



THROUGH NATURAL DISASTER TO PROSPERITY

A CALL TO ACTION

Five Principles to Improve Health and Economic Outcomes for Rural Communities and Native Nations

- 1 Understand and address the underlying conditions affecting rural disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.
- 2 Advance worldviews that restore balance and relationships among communities and natural systems.
- 3 Use disaster response to advance equity and increase regional prosperity.
- 4 Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.
- 5 Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.

Community 
Strategies Group

 aspen institute



This Call to Action is part of [Thrive Rural](#), a movement that imagines a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives. The [Thrive Rural Framework](#) provides both a shared vision and a line of sight into our current understanding of the local and systems conditions necessary to realize that vision — and this is true for disaster preparedness, planning, and response.

INTRODUCTION

From fires to flooding, the geography and exposure to natural disasters in rural America are vast, but its capacity to prepare and respond to disasters is not.

As climate change continues to drive the [increasing frequency and intensity](#) of natural disasters, we have an opportunity to meet the moment by changing the way we approach rural disaster work and filling critical gaps in current efforts.

At the most fundamental level, this will require a reorientation of disaster work from a focus on just fixing what disasters break (an insurance or replacement approach) to a broader focus on advancing equitable community development outcomes (a community prosperity or opportunity approach). This shift in focus will enable disaster work to move out of a “patch it again” cycle and onto a trajectory that advances fundamental community prosperity outcomes, ultimately leading to healthy and thriving people in strong and stable rural communities and Native nations.

Too often, rural and Indigenous people, communities, and leaders are praised for their heroic “resilience” in the face of almost unimaginable damage and trauma when they gather their communities together and help each other with minimal outside resources and support. We assert that, while genuinely heroic and admirable, these efforts should not be necessary. As a nation, we should not expect already under-resourced communities to

“The state and federal level needs a shift in approach — just because a community has been hit by a disaster does not mean that they’re incapable or don’t have any ideas around recovery.”

repeatedly pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps. At all levels, we need to ensure that rural communities and Native nations have the resources they need to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters in a way that advances community prosperity — and the prosperity of the United States as a whole.

Additionally, for a host of reasons explored in this Call to Action, rural and Indigenous communities are more [vulnerable to the impact](#) of natural disasters and face different [post-disaster recovery](#) challenges than [urban and suburban](#) neighbors. The principles shared here are specific to rural and Native nation communities, but every effort, whether rural, urban or suburban, can become more effective by incorporating these principles.



Janice Ikeda



The Aldrich Resilience Lab at Northeastern University recently published [research](#) that underscores the importance of an equitable community prosperity approach. The Lab’s study of Louisiana parishes (counties) affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 found that parishes that adopted community-driven, people-focused “soft” policy tools recovered better than those that adopted top-down policy tools driven from outside the community or those that depended on “hard” policy tools like major infrastructure projects to drive recovery. In their recommendations to policymakers, the researchers emphasize the importance of community leadership and voice — before and after a disaster — for successful recovery.

Community Prosperity Approach: Focus on improving outcomes, not just maintaining or rebuilding the status quo

Traditional disaster response focuses on protection, repair, and preservation — protecting a community’s current infrastructure and resources and, following a disaster, repairing those resources to maintain the community’s pre-disaster status. But given the deep inequities around [place, race, and class](#) that affect rural communities, this “insurance approach” to disaster preparation, response, and recovery is inadequate. For example, consider a racially segregated, disinvested community. Building back to recreate pre-disaster conditions would mean rebuilding substandard housing, rebuilding in disaster-prone areas like flood plains, and reproducing inequitable outcomes for community health and prosperity. Status quo alternatives for rebuilding to pre-disaster conditions include limited or harmful solutions like tearing down substandard housing without providing alternatives or preventing rebuilding in the floodplain, which in turn leads to further displacement of already vulnerable households. Beyond the danger of replicating an inequitable status quo, the insurance approach, with its focus on repairing individual properties and compensating individual people, fails to account for and address the big-picture dynamics, health, and prosperity of a community.

The principles that emerged from the TRALE process are grounded in an equitable community prosperity approach that seeks to improve health and economic outcomes for rural communities, not simply to preserve their current status. This holistic approach, grounded in the building blocks of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#), focuses on improving the health of the community overall, not just fixing what is threatened or broken by a disaster. It is also a strengths-based approach, focusing on building from community assets and engaging community members as creators and shapers of their communities’ futures.

Beyond local impact and equity concerns, the equitable community prosperity approach has the potential to dramatically improve taxpayers’ return on investment for disaster funding, which is a significant and growing portion of federal spending. Communities that emerge from disasters damaged and shaken will be more vulnerable to future disasters and will require more and more funding to “fix.” But if communities emerge from disasters stronger and more able to withstand and recover from future disasters, we engage in a virtuous cycle that drives national prosperity as well.

“Often, those of us who are outside of a community, who go into a community to help, are transactional instead of relational. What works better is if we’re relational and meeting needs on the ground.”



Cari Cullen



This Call to Action aims to equip systems-level actors (from federal disaster response agencies to national non-profits) with equity-centered principles that, if adopted, will improve their work with rural and Native nation communities. And because this document centers the ideas of rural thinkers and doers, it gives local leaders a tool to inspire equitable action at the local level. Intentional, collaborative action at both the local and systems levels will work to grow equitable rural prosperity and dismantle systemic discrimination based on race, geography, and economic status within the field of rural disaster planning and response.

ORIENTATION

The results of the TRALE discussions produced five primary themes, highlighted as the Five Principles for Rural Prosperity in the Face of Disaster. For each principle, you will find:

- **A summary explaining the principle, background context, and why it is important to rural practitioners.**
- **Key quotes from TRALE participants that underline points in that discussion.**
- **A set of Call to Action recommendations for government, philanthropy, and rural practitioners on how to advance that principle in their respective roles.**

DEFINITIONS

The definitions below are terms and concepts used regularly in this Call to Action. These definitions should not be considered exhaustive or final but act as a baseline for readers to understand the context and issues discussed in this document.

A **disaster** is an event such as a storm, fire, or flood that causes severe damage or death within a community or geographic area. We also acknowledge that rural communities and Native nations experience “slow-moving disasters” related to our changing climate, systemic inequity, and/or disinvestment.

Disaster mitigation refers to efforts to reduce the risk of damage from future disasters.

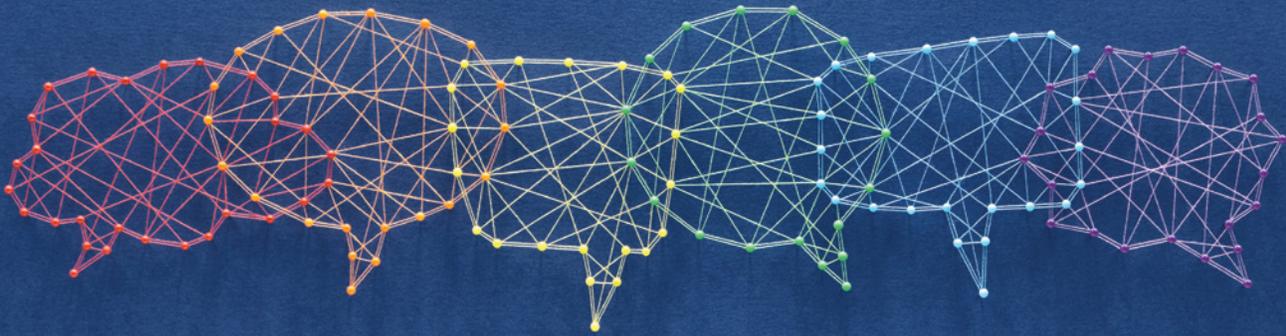
Planning refers to creating and adopting concrete plans for community development (e.g., economic development, built environment) and/or disaster mitigation.

Disaster preparedness includes planning, mitigation, and other efforts to strengthen a community and its infrastructure to better respond to and recover from a future disaster.

Disaster response refers to meeting immediate human and infrastructure needs following a disaster.

Disaster recovery refers to mid-term efforts to address the damage caused by a disaster.

Resilience refers to the long-term ability of built infrastructure to withstand disasters. We do not use this term to refer to communities or people, given that rural and Indigenous people and communities have too often been praised for being resilient — at the expense of a real effort to create equitable conditions on the ground.



THE TRALE PROCESS: STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPANTS

TRALE STRUCTURE

This Call to Action is the result of a Thrive Rural Action-Learning Exchange (TRALE). TRALE is a process that quickly taps on-the-ground insights and experiences to help generate breakthrough thinking about what works and what’s needed to push rural policy and practice forward. The [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#) (Aspen CSG) conducts each TRALE process, working with various collaborating partners to ensure a strong representation of rural communities and Native nations.

TRALE PARTICIPANTS AND PARTICIPATION

For this TRALE process, Aspen CSG convened 39 seasoned rural economic and community development practitioners from rural communities and Native nations across the United States. These rural practitioners, advocates, and innovators shared their experiences and ideas to answer the question, “What will it take for rural and Native nations communities to make progress towards long-term resilience from natural disasters?”

Collectively, the diverse participants account for hundreds of years of experience in rural economic development, community human services and health, housing, transportation, small business development, family asset building, development finance, grassroots community engagement and advocacy, and regional development. They are respected, committed leaders in their communities, representing all regions of the United States, from the Pacific Islands to the Southeast. [See page 22](#) for the list of TRALE participants.

“Is it the same old, same old people that are going to get these resources, or can this be an opportunity for transformation? And how does community voice get into this?”



Karen Minyard



5

PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

The following principles are grounded in a community prosperity approach to disasters, which focuses on improving equitable outcomes for rural communities rather than maintaining or rebuilding an inequitable status quo:

1

Understand and address the underlying conditions unique to rural affecting disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.

2

Advance worldviews that restore balance and relationships among rural communities and natural systems.

3

Use disaster response to advance equity and increase regional prosperity.

4

Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.

5

Provide flexible and responsive funding for disaster preparation, response, and recovery.



1

PRINCIPLE 1:

Understand and address the underlying conditions affecting rural disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.

Disasters happen in places, and specific conditions shape each place. The natural, physical, social, and policy landscapes of rural communities and Native nations affect the communities' vulnerability to disasters and their ability to respond to and recover from them.

Disaster response and preparedness programs that fail to account for long-term local and systems conditions are less likely to succeed. They can even do harm or perpetuate patterns of inequity and distrust ([see Principle 3](#)).

Long-term disinvestment, crumbling or absent infrastructure, and lack of institutional capacity ([due to inadequate funding support](#)) are part of the landscape in many rural communities and Native nations ([see Principle 4](#)). And for many rural communities of color and Native nations, these inequities are compounded by structural discrimination and traumatic histories of colonization, genocide, slavery, and racial violence. These conditions make many rural communities especially vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters — and make it more challenging to recover and thrive. And in many cases, challenging local conditions may add up to a “slow-moving disaster” as impacts build over time (e.g., from environmental degradation or climate change).

Housing, for example, has been an [infrastructure challenge](#) for many years. A rural community with deteriorating housing stock located primarily in a flood plain will see a disproportionate disaster impact and will have a much longer and more difficult road to recovery than a community with good quality, safely-sited housing. And as our changing climate intensifies the magnitude and frequency of disasters such as storms, fires, and floods, rural communities and Native nations will be [especially vulnerable](#).

Overall population health is another critical underlying condition that affects disaster vulnerability and impact. Communities with high rates of chronic health conditions will have different needs in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and the stress of a disaster may exacerbate existing conditions, worsening health outcomes.

“It’s not just that a hurricane occurs – there isn’t the underlying infrastructure to begin with. When it rains, we get this constant flooding – not just because of the natural disaster, but because we didn’t have the infrastructure to begin with to handle even a little rain, much less all the rain that comes with a hurricane. We’re making an assumption that communities can bounce back and be resilient. I think a lot of times when a disaster happens, the houses were already in a detrimental, fragile state, and this idea of rebuilding or repairing is nonexistent because it wasn’t a place that you could rebuild. And so it becomes just tear down and start over.”



Zoraima Diaz

“There is an inventory of plans that might exist in a place – infrastructure plans, housing plans, land use plans. It would be helpful if those plans were not in conflict. For example, mitigation plans call for building outside of the floodplain, but the economic development plan calls for a riverfront entertainment district, and those two things are incompatible. To the extent possible, the plans that are in place in local communities ought to be reviewed to make sure that they are complementary and not exacerbating a problem.”



John Cooper Jr.

**PRINCIPLE 1:**

Understand and address the underlying conditions affecting rural disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.

While some local conditions can make rural communities and Native nations more vulnerable to the impacts of disasters, other conditions can strengthen these communities' ability to prepare and respond. For example, these communities may have strong social ties and informal networks that can be activated during a crisis to respond quickly and save lives. Community elders, leaders, and organizers understand where the physical and social resources are in a rural area and how to engage them effectively. Elders may also have valuable insight into reciprocal relationships between people and the land (see Principle 2). Given the diversity of conditions on the ground and the fact that rural people know their communities best, disaster-response and resilience-building programs must partner with local people to learn, respond, and build trust before, during, and after a disaster.

"One piece I feel is missing from a lot of work with communities is the connection to the aunts and the grandmas, whoever those folks are in a particular community – the unofficial leaders who will stick with the people through recovery and as they prepare for the next disaster."



Samantha Estabrook

To build thriving communities that can respond to and recover from acute disasters, we need to move away from the insurance approach to disaster response to a community prosperity approach that builds on each community's unique conditions, including strengths and challenges.



FLOODING IN CENTRAL APPALACHIA

The Summer 2022 flash flooding in Central Appalachia (in Eastern Kentucky and Southern West Virginia) is an instructive example of how local conditions can intensify the impact of a natural disaster. Long a site of fossil fuel extraction, the region has seen an intensification of damaging surface coal mining, including large-scale mountaintop removal mining in recent generations. Local economies have risen and fallen with the coal industry, and even as well-paying coal jobs dwindle with automation, local community identities are often tied to coal.

This leaves Central Appalachian communities trapped in a vicious cycle: coal-burning power plants release large amounts of carbon, driving climate change; climate change increases the frequency and intensity of heavy rain events, especially in this region; and land that has been subject to surface mining sees dramatic increases in runoff, as the damaged land can't absorb the water. Within this cycle, communities affected by a decline in coal jobs are in an economic position that makes it difficult to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. This is in addition to the negative human health consequences of both coal mining (e.g., black lung disease) and economic disinvestment.

Strong social ties have helped people in Central Appalachia recover from many disasters, and we can already see community commitment at work in this case. And while the people of this region are often praised for being self-reliant and scrappy, we contend that as a nation, we should not be asking them to interrupt this vicious cycle on their own. With a community prosperity approach and adequate resources to implement it, the strong leadership and energy in Central Appalachian communities could be directed toward building thriving, healthy communities and economies with truly resilient infrastructure — improving outcomes for everyone.



PRINCIPLE 1:

Understand and address the underlying conditions affecting rural disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.

The Call to Action

For Government	
<p>Build</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address conditions that affect rural disaster vulnerability, such as housing and environmental degradation. This requires sustained effort, long-term federal, state, and local programming, and integration of disaster considerations into existing programming. <p>Inform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make information on risk easily accessible. Require consistent and full disclosure of risk (e.g., flood and fire risk for both homebuyers and renters). 	<p>Coordinate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate disaster strategies with community planning. Consider disaster-related issues in regular community planning processes, including thorough vulnerability and risk assessments. Ensure that strategies and plans are aligned. Coordinate disaster planning with other community planning efforts and regularly assess plans across the community and region for alignment and potential conflict. Remove barriers to use of local assets for disaster response, including assessing local resources (e.g., buildings) and how they can be repurposed in a disaster context.
For Philanthropy	
<p>Assess</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support analysis of underlying conditions, including deeper considerations like structural discrimination that affect rural communities and Native nations vulnerability to, response to, and recovery from disasters. Use and promote measurement and evaluation practices that reflect underlying conditions affecting rural communities and Native nations vulnerability to, response to, and recovery from disasters. 	<p>Convene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring actors together across sectors to address underlying conditions, ensuring disaster considerations are integrated into new and existing policy and programming. Ensure that convenings and conversations around disaster work include people and groups who have been historically left out of previous planning and discussions. Build trust by authentically listening to their perspectives. <p>Amplify</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elevate consideration of underlying rural conditions in national and regional conversations around disaster and community development-related policy.
For Rural Practitioners	
<p>Engage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify key community members to engage in disaster work, especially community members from marginalized groups and those who have been left out of previous discussions, and bring them into the work early. Who are the elders, youth, or informal leaders who can make things happen in this community? Build trust by authentically listening to their perspectives. 	<p>Consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look at the big picture of a community's underlying conditions. Consider how each element affects the whole and what efforts and areas should be prioritized. Use the Thrive Rural Framework as a tool to support this process. Assess community resources and assets and consider how they can be used to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

Thrive Rural Framework Building Blocks

Local Level — [Build from Current Assets](#)

Systems Level — [Aligned Rural Fields and Actors](#)

Foundational Element — Dismantle practices that discriminate in and against rural



2

PRINCIPLE 2:

Advance worldviews that restore balance and relationships among communities and natural systems.

During TRALE conversations, the need to shift how we relate to the natural world emerged as a strong theme. Extractive and exploitative relationships with natural systems produce conditions that promote natural disasters — and make it difficult to prepare for and respond to them.

While human-driven climate change, which is [increasing](#) the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, is an example of this type of unsustainable and exploitative relationship on a grand scale, the principle applies at all levels and scales — from the siting and design of homes and roadways to the preservation or destruction of protective ecological systems like wetlands.

To create the conditions ([see Principle 1](#)) for thriving rural communities and Native nations with resilient infrastructure, we need to shift our worldviews to accommodate a full and balanced picture of the reciprocal relationships between human beings and the natural world. (For example, see the [Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#)' recent paper, [Valuing nature's contributions to people](#).) A full understanding of the truly interconnected nature of human and ecological health could lead to breakthroughs that advance health outcomes and health equity. Such a worldview shift would significantly impact disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, allowing rural communities and Native nations to move beyond the "insurance approach" ([see Introduction](#)) and address the roots of disaster, setting the stage for truly thriving social and ecological communities.

TRALE participants noted that Indigenous people's knowledge of and connections to natural systems and place provide a grounded, real-world example of reciprocity between the human and natural worlds. (For more on the importance of reciprocity, see the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, including [The Serviceberry](#).) In TRALE discussions, we heard voices from Native nations that are succeeding at reestablishing a balanced life in the face of hundreds of years of oppression — disaster on a monumental scale. Rural communities across the country have much to learn from Indigenous communities undertaking this work. Still, that learning itself must be balanced and reciprocal, not extractive or exploitative — undertaken with humility on the part of the learners and just compensation for those sharing experiences and knowledge.

"I think it's really important to listen to the people who have lived on the land the longest; listen to these communities and value the knowledge they have about what works and what doesn't work in their community. More importantly, we have to be very respectful of Mother Nature and should stop planning practices/strategies that put people in harm's way. In California for example, building new communities up in the foothills of the Sierras where the forest thrives on regeneration by fire, we're setting someone up to experience fire at some point. It is irresponsible to put someone on land that was once a swamp 25 years ago and not expect their home to flood. Continuing to do so is only setting ourselves up for failure."



Sharon Reilly

"Two hurricanes left the Upper Coharie River completely full of debris. The Coharie, a North Carolina state-recognized tribe, engaged young tribal members in learning stream restoration skills, clearing logs and obstructions from a small portion of the river. When Hurricane Matthew came through that year, water covered roads for almost two weeks. Two years later, the tribe had cleared almost 30 miles of river and the roads were clear within two days following Hurricane Florence's much more severe flooding. This led the tribe to create an LLC that is generating revenue, creating jobs and providing work skills training in environmental clean-up and stream restoration in two states."



Mikki Sager



PRINCIPLE 2:

Advance worldviews that restore balance and relationships among communities and natural systems.

“There is often a lack of consent with regard to the needs of Indigenous communities. The people closest to challenges have valuable insight into solutions, and unfortunately, scholars and people outside of our communities often think that they know more about the science behind the changes that are occurring in the community. Well, the people of the community have long-standing intelligence about and knowledge about how things have changed over time. For example, how snow has changed and how the seasons have changed, getting longer or shorter depending upon various elements and cycles. Especially with climate change, we are seeing them becoming shorter and shorter. So what needs to happen first of all is acknowledging the sovereignty of Indigenous communities and then second to recognize that they have thousands of years of expertise.”



Sophia Marjanovic

The Call to Action

For Government	
<p>Learn</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote or expand policies and programs that conserve or restore natural ecosystems and working landscapes. • Support basic research that grows our understanding of reciprocity between humans and natural systems and that includes representation from a wide spectrum of expertise, including Indigenous perspectives. • Increase staff literacy regarding Native nations’ history and concerns, both to facilitate respectful and effective working relationships and to integrate Indigenous perspectives into broader work. 	<p>Collaborate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support practical collaboration within and across regions to advance learning and integrate consideration of reciprocity between human and natural systems into community development work.
For Philanthropy	
<p>Learn</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene peer learning networks to facilitate a deeper understanding of reciprocity between humans and natural systems, and that includes representation from a wide spectrum of expertise (e.g., faith communities, science, and Indigenous perspectives). • Support work within Native nations to explore and document place-based knowledge and approaches to community prosperity and disasters. 	<p>Amplify</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase staff and grantee literacy regarding Indigenous history and expertise to facilitate respectful and effective working relationships and integrate Indigenous perspectives into broader work. • Document effectiveness of regenerative strategies and approaches to community prosperity and disaster mitigation. • Lift up and disseminate stories of a healthy balance between humans and natural systems and the relationship of this balance to rural communities and Native nations vulnerability to, response to, and recovery from disasters.
For Rural Practitioners	
<p>Consider</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate consideration of balance and reciprocity between human and natural systems into community prosperity and disaster work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally design efforts to engage diverse perspectives, including Native nation communities, to learn how to better incorporate regenerative practices and approaches within inclusive local and regional efforts.

<p>Thrive Rural Framework Building Blocks</p>	<p>Local Level — Balance Development Goals</p>
	<p>Systems Level — Balanced Development Outcomes; Valued Rural Stewardship</p>
	<p>Foundational Element — Dismantle practices that discriminate in and against rural</p>



3

PRINCIPLE 3:

Use disaster response to advance equity and increase regional prosperity.

As we saw in the discussion of rural conditions (see Principle 1), historic inequities exacerbate disaster impacts. Communities with more poverty and less capacity due to structural discrimination and disinvestment may be more vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters and less able to access and activate the resources necessary for recovery and long-term prosperity.

If disaster preparedness, response, and recovery programs are not intentionally [designed to mitigate and address inequities](#), including interventions to propel communities to more prosperous futures, they risk perpetuating inequality or making these regions less prosperous.

For example, suppose recovery assistance is complex or difficult to access (e.g., applicants need a computer to submit forms, instructions are not available in the language community members are most comfortable using, or assistance is only available during limited business hours). In that case, the most privileged members of the community — those with the most time, connections, and resources — will be more likely to receive recovery assistance than those who most need it, deepening and reinforcing inequities within the community. The same principle applies across regions: the more complex or challenging assistance is to access, the more likely that places with fewer resources will receive less assistance, widening gaps between communities.

Inequitable disaster response and a lack of equitable disaster recovery have a compounding impact on social determinants of health and health outcomes over repeated disaster cycles and, ultimately, generations. Conversely, [improving equity in disaster response](#) has the potential to improve the social determinants of health — and, thereby, health outcomes — for communities that have experienced some of the deepest health challenges in the nation.

“When we go in to do recovery in these communities, what does equity look like? What does recovery look like when a community has this background, this history as its foundation?”



Simonne Dunn

“The big problem with a lot of very small communities is they might have access to funds, but every big city is also eligible, including Houston, Austin, and San Antonio. The little communities don’t get enough resources to recover.”



Harold Hunter

“It’s important that government leaders have humility and accept and acknowledge that we don’t have all the answers. In the end, it’s really the people who are impacted directly or helping to lift themselves up as well as lift one another up. Government cannot be seen as the normal be-all resource to fix every problem a community faces, but rather government should be there to support the community developing its own strategies.”



Darryl Oliveira



PRINCIPLE 3:

Use disaster response to advance equity and increase regional prosperity.

One important way to design disaster-related programs to advance equity is to ensure that those most affected are part of the leadership in planning, response, and recovery. The local community — especially those most affected by inequity and discrimination — needs to wield real power and exercise authentic leadership, especially in contexts where trust is absent because of past experiences of oppression or abuse from systems and institutions. And on a practical level, local grassroots leadership is often more likely to be effective than outside organizations ([see asset discussion in Principle 1](#)).

“The strongest solutions are very often practice-based. They are built by people who have intimate experiential knowledge of the geography, the culture, and the history.”



Gillian Mittelstaedt

The Call to Action

For Government	
<p>Engage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase USDA Rural Development (RD) involvement in federal disaster management, leveraging RD’s deep knowledge of rural communities in groups such as the FEMA-led multi-agency taskforce. • Build relationships in communities ahead of disasters, including with historically marginalized groups within communities. • Facilitate inclusive planning processes, providing accessible spaces for all community members, regardless of needs (e.g., translation services, physically accessible spaces). 	<p>Lead</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support local networks’ and organizations’ disaster planning, response, and recovery efforts, including by assessing and filling gaps in programming and funding opportunities that prevent certain types of organizations (e.g., community-based organizations, non-federally-recognized tribes) from engaging in this work. • Prioritize local hiring and contracting for disaster work, given that community residents know the issues best and are best positioned to hit the ground running in a disaster situation.
For Philanthropy	
<p>Learn</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support research on and evaluation of equity and access in disaster preparation, response, and recovery (e.g., inclusion of grassroots non-profits in the work of state Emergency Operations Centers). 	<p>Build</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create regional relationships and networks to facilitate equitable disaster preparation, response, and recovery efforts. • Engage with grassroots community groups early and often to support disaster preparation and to “pre-certify” organizations for rapid funding in the event of a disaster.
For Rural Practitioners	
<p>Engage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring people from across the community into disaster work. Ask who is missing from groups and collaborations, and engage them; this includes making spaces and systems accessible. 	<p>Orient</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on improving outcomes for the community, especially for community members affected by structural discrimination. Shift disaster work from an insurance approach to an inclusive community prosperity approach.

Thrive Rural Framework Building Blocks

Local Level — [Design for Everyone to Thrive](#)

Systems Level — [Balanced Development Outcomes](#); [Rural Stakeholder Equity](#); [Cohesive Rural Policy Lens](#)

Foundational Element — Dismantle practices that discriminate in and against rural



PRINCIPLE 3:

Use disaster response to advance equity and increase regional prosperity.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

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We have to look at the systems in terms of everybody's needs, but also recognize that for a community of color within a rural region, the impact on that smaller population is amplified. It's exponential compared to their urban counterparts because of isolation. So there has to be attention to the folks who are most in need, but we can't just look only at one group, we have to be applying it broadly, and our mainstream government and non-profit systems are just not set up to do that right now. We're going to have to do disaster recovery differently.”



Calvin Allen

“Somebody brought up that the immediate response comes from neighbors, and that's exactly what happened when we built this system, you know, out of nowhere. And so all of us began thinking, you know what this means — we can do this. We can do economic development in our communities, we can provide services in our communities, we can get water lines, we can do the infrastructure, we can do all this work. We have everything that it takes, we have the people that care, it's just there's another layer of this colonial power that still impacts our communities.”



Jessica Stago

“When I was with the Greater New Orleans Foundation, we pre-certified organizations to receive disaster response money. The pre-certification process includes getting all the needed documents for a grant in advance – 501(c)3 status, a short description of how the organization deploys resources after a disaster, bank information for ACH, etc. It speeds up the grantmaking process so that funds can be disbursed as soon as possible — giving non-profits the resources they need to immediately start their work helping communities affected by the disaster.”



Bonita Robertson-Hardy

“

“You hear a lot about procedural equity and planning and making sure that the process is inclusive and grounded in the local context. In low-resource communities, the lack of access to accurate, up-to-date data hampers the planning work. Data has to be accurate and grounded in the local context in order for the planning to be meaningful.”



John Cooper Jr.

“The strength is local formal and informal community leaders being involved and taking ownership in recovery.”



Heidi Schultz

“

Recovery funding that goes to the big intermediaries should require or prioritize hiring local people and nonprofits that get paid to do the recovery work. We've seen, time and time again, recovery money going to one outside group, they hire people who are not from the community and then they ask local people and organizations to help them for free. Requiring or prioritizing hiring local people and groups would build on rural communities' biggest assets: their people. It would help people who need the money and who know and are trusted by the community; and would get recovery resources to community members who would not otherwise be reached.”



Mikki Sager



4

PRINCIPLE 4:

Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.

Responding to an emerging disaster is challenging in any circumstance. Strong systems for communication and collaboration, trust between people, health systems, and agencies, and a clear understanding of the landscape of local conditions are essential for an effective response.

To lay the groundwork for that effective response, it is crucial to build systems and structures at both the local and regional levels that have the capacity to respond — and communicate, collaborate, and coordinate — when the time comes.

At the local level, [many communities lack capacity](#) to seek and manage funding to support disaster mitigation, and many rural organizations lack continuity of operations plans that can help an organization be in a good place to respond following a disaster. It is also important to recognize that using scarce resources to plan for infrequent disasters is difficult for these communities to prioritize over other, more immediate needs.

The complexities and restrictions in securing and administering disaster funding can be a significant barrier to recovery, reinforcing inequities related to place, race, and class ([see Principle 3](#)). Given these issues, navigation assistance and training around funding could prove especially valuable, though, as noted below ([see Principle 5](#)), increased flexibility in funding structures is a high priority.

Many rural communities and Native nations also lack planning capacity, an essential element of preparedness. Communities may need support and training on assessing and addressing vulnerabilities, preparing for immediate response, and creating systems to facilitate recovery in the event of a disaster.

Beyond the local level, capacity for coordination among agencies, health systems, and local communities is a significant gap. Multiple federal and state agencies may have established relationships within a rural or Native nation community. When a disaster strikes, they may not communicate well and may even work at cross purposes.

[Firewise Communities](#) are multi-jurisdictional community-based responses to the risk of wildfire. Through the program, led by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), locally-led groups identify their community's greatest risks for wildfire and different ways to respond to it. There are nearly 2,000 Firewise Communities across the United States.

Communities of at least eight dwellings are recognized as "Firewise" after they complete these five steps:

1. Create a board or committee of residents and other local stakeholders interested in wildfire protection;
2. Obtain a written wildfire risk assessment from the state forestry agency or local fire department that identifies risky areas and recommendations for improvement;
3. Create an action plan to be updated every three years that identifies community education and mitigation activities;
4. Host an outreach and education event that addresses items from the action plan;
5. Track the hours and financial investments from the community in wildfire mitigation.

"Firewise Communities are essentially like homeowner associations in the wildland-urban interface area, working together as local cooperatives to identify where their greatest risks are, mitigate those risks, and develop joint strategies to respond if a wildfire comes in."



Nils Christoffersen



PRINCIPLE 4:

Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.

PRACTITIONER VOICES



In 2017, we started the work around building community leadership teams — diverse leadership teams that reflect the demographics in the community. This is challenging to do in the South, but it’s important because if you don’t have all the voices at the table, then the decisions just keep repeating themselves, historically. What we found was that the communities that had leadership teams had a way to respond to COVID that other communities did not have. Very quickly, the folks who were used to working together mobilized themselves to do outreach to small businesses and figured out how to keep them afloat. Once you build the infrastructure of that team, it sort of mobilizes itself. Can you imagine what that would look like in a climate disaster environment, where you’re not coming in after the disaster to organize the team, but the team is already there?”



Ines Polonius

“Practitioners have the trust of community members because they’re part of the community, and that’s critical. But if the practitioners themselves don’t have the capacity or ability to understand the regulatory policy as it’s coming down, then there is a lot of stress on the practitioner that they’re not imparting the correct knowledge to the community. It is stressful for local communities that don’t have the capacity to understand the regulation in real-time. It causes fear about what to do, and that’s exactly what you don’t want to get at the end of the day — misappropriate funds.”



Zoraima Diaz

“There are just so many hoops to jump through for programs that look really great on paper, but in actuality, resources never get to the places where they’re most needed.”



Karen Affeld



“These communities don’t have the infrastructure, they do not have the staff, they do not have the professional human resources to develop plans for their communities, towns, and villages; it’s not there. Many of them do not even understand that they need to have a plan for sustainability. Intermediaries need to step up their game; they need to reimagine how they are going to relate to our communities, and funders need to stop looking at these mega communities and thinking that because our organizations are small, we do not have the capacity to do the work in the communities that we do. Because we’re going to be here when the intermediaries and all the rest of them have come and gone, whether there is funding on the table, or whether there is not; we’re going to be here because this is where we live.”



Romona Taylor Williams



“Seems like every time something happens, we have to make it all up again. When the feds are involved, they’re in charge, and then they come and go, and then the state comes and goes. Eventually, it’s going to be the local people that are left dealing with the situation, and there’s no continuity of command and control — there’s no real long-term cooperation. Everything happens in phases, and different people are in charge in different phases, and that makes it really hard to coordinate a long-term response.”



Michael Howard



PRINCIPLE 4:
Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.

The Call to Action

For Government	
<p style="text-align: center;">Build</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish inclusive cross-sector local leadership teams to plan for, respond to, and support recovery from disasters and provide consistent agency participation and support over time. • Incentivize agency participation in and prioritization of community-led efforts. • Engage connected institutions on leadership teams (e.g., Economic Development Administration–funded regional councils of government, Land-Grant affiliated Extension Service offices). • Train agency staff on working with rural communities and Native nations. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training and materials to local leadership teams and organizations, including on disaster planning, response simulations, and mitigation efforts. <p style="text-align: center;">Clarify</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline complex systems and requirements to allow communities to focus on the work at hand. • Align evaluation systems across agencies and sectors to avoid duplicative and onerous data collection and allow communities to focus on the work.
For Philanthropy	
<p style="text-align: center;">Grow</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support development of local leadership teams as they build infrastructure for disaster planning, response, and recovery. • Develop and pilot programs that help communities navigate complex federal systems. While public navigator systems are ideal, philanthropy can support this development by funding projects that test and pilot these ideas. • Help develop and pilot local information-sharing systems. Publish learnings so communities can build their own systems. <p style="text-align: center;">Align</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align reporting and evaluation systems across funders and sectors to avoid duplicative and onerous data collection and allow communities to focus on the work. • Align internal evaluation and measurement with intended outcomes, including measuring inclusion and equity outcomes. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide fiscal agency support to smaller community organizations that are not able to take on the risk and burden of federal funding. • Provide technical assistance with federal systems, including funding grant development and administration support as necessary. • Launch the development of continuity of operations plans for local and regional non-profits. Hold workshops or create workbooks with model plans that can help practitioners prepare their organization to be in working order during and after a disaster.
For Rural Practitioners	
<p style="text-align: center;">Build</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create “care infrastructure” for the community, including local cross-sector leadership teams. • Create disaster plans for community-based organizations, including detailed continuity of operations plans that explain what to do to keep the organization in action to support the community in the event of a disaster. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Learn</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather information on local, regional, and national resources before a disaster strikes; know who is in charge of what resources and how they can be accessed.



PRINCIPLE 4:

Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.

“If FEMA is embedded in the places where these disasters tend to occur, then it may make the response and the planning efforts a bit more effective and efficient.”



Alison Davis

“Getting people involved in the information gathering and dissemination process helps them build confidence and understanding of what’s happening and why, and then what they can actually do to address it or to hold people accountable.”



Lyndsey Gilpin

“You can say a lot of nice words as a local leader of an agency that you care about community input, but at the end of the day, you’re not measured on those data, and budgets aren’t allocated on those things, so I think until we start to shift that bureaucratic architecture we’re always pushing a rock uphill.”



Tyson Bertone-Riggs

“We typically talk about building capacity for community leaders. There’s also a need to build the capacity of state and local government officials so they can better engage community equitably”



Andrew Shoeng

Thrive Rural Framework Building Blocks

Local Level — [Prepare Action-Able Leadership](#); [Organize an Action Infrastructure](#)

Systems Level — [Rural Data for Analysis and Change](#); [Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow](#)

Foundational Element — [Dismantle practices that discriminate in and against rural](#)





5

PRINCIPLE 5:

Provide flexible and responsive funding for disaster preparation, response, and recovery.

A strong theme throughout the TRALE conversations was the high level of complexity, even rigidity, involved with disaster funding, especially at the federal level.

Many participants expressed frustration at the limitations of the funding available, which is designed from the more narrow perspective of an insurance approach, rather than a community prosperity approach to disasters (see [Introduction](#)). Additional complexity comes from the need to stitch together multiple funding sources, which may have conflicting requirements. For example, accepting one set of funds can cut a community off from more significant funding in the future.

Beyond the challenges of limitations and strictures on funding, many participants expressed fear around engaging with federal funding, given the high stakes involved with potentially making a mistake, even a small error, in project administration or reporting. Making a mistake on complex federal grant administration and therefore having to return funds could mean the end of a small community organization — or even jail time for staff!

Flexible, responsive funding opportunities could enable rural communities and Native nations to take a community prosperity approach to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, improving outcomes and building long-term prosperity for all. This could mean streamlining processes and creating new, flexible programs at the federal and state levels. For philanthropic funders, it could mean proactive outreach and pre-certification, as well as developing programs to fill gaps and pilot new approaches.

“How do we create a structure where folks can access resources that’s not as complicated as some of these federal grants?”



Ines Polonius

“In many cases, if you take funds from another agency to address some of these recovery needs, it can eliminate your ability to actually draw down FEMA funds. That would be one really quick, and maybe easy, piece for the Federal family to think about. Why are we preventing communities from taking funds that can address things quickly?”



Nathan Ohle

“There is this huge push for no mistakes in administering these funds. It’s unreasonable – humans make mistakes. Nobody does things perfectly all the time, and when you have millions of dollars of awards, people are going to make mistakes – what’s the expectation of a reasonable mistake? I would love to see the work of someone who’s actually analyzed this.”



Jessica Whitehead

“It is critical to be responsive during emergency situations and to be flexible with funding. We (The Ford Family Foundation) reached out to communities in need and provided them the resources they needed. We eliminated barriers and requirements - final reports as an example. We learned that in crisis situation it is critical that philanthropy be responsive to the needs of the people they serve and respect the realities of their experience.”



Roque Barros



PRINCIPLE 5:

Provide flexible and responsive funding for disaster preparation, response, and recovery.

The Call to Action

For Government	
<p>Align</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change regulations that can prevent communities from accessing FEMA funds if they accept funding from other sources. Communities need both immediate and long-term assistance, and FEMA regulations should reflect this reality. • Develop short-term “bridge funding” for communities. This could involve zero-interest loans for businesses until FEMA funds begin to flow. <p>Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create programs that fund long-term prosperity and sustainability, not just immediate disaster needs. • Create funding programs flexible enough to meet specific local needs. Not all communities need to do the same things to prepare for, respond to, or recover from a disaster. Funding programs should allow communities to make a case for their resilience needs rather than dictating approaches. 	<p>Streamline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify and simplify regulations related to managing disaster funding to increase access for smaller organizations and communities. This is particularly important for Native nations that rely on direct aid from the federal government and where jurisdictions are fuzzy between states and tribes. • Trust rural people and communities to make responsive, quick, and wise decisions about spending money in a disaster.
For Philanthropy	
<p>Assess</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support accountability analysis of public and private disaster funding to assess impact on equity and community prosperity outcomes. 	<p>Respond</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create low-friction systems to distribute funding after a disaster, including pre-certifying organizations (see recommendations in Principle 3) and simplifying administration and reporting requirements. • Provide short-term “bridge funding” for communities to fill gaps before federal funds begin to flow.
For Rural Practitioners	
<p>Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess potential needs and develop possible spending plans for flexible disaster funding. 	

Thrive Rural Framework Building Blocks

Local Level — [Strengthen Local Ownership and Influence](#)

Systems Level — [Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow](#)

Foundational Element — Dismantle practices that discriminate in and against rural



PRINCIPLE 5:

Provide flexible and responsive funding for disaster preparation, response, and recovery.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

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The town was in disaster response mode, trying to do the best that they could, and the mayor ended up getting indicted for misuse of federal funds — sentenced to prison for his misuse of about \$1,000. It created a lot of fear in local city officials about using federal funds. There’s not the state capacity to come in and support a town of 2000 people to help them manage hundreds of millions of dollars of federal funds, so how do we address that fear that people now have, and also help them have the capacity to manage those resources when they come in?”



Stephanie Tyree

“I think there is a big role for philanthropy to not only invest in more capacity for communities through programs but also help provide accountability for federal funds from FEMA.”



Astrid Caldas

“

“It was interesting to learn how funders thought about us and our capacity. I think that’s a big piece of this when we talk about getting funding to minority leaders and to small organizations. One woman called me and was going to give us a grant. She said, “Do you know anyone in Chicago or the Twin Cities who could be the fiscal agent?” And I was like, we absolutely have the capacity to be the fiscal agent for this!”



Nancy Van Milligen

“

Our tribe, the Navajo Nation, like all tribes across the United States, has a special political relationship with the federal government. And that relationship requires that the federal government provide certain funding directly to tribes. And so there’s always that boundary — when there’s a disaster, do we consider that part of the state of Arizona? Do we consider it Navajo Nation? And if it’s the Navajo Nation, then our funding has to go through the federal government to the Navajo Nation. Our tribes have these colonial systems that were put in place that really restrict the flow of funding down into our communities.”



Jessica Stago



TRALE Participant List

Charlie Alfero

Executive Advisor, Center for Health Innovation
New Mexico

Karen Affeld

Executive Director, North Olympic Peninsula
Resource Conservation & Development Council
Washington

Calvin Allen

Senior Director, MDC Rural Forward
North Carolina

Roque Barros

Executive Director, Imperial Valley
Wellness Foundation
California

Tyson Bertone-Riggs

Former Coalition Director, Rural Voices for
Conservation Coalition
Oregon

Astrid Caldas

Senior Climate Scientist for Community
Resilience, Union of Concerned Scientists
Maryland

Kyril Calsoyas

Navajo Trust Foundation
Arizona

Nils Christoffersen

Executive Director, Wallowa Resources
Oregon

John T. Cooper Jr.

Assistant Vice President for Public Partnership
& Outreach, Texas A&M University
Texas

Cari Cullen

Director of the Midwest Early Recovery Fund,
Center for Disaster Philanthropy
North Dakota/Minnesota

Alison Davis

H.B. Price Professor, Department of Agricultural
Economics, Executive Director, Community and
Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky,
University of Kentucky
Kentucky

Zoraima Diaz-Pineda

Director of Policy, Come Dream Come Build
Texas

Simonne Dunn

Recovery Planning Coordinator, FEMA
Georgia

Samantha Estabrook

Planner, Headwaters Economics
Kansas

Lyndsey Gilpin

Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Southerly Magazine
Kentucky

Mark Haggerty

Senior Fellow – Energy and Environment,
Center for American Progress
Montana

Megan Hess

Rural Organizing Director, We the People
Michigan

Michael Howard

CEO, ARCH Community Health Coalition
Kentucky

Harold Hunter

Texas State Lead, Communities Unlimited
Texas

Janice Ikeda

Executive Director, Vibrant Hawai'i
Hawaii

Ka'ea Lyons

PMG Hawaii
Hawaii

Sophia Marjanovic

Bilingual Senior Organizer, Union of
Concerned Scientists
Maryland

Karen Minyard

CEO, Georgia Health Policy Center
Georgia

Gillian Mittelstaedt

President, Tribal Healthy Homes Network
Washington

John Molinaro

Principal, RES Associates LLC
Ohio

Nathan Ohle

President and CEO, International Economic
Development Council
Washington DC

Darryl Oliveira

HPM Safety and Internal Control Manager,
HPM Hawaii
Hawaii

Susie Osbourne

Head of School, Kua O Ka La PCS
Hawaii

Nola Osinubi

Former Research Fellow, Center on
Rural Innovation
Georgia

Andrea Osorio

Former Program Associate for Economic
Mobility & Disaster Response, Cognizant, and
Former Disaster Response Team Member,
GlobalGiving
Washington DC

Ines Polonius

CEO, Communities Unlimited
Arkansas

Sharon Reilly

Planning and Development Director, Great
Lakes Inter-Tribal Council
Wisconsin

Mikki Sager

Self-Employed, Former Vice President of the
Conservation Fund
North Carolina

Heidi Schultz

Program Manager, Tribal and Native
Communities Disaster Recovery Program,
Center for Disaster Philanthropy
South Dakota

Andrew Shoening

Program Director for Community Resilience,
MDC Rural Forward
North Carolina

Jessica Stago

Director of Economic Initiatives,
Change Labs/Grand Canyon Trust
Arizona

Romona Taylor Williams

Executive Director, MS Communities United
for Prosperity (MCUP)
Mississippi

Stephanie Tyree

Executive Director, West Virginia Community
Development Hub
West Virginia

Nancy Van Milligen

President and CEO, Community Foundation
of Greater Dubuque
Iowa

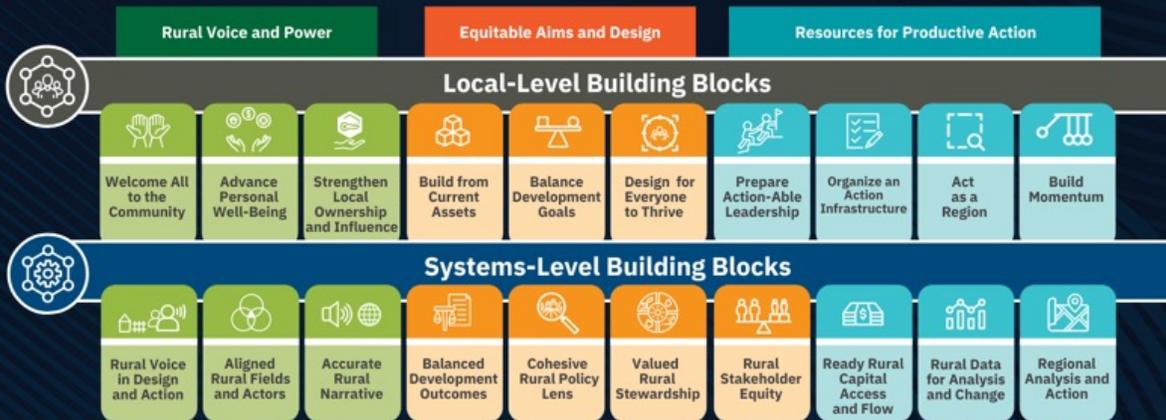
Jessica Whitehead

Joan P. Brock Endowed Executive Director,
Institute for Coastal Adaptation and Resilience,
Old Dominion University
Virginia



THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.



The TRALE process is used to explore and illuminate building blocks in the [Thrive Rural Framework](#) – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

The following people worked together to shape this Call to Action:

- Action-Learning Exchanges were facilitated by Chris Estes, with coordination support from Tyler Bowders.
- Aspen CSG’s consultant Jason Gray assisted in the interview process, identified the themes, and highlighted participant quotes and stories.
- Aspen CSG’s consultant Rebecca Huenink led the writing process.
- The entire Aspen CSG staff – Bonita Robertson-Hardy, Chris Estes, Erin Cahill, Devin Deaton, and Tyler Bowders – helped edit and sharpen the concepts.

Community Strategies Group

 aspen institute

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The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the Thrive Rural Framework – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

For more on Aspen CSG,
see: www.AspenCSG.org

For more on the Thrive Rural Framework,
see: www.ThriveRural.org