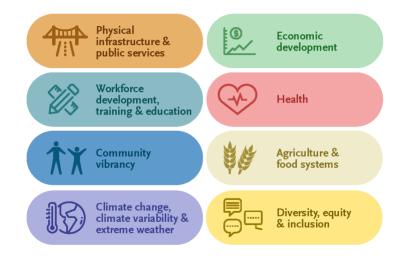*Investing in Rural Capacity:*
Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural
Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions

Executive Summary

The four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) conducted a rapid assessment of priorities for investments in rural community development. The overarching purpose was to identify the critical resources needed to build community capacity and improve quality of life in rural America. Conducted via an iterative process from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022, the assessment is from the perspective of stakeholders working in the rural development spaces. This process was divided into two phases:

- Phase 1: In Fall 2021, an online survey was distributed to stakeholders, which focused on eight topical areas that often impact rural recovery. Survey findings informed the development of the second phase.
- Phase 2: In Spring 2022, eight virtual listening sessions focused on identifying what is needed to fill the gaps between rural communities' assets and opportunities. These facilitated dialogues, which included interactive technologies, asked participants to think about Extension/education, research, and other investments that were needed, and to prioritize them by the most pressing areas for intervention.

Invitations to participate were broadcast to a wide audience of stakeholders working at various organizational and regional levels across the nation, including through professional networks. Participants came from organizations including Land-Grant Universities, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies, among others. Supplemental material identifies regional, demographic, and organizational identifiers collected in both phases. This report compiles recommendations and feedback

Physical infrastructure & public services

Economic development

Workforce development, training & education

Health

Community vibrancy

Agriculture & food systems

Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather

Diversity, equity & inclusion

collected over the process to inform rural development investments and provides a baseline for ongoing and future rural development initiatives. Findings are intended as a set of guideposts to support a broad audience of practitioners, decision makers, and government agencies.

The initial survey involved 680 stakeholders reflecting on topics including: physical infrastructure and public services, workforce development, training, and education; economic development; community vibrancy; health; agriculture and food systems; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather. Findings from priority rankings and written responses to open-ended questions concerning assets, challenges, opportunities, and capacities were used to inform listening session topics. Four regional sessions were conducted on the top priorities for the respective regions (North Central, Northeast, South, West). Also, four national listening sessions

addressed: broadband and the digital divide; rural innovation and entrepreneurship; workforce development, training, and education; and community planning.

The report, available at bit.ly/3lPmhUK, combines data and findings from both phases into a single, comprehensive summary. It identifies the investments that key informant stakeholders view as the highest priorities for U.S. rural communities on the immediate horizon. Prioritization activities during the process also usefully highlighted connections between these topics and various issues that fall under them. These investments, if pursued, would build the capacity of organizations and individuals.

Through this rural development stakeholder engagement, several themes emerged from the eight listening sessions. Participants identified the desire to:

- support and increase collaborative efforts across disciplinary, organizational, and geographic boundaries;
- inform decision making through place-based and community engaged research and best practices;
- involve underserved groups and pursue greater equity;
- and build climate and related economic resilience into local, regional, and national planning.

The report's recommendations for future investments are intended to highlight and inform where direct programmatic efforts and resources may be effective in tackling key issues facing rural communities. Regional differences do occur, and additional interpretation and application of these results should be considered in complement with place-specific findings and existing literature.

In summary, the combination of findings from the survey and listening sessions underscore stakeholder priorities as those efforts that will advance organizational capacity, as well as funding and development opportunities, especially through research and Extension efforts. While these issues have been explored through the Rapid Assessment of Stakeholder Priorities conducted by the RRDCs throughout 2021-2022, additional work is needed to build upon this work and to activate positive impacts in the field of rural development.

The report provides eight overview summaries – one for each of the topics of prominence covered in a nation-wide listening session and one for each of the four geographic regions. A universal summary is then provided, as are potential roles of the RRDCs in building capacity in these areas. The report concludes with a technical summary of the methodology employed and demographics of those who registered to participate in the facilitated dialogues held virtually.

A draft of this report created in October 2022 was sent for an augmented single-blind review by an external panel of professionals and academics. Individuals invited to the review panel included both those who participated in various aspects of the process and those who did not. A total of 10 external reviewers rated the draft report over six metrics, provided comments for both the authors and for a public assessment of the draft, and were provided the optional opportunity to identify if they engaged in the process or not. Half of the review panel indicated they were fully external, having had no direct engagement as an active participant. The panel's feedback was used to inform revisions of this report.

Get the full report, topic-specific and region-specific excerpts, and supplemental material at: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions