

Report Summary from the Thrive Rural Strategy Assessment

October 2023

Background

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) identified rural communities as an important area for continued exploration and investment based on significant need and the opportunity to advance health and health equity in rural areas. [Rural counties across the United States rank lowest](#) in health outcomes, with BIPOC rural residents having worse health, social, and economic outcomes than their white counterparts. Between September 2019 and December 2023, RWJF awarded \$11,050,000 into grants and partnerships establishing the Thrive Rural Body of Work (referred to as TR throughout). Initial stages of TR were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. In response RWJF collaborated with grantees to tailor the goal of the initiative to focus on **advancing a more connected and influential ecosystem of people and institutions to increase racial equity, prosperity, and health in low-wealth and BIPOC rural communities**. The Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE) served as RWJF's evaluation and learning partner to conduct a strategy assessment of TR from March 2021 to June 2023. The strategy assessment focused on the three main strategies in the TR theory of change: field weaving & strengthening; narrative & paradigm change; and policies, practices, & resource flows (Box 1), and included the work of nine grantee teams.

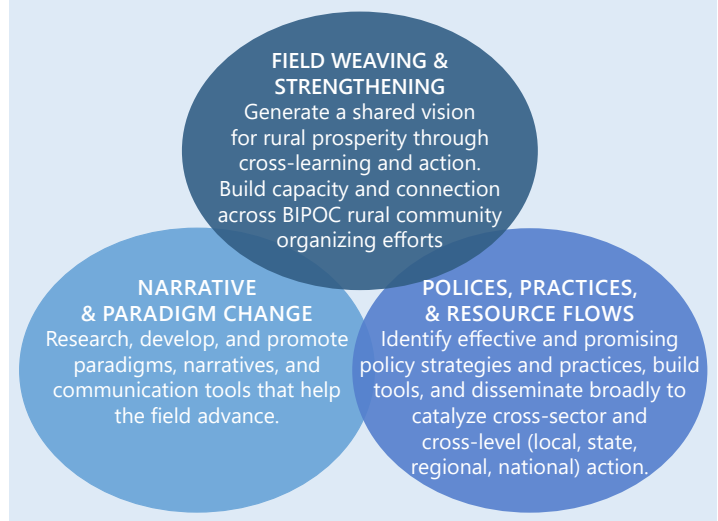
Methods

The strategy assessment was driven by a set of questions that focused on understanding TR strategy implementation, lessons learned, and opportunities for future impact. The assessment involved developing an initial TR theory of change in collaboration with RWJF, conducting interviews, tracking grantee progress, and reviewing relevant documents. The CCHE team conducted a total of 37 interviews (see Box 2). Analysis methods included qualitative thematic analysis by data source and using a SWOT analysis to triangulate and synthesize information across data sources. Briefings of key findings and collective sensemaking with RWJF program officers occurred throughout the assessment.

One limitation of the assessment was the timeline of grantee data collection (from March 2021 through December 2022) which excluded some grantees' work that was still emerging in 2023. In addition, the level of grantee engagement was constrained by the amount of time and capacity grantees had to participate in the assessment outside of annual interviews.

This report provides a summary of strategy assessment findings organized into three main areas: TR accomplishments; catalysts and barriers to progress; and opportunities for future impact. Findings from the assessment were meant to generate actionable learnings and guidance for RWJF's future investments and partnerships and contribute to forward thinking in the broader field of rural community development.

Box 1. TR Theory of Change Strategies



Box 2. Types of interviews (total = 37)

- 2 rounds of grantee interviews (9 interviews in 2021; 8 interviews in 2022)
- 8 interviews with RWJF staff
- 12 interviews with experts in the rural community development field (identified by RWJF staff, CCHE and through snowball sampling from interviews)

Thrive Rural accomplishments

Thrive Rural laid a foundation of research, infrastructure, and networked actors to strengthen the rural community development field. Appendix 1 describes the grantees and a sample of their accomplishments up to December 2022. Important milestones included:



Development of the [TR Framework](#) (led by Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG)) that provides a **unifying frame and driver for knowledge, learning and action for the rural field**. Interest and adoption of the framework by rural practitioners, government, and funders is growing.



In interviews, all nine grantees gave examples of how their **partnerships and connections grew** both within TR and with other rural allies through newly created entities (e.g., advisory committees, working groups, networks, a learning circle).



TR grantees developed 17 research briefs, 11 blog posts, 6 tools/toolkits, 4 podcasts, 7 case stories, 1 book chapter and 1 New York Times editorial, all in support of **strengthening capacity and advocating for the rural field**. These efforts prioritized space for rural BIPOC communities and BIPOC-serving organizations to share their stories.



Convened federal agency officials and rural practitioners for a series of roundtables to strengthen support for capacity-building and improve metrics to measure rural prosperity and equity (hosted by Brookings Center for Sustainable Development and Aspen CSG).



“We put the right issues on the table at the right time, with a lot of thinking that resonated both with the field and policymakers and have been helpful in starting to put momentum around change in motion.”

-TR grantee

TR catalysts of equitable rural development progress

The assessment found the following five key drivers of progress for TR as identified by grantees:



Focus on race, place, and class equity: The investment's focus on addressing structural racism articulated by the [Foundational element in the TR Framework](#) (defining race, place, and class equity in the context of rural) gave grantees a frame to build from in their work and helped to spark more conversations, research, tools, and resources.



Spaces to convene/connect increased capacity and collaboration: TR provided an important impetus to partner and tapped into a desire for more connection across the field.



A vision and a hub for rural community development resources: Aspen CSG's role, development of the TR Framework, and their website, acts as a comprehensive resource for rural practitioners which filled a gap in communications across the rural field. Interest and adoption of the TR Framework by government and funders (e.g., USDA, the Ford Family Foundation, and others) as a way to fund rural community development is helping to spread it to more practitioners, and other levels of government and philanthropy.



The gift of good timing: TR research, data, and products that influenced policymaking were buoyed by a political administration that was hungry for the information and a period of unprecedented federal investment in rural (e.g., American Rescue Plan Act, Rural Partnership Program, Rural Community Assistance Partnership, etc.)



Stories and models that sparked change: New guidance, models, and case studies on equitable practice in philanthropy helped strengthen connections between funders and rural communities. A data story on federal definitions of rural opened new conversations and continues to be referenced by researchers and practitioners.

Barriers to equitable rural development progress that impacted TR

The following five challenges were named by TR grantees and were acknowledged in interviews with experts in the rural community development field (referred to as field informants) to be barriers that impact the field as a whole. Below are ways in which the work of TR helped to better understand some implications of these known issues.

- **Complex power dynamics not always grounded in BIPOC community needs:** As a large national funder entering the rural community development space it's difficult for RWJF to strike a balance of local-level engagement and working only with national-level organizations aimed at broad impact. TR grantees described their individual work streams as community-informed but felt that initial TR strategy development lacked a collective approach and was more top-down. Some field informants noted the work by grantees was generally white-led, highlighting the importance of having BIPOC and Native-led organizations represented and engaged as leaders in the initiative. Field informants suggested focusing on shifting power to BIPOC-led organizations and local, rural communities including connecting them to funding and resources that help build their capacity and assets.
- **Lack of investment in Native nations/communities to fund rural development:** Rural issues and strategies within tribal/Native communities can look different given they are sovereign. Resources dedicated to relationship building and research to better understand how federal policies impact Native nations is a critical need for the field.

- **Public perceptions and stereotypes about rural communities:** The mainstream media promotes false stereotypes and seems uninterested in changing narratives about rural communities. TR's narrative change work aimed to equip rural leaders and practitioners to address this issue yet there is a long-time frame to these efforts. Field informants and grantees emphasized the need to share messages and garner support from rural community members for how federal funds are spent to benefit their communities. This would help ensure rural communities vote favorably for federal funding in the future.

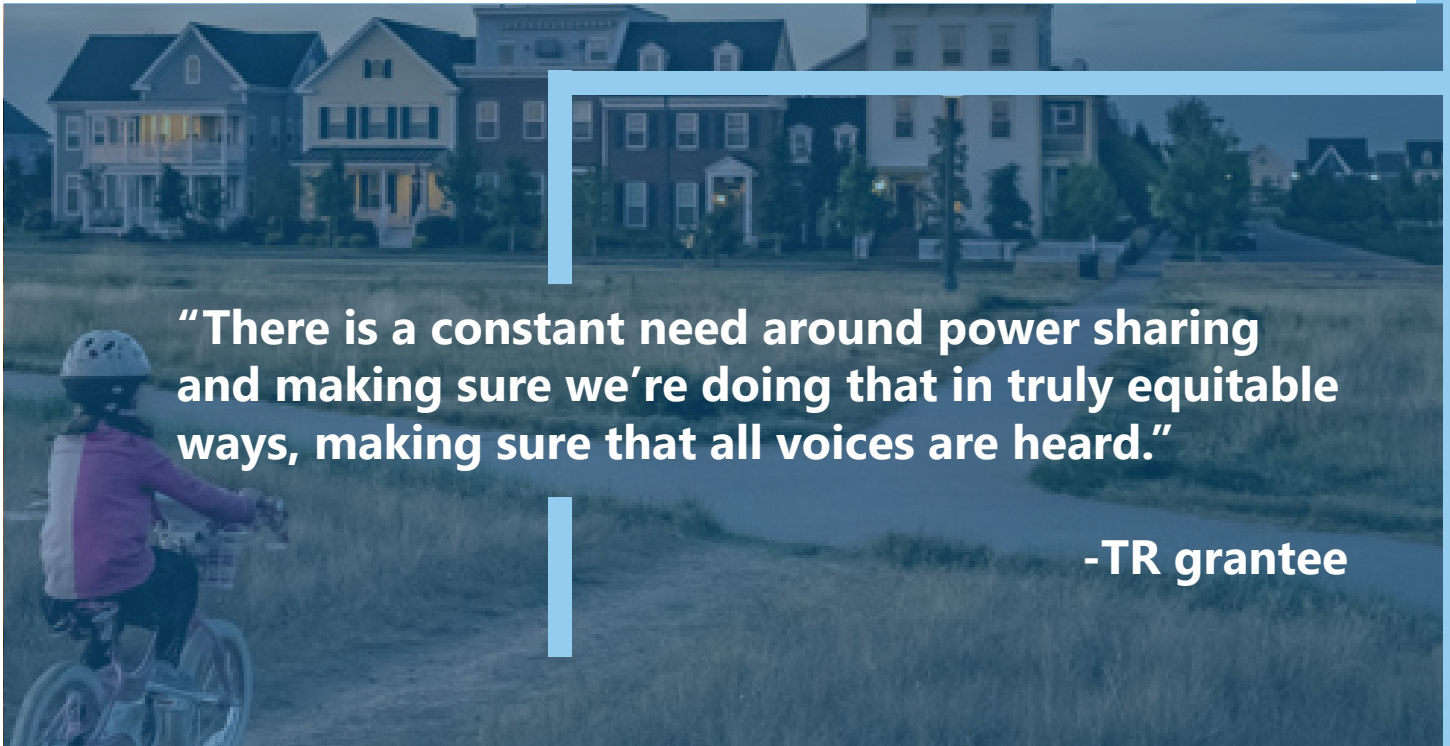


- **Structural challenges to how rural investment resources flow:** Despite exceptional federal resources available funding does not consistently reach rural communities that need it due to a variety of challenges, e.g., varying definitions of rural areas, siloed funding streams, and match/reimbursement requirements. An additional barrier is the lack of community-based organizational capacity with major gaps in organizations' ability to apply for and spend funds. Grantees reported a dearth of funding and bandwidth in the field to be able to research and learn effectively from the current implementation. More attention is needed at the federal level to understand what rural areas need. Grantees see a critical role for rural development hubs and regional and national intermediaries to assist in this effort.
- **Short-term grant cycles create unrealistic expectations and pressure:** Assessment findings showed there is a tension between short-term funding cycles (RWJF uses two-year grant cycles) and the long-term nature of the work, especially the focus on structural racism. Relationship building and work that is community informed to address structural racism takes time. One example was the TR narrative change work which meaningfully engaged diverse groups (geographic, racial, economic, etc.) in building an overarching narrative that honors the diversity and uniqueness of rural communities and required a long research and development phase.

Opportunities for Future Impact

The following section describes six opportunities that emerged from the assessment findings that are applicable to funders and practitioners interested in advancing equitable rural development.

Increase power sharing and collective strategy in the next phase of work. Building from the experience of TR, any new funding should recognize the expertise of rural practitioners, provide some flexibility in funding and grant requirements, and engage them in collective strategy setting to best leverage strengths, build buy-in, and drive efficiency in the work. Taking these steps demonstrates trust in rural practitioners and local communities already doing the work. In parallel, recognize and work to address longstanding inequitable structures (white supremacy, colonization) that impact rural development (e.g., who are the decision makers, who holds power and who doesn't). Inequities in funding rural community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve BIPOC communities (compared to white-led or non-rural counterparts) remain and need to be addressed as CBOs play a vital role in advancing equity for rural populations.



“There is a constant need around power sharing and making sure we’re doing that in truly equitable ways, making sure that all voices are heard.”

-TR grantee

Continue field strengthening efforts and increase support for rural regional hubs¹. Assessment findings pointed to the opportunity to deepen field weaving efforts by providing resources and funding opportunities (e.g., capacity building funding and multi-sector grants) to support and incentivize cross-sector convening, networking, and collaboration on rural work. There was interest in regional convenings for connection and field strengthening approaches that go beyond conversations to actionable strategies. Grantees and field informants recommended more investment and engagement with regional hubs, which can support the work of local intermediaries, strengthen the community-informed approach, and provide broader cross-sharing and learning. They are also an opportunistic place to advance the systems and community elements of the TR Framework (as indicated in [Aspen CSG’s Regional Hubs report](#)). Increasing local entity engagement can deepen field weaving by helping translate and tailor policies and strategies that resonate at the regional/local level and do not ignore current political context. Local engagement can also provide ways of embracing what is happening in communities as evidence because policies and practices that address structural racism are still nascent. There was some interest among TR grantees to understand more about whose voices are missing and what parts of the TR Framework do not yet have active work.

Increase investment in and acknowledgement of tribal nations and Native people. Any truly equitable rural development strategy needs to include Native people. It will take sizable investment to look at relationship building, and narrative and policy change that is in line with rural-based Native nations’ ideas and not white-led goals and outcomes. This will require bringing BIPOC-led and Native organizations to the table and increasing their direct funding.

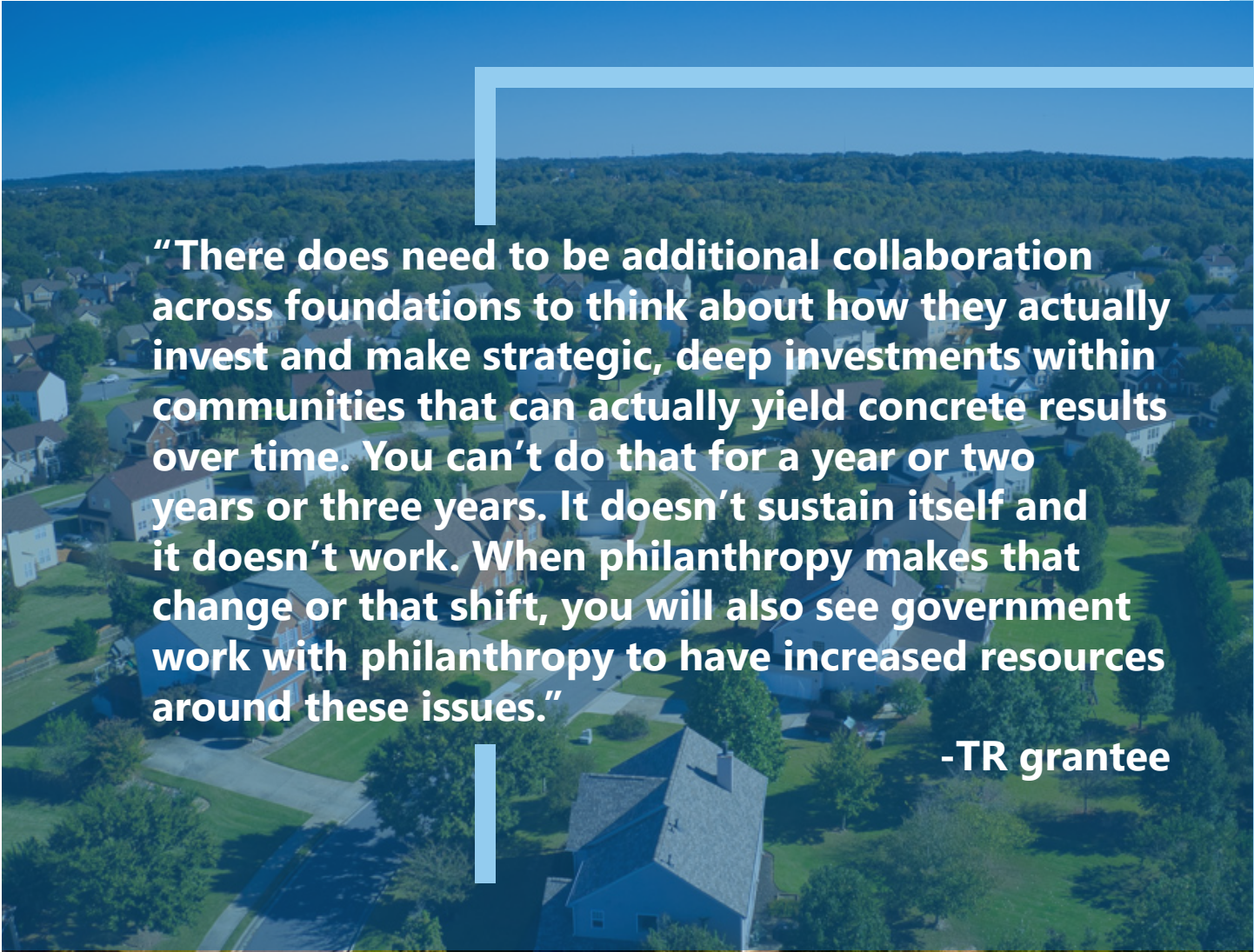
Directly fund local organizational capacity and increase research efforts to study how well federal resources reach rural communities. The current investment model (e.g., competitive grants, matching funds) creates a complex system where resources and funding are not adequately reaching under-resourced communities. Direct investment in organizational capacity increases local communities’ ability to identify, apply for, and receive funds. Additionally, regional funders need the organizational capacity to effectively identify local organizations to provide funding. In parallel, resources are needed to help understand the

¹ Regional hubs in this report are defined as rural and regional intermediary organizations that are place-based and working to improve prosperity and well-being by harnessing local and outside resources to design and deliver services and products to people, firms, and organizations in their region (adapted from [Aspen CSG Rural Development Hubs report](#), 2019)

effectiveness of federal resources in rural communities and how well they reach those in need. There is a dearth of data on rural philanthropy to understand where existing funding is and what is needed. Better data can illuminate disparities and provide a baseline for evaluation of progress over time.

Advance a shifting narrative about rural communities. TR narrative change grantees reached a critical inflection point at the end of 2022, moving from a complex research and development phase into a phase of dissemination, storytelling, and building connection both within TR and across the rural field. It will take more time and resources to overcome negative stereotypes and permeate the reach of mass media so narratives that rural communities can thrive and investment in them is valuable are shared by all.

Visionary/long-term funding in the field will drive more momentum. Grantees and field informants named a persistent lack of sustainable funding for their work, and a few said RWJF is the only funder they know of supporting rural field strengthening and networking work. There is an opportunity in rural community development for national philanthropy leaders to come together and consider collaborative funding models to make significant, lasting change in rural communities. Grant cycles should match with the long-term timeline that is needed to make an impact.



“There does need to be additional collaboration across foundations to think about how they actually invest and make strategic, deep investments within communities that can actually yield concrete results over time. You can’t do that for a year or two years or three years. It doesn’t sustain itself and it doesn’t work. When philanthropy makes that change or that shift, you will also see government work with philanthropy to have increased resources around these issues.”

-TR grantee

RWJF Role

RWJF's Healthy Communities (RWJF) strategic portfolio remains committed to advancing equitable rural development, recognizing that rural communities are an important part of improving health equity nationwide. Informed by this assessment, RWJF recognizes the importance of continuing to support field weaving & strengthening as a core field building function and remains committed to sustaining that effort. Importantly, the portfolio is also committed to de-siloing its rural work, and meaningfully embedding and building out programming focused on changing policy, systems, and financing to improve outcomes in rural regions of concentrated poverty and rural communities of color across its strategies and bodies of work in order to fully leverage its strengths and influence.

The [Center for Community Health and Evaluation](#) designs and evaluates health-related programs and initiatives throughout the United States.

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Appendix 1. Thrive Rural Grantees

TR strategy ¹	Grantee Organizations	Sample of Accomplishments
Field Weaving & Strengthening	<p>Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG)</p> <p>Partnered with: University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Fourth Quadrant Partners University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated a highly collaborative process to produce the Thrive Rural (TR) Framework, a shared vision for the field, followed by a report describing principles for measuring rural development progress. Co-led nine Rural Opportunity and Development (ROAD) Sessions providing on-demand videos showcasing the work of tribal and rural practitioners. Published Thrive Rural Field Perspectives, topical research reports/briefs relevant to rural development and equity. Developed a webpage to share out timely information about federal funding opportunities for rural people and places. Strategically convened rural practitioners, academic researchers, and policy makers to share resources and learnings and documented results for broad dissemination. Most recently shared five principles for equitable rural outdoor recreation economies following a convening of 27 rural economic and community development practitioners.
	<p>Innovation Network for Communities aka Collaborating for Action on Rural Equity (CARE)</p> <p>Partnered with: Ullman Consulting Gilbert and Associates Roanhorse Consulting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified anti-racism tools for relationship building, created “Guidelines for Conversations” for use in interviews and performed a network scan to identify organizations, networks, and opportunities for collaboration on rural anti-racism work. Produced a research report to promote investment in rural work that focuses on addressing racism and inequities. In addition to providing recommendations to RWJF, the report includes principles for conducting anti-racism work, definitions of key terms, geography of people of color and poverty in rural areas (a downloadable database), a five-year budget, and reading resources.
	<p>The Praxis Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized a rural organizing community of practice that provided a learning space for members to share insights and inform the development of learning circles and the Roadmap (see below). Facilitated four learning circles with members from 16 BIPOC rural organizations representing diverse regions and demographics to build relationships and share learnings. The sessions focused on identifying promising practices within BIPOC-led rural organizing. Developing a Roadmap (to be released in 2023), which will include content on BIPOC rural organizing priorities, strategies, challenges and opportunities, and actionable recommendations for funders and partners to support this effort.

¹ Grantees’ work fit into more than one TR strategy. The largest emphasis of their work is the strategy listed.

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Narrative & Paradigm Change	Hattaway Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed the Messaging Toolkit for Community and Economic Development and the Rural Narrative Change Guidebook; including tools for developing messaging, with stories and examples tailored to key audiences. • Convened a communications community of practice, bringing together rural narrative change practitioners to share learnings and resources for communicating about rural opportunities.
	Center for Rural Innovation (CORI) aka Rural Aperture Project Partnered with: MDC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published two comprehensive data stories that include accessible data, graphics, and narratives to explore two important topics: 1) federal government definitions of rural America and their consequences and 2) how data shapes our understanding of diversity in rural America and the often overlooked realities that come with it. Data stories were written for a variety of audiences including practitioners, journalists, researchers, philanthropists, and government officials.
Policies, Practices, & Resource Flows	Brookings Institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched the Reimagining Rural Policy initiative and produced 14 policy briefs and blogs, and a New York Times editorial to provide analysis and recommendations for U.S. federal rural policy to expand equitable rural prosperity. Have also produced analysis and recommendations for Congressional and executive branch offices upon their request. • Its signature launch report produced an analysis of the landscape of federal resources regularly cited by Congressional members, staff, senior administration officials, and rural practitioners and leaders, with its recommendations incorporated into proposed legislation and executive branch initiatives. • Produced a narrative podcast series that highlighted the diversity of rural demographics, economics, and geographies to emphasize the importance of capacity building and public investment in rural communities. • Tony Pipa, lead scholar of the Reimagining Rural Policy initiative, led the creation of and chairs the Reimagining Rural Assistance Network, a coalition that was quickly able to build strong connections to advance the rural agenda among federal policymakers. Aspen CSG has been a core member of the RRAN steering committee from its inception. • Provided analysis that informed the creation and launch of Resource Rural, a new philanthropic platform to enable better access of rural communities to federal investment.
	ChangeLab Solutions aka Towards Better Rural Futures Project Partnered with: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices The Praxis Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted a policy scan that identified 30 high impact state and local policies that can improve opportunity, health, and equity in rural places. They engaged key partners in the process resulting in multiple resources to advance rural policymaking; including a strategy brief focused on advancing racial equity in rural communities, a strategy brief focusing on advancing rural prosperity, and case studies demonstrating rural policymaking in action. • Hosted a webinar exploring equitable policymaking in rural communities as part of a four-part series focused on policymaking for community health.

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TR strategy ¹	Grantee Organizations	Sample of Accomplishments
Policies, Practices, & Resource Flows (Continued)	<p>United Philanthropy Forum (the Forum)</p> <p>Partnered with: MDC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided 23 mini grants (\$135K) to a diverse set of philanthropy serving organizations to catalyze approaches that support investment in rural equity among their members. • Launched a rural equity column in the Forum's biweekly newsletter with events, resources, and ideas. • Organized a working group of 15 philanthropy serving organizations charged with guiding the project and who meet regularly to support prioritized focus areas and oversee the mini-grants program. • Produced the Principles of Rural Philanthropic Engagement, a collection of best practices from funders and curated seven case stories demonstrating equitable rural funding practice. • Partnered with Inside Philanthropy to write the article The State of American Philanthropy: Giving for Rural Communities.
	<p>Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produced the report Resourcing Rural Organizing Infrastructure: A New York Case Study that provides recommendations to philanthropy/funders on how and why to invest in rural organizing infrastructure and included a toolkit for funders to support organizers in actualizing the report's findings. • Hosted the Rural Organizing Dialogue Series, a space for funders in their network to get to know rural community leaders doing the work.