funders by sharing data, best practices, and relationships so there are platforms to both incubate structural solutions across rural communities and collaborative action more generally. There is a need to deepen, broaden, and formalize how these regional entities learn and work together. Building upon the foundational convenings led by the Brookings Institution, Grantmakers in Health and the Dogwood Health Trust over the past 18 months. In the near-term this ecosystem might expand to include additional regional funders or funder networks focused on economic mobility, for example–leveraging existing platforms like the United Philanthropy Forum, Council on Foundations, and sector campaigns like Unite and Advance. This network could provide

avenues for local philanthropy to learn from one another and bring promising models and strategies to their places.

A formal National Rural Philanthropy Network/Philanthropy Serving Organization (PSO) could offer national funders a place for peer learning in how to strategically invest as well as support connections to regional and local networks**.** There are multiple models for this kind of network, for example, a PSO or a specialized roundtable could operate within the Council on Foundations, a funder network could organize national institutional donors and integrate them directly with local and regional funders, or examples of national organizations that connect funders focused on specific areas such as the Infrastructure Funders group, A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities (ABFE) or Neighborhood Funders Group. This coordinating body could drive field coherence by sharing information/investments and organizational strategies, and setting the table for conversations about scaling existing rural and Native-focused national funding collaboratives or creating new funder tables or collaboratives with shared strategy and vision to deploy long-term, parallel investments in systems infrastructure. This kind of network could facilitate rural field immersion, helping to make it a regular practice, not an occasional learning trip. Funder learning should include practitioner-designed site visits, listening sessions, peer exchange, and follow-up commitments that move beyond observation into aligned investment.

National and regional pooled funding collaboratives are aggregating capital and investing it in place-based partners to create efficient ways for philanthropy to deploy capital. The Trust for Civic Life, BuildUS, and Invest in Our Future are all models focused on addressing specific issues that are deploying the collective capital in rural places. Similarly, the Heartland Fund (the entity behind Resource Rural, Rural Democracy Initiatives, and Rural Climate Partners) has provided donors the opportunity to invest in rural-specific collaboratives enabling them to fund and learn at scale to regional or local entities. In the meantime, there are numerous longtime rural actors such as HAC, Rural LISC, RCAP at the national level and Communities Unlimited, FAHE, and many, many more regional organizations that are essential sector-or-region specific intermediaries that work hand-in-glove with local communities and that are well positioned to regrant and redeploy multiple types of capital (including public and private financing) to local actors if properly resourced. All of these entities can be part of creating an interlocking system of intermediaries that enables philanthropic--and ideally also public and private capital--to reach rural people and places.

Local Capital Capture and Community Foundation Models

Retaining wealth locally requires organizing and empowering rural community foundations, which represent one of the ecosystem's most important locally-rooted and often underleveraged assets. Rural community foundations should be supported and viewed as civic infrastructure: grantmakers, civic infrastructure, trusted conveners, fiscal sponsors, capital aggregators, support for emerging organizations, data stewards, and intermediaries that can help national funders invest in rural places without bypassing local ownership. A national association of rural community foundations could elevate these institutions, become even more important civic

infrastructure showcasing deeper impact on measures like trust, belonging, and civic engagement alongside growing local endowments, improve asset-management capacity, and utilize sophisticated financial instruments like Program-Related Investments (PRIs) and tax credits. A national association of rural community foundations provides another pathway for intergenerational and technology wealth to land in communities where donors have personal connections and affinities for rural communities by building the infrastructure to accept and deploy substantial gifts across the community that has limited capacity and visibility to large donors. By replicating and scaling the highly successful, independent models developed by the Nebraska Community Foundation, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, and the Kansas Association of Community Foundations (KACF hosts an annual national conference for community foundations) this national infrastructure could help local, regional, and national philanthropy capture wealth before it leaks out of the region, converting temporary local assets into permanent, locally controlled capital.

Family Office and Private Capital Integration Models

Mobilizing private wealth requires constructing formal peer-to-peer networks that integrate family offices, corporate foundations, and high-net-worth individuals into the rural systems change ecosystem. This is consistent with national giving trends–2025 saw record giving ($617 billion) with larger shares from donor advised funds and family offices. This underscores why Donor Advised Funds are an important tool to more effectively deploy. Additionally, in partnership with the National Center for Family Philanthropy and collaborative networks like Stand Together, the field should establish a dedicated rural investment roundtable for private wealth allocators. This mechanism could connect prominent, rural-aligned family offices and other private wealth holders with established rural development networks so there is greater integration, alignment, and familiarity with rural development strategies. This mechanism could create opportunities to share learning, identify promising investments, and coordinate capital around community-defined priorities. By investing in existing and/or designing new neutral, multi-funder pooled funds and collaborative platforms if, when, and where they do not exist, this infrastructure enables private family capital to align seamlessly with grassroots organizing, and connect directly with rural people and organizations, bypass traditional urban-biased gatekeepers, and direct strategic resources into multi-sector rural advancement.

Program Innovations that Do Right by Rural and Resource-Limited Communities

Ensuring rural organizations and communities have the ability to access public and philanthropic funds often depends on funder program design and processes that can either help or hinder access. As part and parcel of their commitment to investing in rural people and places, philanthropy large and small should align around and update rural grant making standards that are responsive to community and organizational needs, such as: multi-year flexible support; reduced application and reporting burden; compensation for community expertise; rural-relevant impact measures; support for smaller and emerging organizations; funding for collaboration and

backbone capacity; and grant criteria that value depth, trust, and community ownership rather than scale.

An important example is Partners for Rural Transformation's (PRT) Rural Funding Guide—a framework of investment best practices to transform how public and private funders invest in rural prosperity informed by the voices of rural and Native practitioners serving persistent poverty communities, PRT champions this framework to ensure persistent-poverty communities can deploy RECD solutions that shape policy. Furthermore, field-building and collaboration efforts aligned with SFRA recommendations must explicitly recognize and adequately resource the participation of persistent poverty communities, communities of color, and Tribal Nations, alongside a broader set of rural communities affected by industrial restructuring, disinvestment, and demographic change.
Additionally philanthropy should continue to create dedicated match, predevelopment, and bridge-funding pools that help rural communities access federal, state, and private capital. Pre-development funds should cover planning, engineering, grant writing, community engagement, compliance, and local match requirements—costs that often determine whether rural communities can compete for public resources at all.

Philanthropy should set and track progress towards a bold rural investment goal that motivates and mobilizes philanthropy and the private sector both to invest a greater share of capital in rural-serving, rural-based organizations, people, and places.

Next Steps & Staged Investment Strategy

The most important outcomes of SFRA to date are stronger relationships, greater trust, and shared language among practitioners and national leaders across sector and geography. There is also a shared commitment to working hand-in-glove to build a stronger field. The conversations that have happened over the past 15 months and this paper have been about building a strong foundation for what will be a multi-year (e.g. 10-15 year) effort to build power, change narratives, and ultimately change funding flows and influence decisions of consequence to rural people and rural places.

Concurrently, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CoBank, the Heron Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, four national funders already invested in rural work, have led an effort to engage national rural-focused philanthropy including a one-day meeting among national rural philanthropy and some regional philanthropies in Denver, Colorado in June 2026 adjacent to the SFRA convening. This effort is building momentum with stronger relationships, understanding, and better alignment among funders.

To that end, the staged investment strategy below details the substantive priorities that SFRA participants collectively identified and agreed to put forward and pursue. In advancing these shared strategies, SFRA explicitly prioritizes investing in existing capacity, institutions, and networks before creating new infrastructure.

Staged Investment Strategy:

Immediate (Next 12-18 months)

1. **Capitalize & resource existing organizations and networks:** Direct resources toward the individuals and networks executing fundamental work on the ground.
2. **Planning Grants.** Two of the most commonly named components of rural development infrastructure are a 1) rural policy institute and 2) a rural data cooperative. Planning grants for these projects would enable SFRA and interested field leaders to do the early stage research and planning work move a step closer towards bringing national policy infrastructure and a rural data cooperative to life.
3. **Field Building & Action Grants that Support Collaboration and SFRA Recommendations.** SFRA has surfaced nascent collaborations and areas of shared interest among practitioners. New investments can deepen these relationships and shared understanding and lead to concrete deliverables. The types of investments that SFRA has surfaced that would increase connectivity across the field and the overall capacity for systems change and where SFRA would ask funders to invite and consider proposals for funding include activities that would:
    - Result in a collaborative, cross-sector vision that is informed by on-the-ground engagement of rural people and a corresponding, responsive rural policy agenda.
    - Support the growth of existing and nascent field infrastructure such as a national intermediary for state offices of rural prosperity and more robust policy and advocacy efforts.
    - Better align and strengthen existing field infrastructure (e.g. help organizations get more clear about their respective lanes aligning infrastructure such as the various existent rural hub networks)
    - Better organize and formalize Rural Hub networks and infrastructure; doing so alongside significant investments could expand the reach of hubs and hub networks, provide the space required to create a shared learning agenda, clarify shared priorities, and articulate a forward-looking agenda across these networks to advance the broader ecosystem.
    - Invest in programming, training, and TA that supports leadership development and local capacity building that enables greater involvement in systems change;
    - Resource and build out lasting advocacy infrastructure for the rural development field;
    - Support creation of products/tools/information that local leaders need in rural places (e.g. technical assistance and model community benefits agreements for data centers)
    - Advance narrative change and rural voice efforts, especially those that lift up people of color and non-dominant perspectives;
    - Provide just in time and bridge grants for essential field infrastructure; and
    - Support and enable broader participation in collaborative efforts (e.g. ensure organizations are able to cover the cost of time spent working in partnership with one another).

4. **Field-building and coordination across RECD.** As part of Phase II of SFRA, a project steering committee representing the mission, diversity and commitment of the field should put time and energy into systems integration activities with support from contracted project staff. This plan of work should be drawn from the many ideas and suggestions in this SFRA report such as sharing information across sectors, organizing a 'rural week', and prompting creation of resources and forums at the national level that are responsive to local issues (e.g. data centers, local media, RHTP).
5. **Grow and deepen the network of regional, place-based funders** that the Brookings Institution and Grantmakers in Health have cultivated through their recent community of practice, in a way that continues to broaden and strengthen relationships, mobilizes and orients participants towards collective action, and develops momentum for the future.
6. **Support and inform philanthropic efforts to build a stronger learning and action network among national funders** that combines peer learning with coordinated deployment of capital. Specifically ensure that regional and local expertise is integrated into the network's activities and urge national and regional philanthropy to recognize and support community foundations as essential RECD infrastructure.
7. **SFRA Phase II.** There is broad agreement among participants that the work of SFRA should continue. Financial investments that support a streamlined infrastructure and dedicated staff time are essential to moving forward with the recommendations that follow. In sum, the work at hand is: 1) supporting coalitions of the willing who are ready to advance some of these proposals that would build a more coherent and effective field; and 2) building the capacity of the field to engage in and effect systems change. The end goal, in the long-run, is for the field of RECD to be organized and powerful enough to improve outcomes for rural people and places, through greater philanthropic, public, and private investment in rural places.

   The next phase of SFRA needs to bring in many more national, regional, and local rural leaders and practitioners into the fold. While this initial phase of SFRA was focused on taking stock and building alignment among field leaders, the next phase of the work must be more oriented towards building the infrastructure that SFRA identified as needed and taking action on a specific set of projects and priorities that SFRA has named. The effort should continue to be non-partisan, cross-sector, multi-racial, and multi-geographic, and future-oriented with on-the-ground experience, local needs, and rural voices front and center.

Short-term (2028-2029)

1. **SFRA recommendations and ideas continue to guide philanthropic investments.** Funders looking to invest in rural systems change efforts turn to SFRA for guidance and ideas for how to invest strategically while also consulting the increasingly coordinated rural funders, rural hubs, and increasingly coordinated field of practitioners.

2. **Support the growth of nascent systems change efforts:** Begin to formalize and build out systems change infrastructure (e.g. a national policy institute or rural policy and action lab) in line with the blueprints created through the planning grants noted in the previous section.
3. **Formalize aligning institutional philanthropy:** Facilitate continuous coordination and strategic alignment among national foundations, while also providing dedicated resources that enable regional funders to participate actively in ongoing dialogues horizontally across regions and sectors and vertically with national funders.
4. **Attract substantial new capital:** Secure a minimum of $20 million in new, previously-unplanned investments, especially from national philanthropy (or high-net-worth individuals) that is focused specifically on building the field of rural development and increasing the capacity for policy and systems change; these investments could be made through existing entities and/or a new entity or some combination of the two.

Mid-term (Through 2032)

1. **Align and capitalize funding infrastructure:** Align, capitalize, and build out a robust and intentional set of funding mechanisms, including multi-funder pooled funds and updated grant structures that enable greater alignment among funders and greater alignment with practitioner and on-the-ground needs.
2. **Attract substantial new capital:** Secure a minimum of $100 million in new, previously-unplanned investments (over five years), especially from national philanthropy (or high-net-worth individuals) that is focused specifically on building the field of rural development and increasing the capacity for policy and systems change; these investments could be made through existing entities and/or a new entity or some combination of the two.

Long-Term Priorities (10-Year Strategy)

1. **Sustain systemic investments:** Maintain permanent, patient funding, and develop new financial and capital investment models to anchor and sustain the rural systems change infrastructure for the long haul. Seek a 10-year commitment of significant systems change funding that results in a meaningful increase in philanthropic investment and a measurable increase in public investment in rural communities.

Appendix A: Summary of Recommendations

This appendix synthesizes the breadth of ideas surfaced throughout the SFRA process. These ideas are not a checklist of standalone project requests. Rather, they form an interdependent framework designed to alter conditions across all three tiers of the Water of Systems Change model:

1. transforming implicit mental models through narrative change (public-interest journalism and field-wide narrative frames);
2. rebalancing relationships and power dynamics through non-partisan organizing and advocacy infrastructure (backbone organizations for RECD hubs, grass-tops leadership councils, and 501(c)(4) organizing capacity); and
3. structural change through reform of explicit policies, practices, and resource flows (national policy infrastructure, data cooperatives, and rural-friendly grantmaking standards).

Considered holistically, these interventions construct an aligned ecosystem where targeted investments yield a collective leverage far larger than the sum of its individual parts. Implementation must consistently prioritize capitalizing, expanding, and connecting existing organizations, networks, and assets before creating new infrastructure from whole cloth. Proposals for national entities, such as a National Policy Institute should not be interpreted as a new entity specializing in federal policy. National infrastructure should be built to think and bridge across local, state, and federal scales, elevate authentic rural voices into national discussions, and align investments across system roles–policy, research, narrative change, and advocac–to achieve durable, fundamental transformation.

Rural Capacity & Leadership Development

- Properly resource existing organizations with multi-year funds and ample general operating support for staff development and capacity building (Pg 5)
- Continued build out of national intermediaries (Pg 5)
- National RECD Hub network or backbone organization (Pg 5)
- A coordinated national and state or regional network of experienced practitioners and entities providing technical assistance (Pg 5)
- Cohort-based Fellowship model for mid-career professionals placing practitioners within national think tanks and state policy organizations (Pg 6)
- Professional development fellowships and opportunities for young professionals in RECD (Pg 6)

Durable and Visible Rural Voice and Advocacy Infrastructure

- Creation of a shared agenda rooted in rural people's priorities and visions for their future created through state-by-state visioning sessions in at least 10-states facilitated by trusted and neutral parties. (Pg 6)
- Build out existing permanent, year-round civic advocacy infrastructure to advance the shared agenda noted above (Pg 6)
- A high-level, highly-visible council of influential leaders to elevate rural voices (Pg 7)

- An organized influencer network of social media personalities with rural cred (Pg 7)
- Intentional, coordinated efforts to educate elected leaders and political candidates about issues of concern to rural people and places. (Pg 7)
- Attention to cultivating, encouraging, and supporting rural people to run for office, including, potentially, creation of a rural-focused C4 (Pg 7)
- Form an Rural-Urban Alliance (Pg 7)

Policy & Strategy Capacity

- National Rural Policy Infrastructure e.g. a Rural Policy Institute (Pg 8)
- High-level, shared federal policy agenda developed collaboratively (Pg 8)
- Tracking of state-level legislation and advancements and local trends & a unified coalition of state and local lobbyists (Pg 8)
- Development and distribution of tools and information in response to local needs (Pg 9)
- A national association of state-based policy organizations (Pg 9)
- A research-informed, outcome-oriented, and modern framework for how to go about rural community and economic development (Pg 9)

Research & Data

- Shared data platform (Pg 10)
- Member-driven rural data cooperative (Pg 10)
- User-friendly data tools that improve data access and usability (Pg 10)
- Stand up shared research infrastructure that can effectively bridge academic rigor, practitioner wisdom, and direct policy influence.

Narrative Change

- Public-interest journalism (Pg 11)
- Sustained local support for local newspapers and radio stations (Pg 11)
- Significant attention to arts and culture (Pg 11)
- Fellowships for rural photographers and journalists (Pg 11)
- Fiction, film and other creative work to drive rural narrative change (Pg 11)
- Unexpected network of rural champions (Pg 12)
- Connectivity with social media influencers (Pg 12)
- Cohesive narrative frame linking sectors across RECD (Pg 12)

Philanthropy & Funders

- Creation of more regional funders networks (Pg 13)
- Relationship building, learning, and coordinated action among rural funders (Pg 13)
- A national Rural Philanthropy Network (Pg 13)
- Funder tables or collaboratives with shared strategy and vision for long-term, parallel investments in systems infrastructure (Pg 13)
- A national association of rural community foundations (Pg 14)
- Formal peer-to-peer networks that integrate family offices, corporate foundations, and high-net-worth individuals into the rural systems change ecosystem (Pg 13).
- Dedicated rural investment roundtable (Pg 13)

- Establish and institute rural-friendly grantmaking standards (Pg 15)
- Continue dedicated match, predevelopment and bridge-funding pools (Pg 15)
- A goal for increasing the share of philanthropy going to rural (Pg 15).

Cross-Cutting Needs

- Greater and sustained investment in rural places and existing rural-serving organizations. SFRA is designed to motivate and direct new energy, resources, and partnerships to turn dynamic local leaders and inspired place-based initiatives into transformative models and coalitions.
- More coordination and backbone capacity supporting rural practitioners and the field. This idea is highlighted specifically to support RCED hubs, state-based policy organizations, and for rural community foundations, for example, but is an essential capacity for a functional, effective field across system roles and geographies.
- Information sharing horizontally, vertically across sectors and silos. Perhaps the biggest cross-cutting priority identified by SFRA participants is lifting rural voices and rural knowledge into state and national level policy and strategy tables.
- Inject fun, professional development, and intentional networking and use of time into field building: e.g. host a rural week and national rural conference, align calendars, increase social connectivity and networks and cut down on cross-country travel.

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

Strong Foundations for Rural Development reflects the input of more than 50 rural leaders, experts, and practitioners from across the country. Special thanks to all those who have shared their time, energy, wisdom, expertise, ideas, experiences, and perspectives.

Most Steering Committee members and project contributors participated in this project in their personal capacity. Participants were invited to participate because of their experience and perspective--personal and professional--over the course of time, not their current institutional home. Accordingly, this paper does not represent the positions or an endorsement of participants' institutions. Affiliations are provided for informational purposes and to provide a snapshot of the breadth and depth of experience and expertise that has informed this paper.

This project was made possible with generous support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and CoBank. We are tremendously grateful for their partnership and their commitment to increasing opportunities for rural people and places.

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