

## WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY 2



### Translating Federal Opportunities into Local Resources: Ada Jobs Foundation

#### THE ISSUE: COMPETING FOR FEDERAL FUNDING AS A RURAL COMMUNITY

Rural development practitioners have long been vocal about rural communities' challenges in accessing competitive federal funding. Challenges range from project scale—rural projects serve fewer people than those in higher density locations, which can make a project seem less competitive to an agency that measures impact by raw numbers (rather than relative change, for example), to development capacity. Rural municipalities and organizations also often have small staffs without deep specialization or experience in federal grantseeking, and little time to dedicate to the process. These challenges mean that rural communities may not know when federal funds are available, may not be able to apply to competitive opportunities, and may be less likely to design and submit a competitive application if they do apply.

**How can rural communities with limited staffing and resources understand, prepare for, and compete for finite federal funds?** As federal agencies roll out new grant programs associated with stimulus and infrastructure funding, rural access to competitive funds has been a national concern (see Headwaters Economics' [Rural Capacity Map](#) to explore the issue). In a small community, collaboration is essential to federal grant success—you need to bring all the community's resources to bear to meet the challenge of the project design and application processes. But it can be very difficult to get a diverse group of local or regional organizations together and keep them on-task for the duration of planning, project design, proposal development, and submission for a major federal grant—a process that can span multiple years.

#### THE SPOTLIGHT: ADA JOBS FOUNDATION

The [Ada Jobs Foundation](#) (AJF) is a nonprofit organization focused on the economic development of Ada, the county seat of Pontotoc County in rural southern Oklahoma. The Foundation's goal is to bring sectors together to create environments for business growth and workforce development in the area. To accomplish its goals, AJF collaborates with the wider region and manages a variety of projects, from entrepreneurship support to housing and community development.

From the beginning of his tenure, Jim Eldridge, Executive Director of the Foundation, had been thinking big about Ada's future and how federal funding could play a role in fostering a dynamic, innovative, inclusive economy in the local area and the region as a whole. But the process felt daunting with a small staff (just two people at the time, including himself) and little experience with the key funding opportunities. To approach it,



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Ada Jobs Foundation turned to what the organization knew best: collaboration. Through a multi-year collaborative process, and with the support of national technical assistance providers, the Foundation brought together an array of public and private sector partners, including the City of Ada, the Chickasaw Nation, East Central University, Pontotoc Technology Center, and Oklahoma Gas and Electric, to secure more than \$1M in federal economic development funds in 2021 from two very competitive federal programs: [EDA Build to Scale](#) and [USDA RISE](#).

### THE PRACTICE: COLLABORATION THROUGH TRANSLATION

According to AJF staff, one key element of work undergirds their successful collaboration efforts: translation. A collaboration builder needs to effectively translate partner organizations' goals to each other to build an aligned coalition, translate the coalition's goals to the funder's goals to design a competitive project, and translate the funder's process and requirements to submit a successful proposal.



**Jim Eldridge, Executive Director, Ada Jobs Foundation:**

*"90% of our job is translation. What do our partners care about? How do we put this key information so they'll pick up on it?"*

### Translate community goals: know what people care about and how they connect

Each member of AJF's coalition has specific goals, motivations, and ways of working. For the Foundation, the most basic question here is: what do they care about? The first step in coalition-building, in preparation for grantseeking, is to learn all partners' goals and understand where they align. For example, the [Chickasaw Nation's](#) mission is to enhance the overall quality of life of the Chickasaw people. When AJF invited the Nation to be part of the local coalition seeking federal economic development funding, they needed to clearly communicate how such an effort could advance the mission in the context of the Nation's core values, including trust, respect, and responsible use of resources. Other potential partners had different goals; in each case, the Foundation's job was to understand them and communicate clearly in the partner's terms.

Beyond the organizational level, coalition-building in a small community requires careful attention to the human aspect of collaboration. Translation between people is crucial and requires understanding histories and interpersonal dynamics. This is especially important if, as is the case for AJF's Executive Director, a coalition builder is not originally from the local rural community.

### Translate funder goals: know what the agency is trying to do and how it aligns with the community's goals

In many cases, federal agencies speak their own languages—agency-specific jargon and framing may not be familiar to rural leaders. The first step in designing a project that is both competitive for funding and aligned with the community's goals is to translate between the two. To learn the language of their target funders, AJF staff spent significant time reading agency materials, attending webinars, and getting a feel for what the Economic Development Administration (EDA), and later the Department of Agriculture (USDA), were trying to accomplish with their programming. Through this process, the Foundation learned about specific funding opportunities aligned with their community goals and began conceptualizing a potential fundable project.

### A RURAL DEVELOPMENT HUB AT WORK

Ada Jobs Foundation is a strong example of a [Rural Development Hub](#), a place-rooted organization working hand-in-glove with people and groups across a region to build inclusive wealth, increase local capacity, and create opportunities to improve livelihoods, health, and wellbeing. As an intermediary committed to advancing innovation in its region, the Foundation is grounded in its place, assembles local organizations for dialogue, and works to bridge issues and silos. Collaboration is the anchor for AJF's work, which addresses systems gaps and connects the community and region to national resources.

For more information about Rural Development Hubs, see Aspen CSG's in-depth 2019 report, [Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure](#).



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Translation at this stage can also take the form of education and advocacy, as the opportunity may bring new framing or possibilities that some in the community may not have considered. In this case, AJF needed to make the case to traditional economic development and public sector partners that a federal opportunity focused on technology entrepreneurship could be a viable approach in a rural community like Ada.

It is important to note that having a regional rural development hub with the staff capacity to do this work is part of the case for general operating support of these organizations. If hub organizations only receive program specific or contract funding, they may never have the capacity to research and identify these larger, more complicated opportunities.

### Translate the process: take advantage of technical assistance resources

During AJF's "deep dive" into translating EDA's goals, they learned of a technical assistance opportunity for rural communities, at the time supported by the agency's national office (see sidebar), which was instrumental in preparing them for a competitive proposal. The technical assistance program, called the [Rural Innovation Initiative](#), was in itself a competitive opportunity—more than 200 rural communities applied for around a dozen spots in the program. However, the application was designed to be much simpler than a federal grant. When Ada was invited to participate, they received intensive assistance that helped them understand and translate EDA's process and grant requirements for the competitive Build to Scale program. This translation was especially valuable for a rural applicant like Ada, applying for the grant without the benefit of the specialized grant development staff that many urban organizations and municipalities employ.

## TRY THIS AT HOME: TIPS FOR PUTTING THE PRACTICE TO WORK

Ada Jobs Foundation offers the following tips to other organizations seeking to undertake this work:

### 1 INVOLVE YOUR WHOLE COMMUNITY

Who are the organizations and people you need to bring to the table? Compare the collaboration's demographics against the community's demographics. What groups or individuals are missing from a gathering of the "usual suspects"? How can you reach them?

### 2 CONNECT YOUR PEOPLE

Who are the connectors in the community? How can they weave people together to align around a goal? What interpersonal histories and dynamics might affect trust and coalition-building among potential partners? Who can be good translators among different parts of the wider community?

### 3 ASK FOR HELP

Look for opportunities like the Rural Innovation Initiative to bring in outside expertise and support. Ask questions of the agency or technical assistance provider when you don't know something—and don't be embarrassed that you don't know. Remember that agencies want to support rural communities but don't always know how.

## NATIONAL RURAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

As more agencies and organizations understand the value of technical assistance, new opportunities for rural communities to receive this type of support are coming online, including through innovative projects like USDA's [Rural Partners Network](#). Technical assistance is also available through established national rural non-profits, including the [Rural Community Assistance Partnership \(RCAP\)](#) and their affiliate organizations, the [Housing Assistance Council \(HAC\)](#), and [Rural LISC](#). And while EDA's pilot funding for the project has ended, the [Center on Rural Innovation](#) and [Rural Innovation Strategies, Inc.](#) continue to provide technical assistance to rural communities looking to develop tech-based economies through the [Rural Innovation Initiative](#).





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## COLLABORATION THROUGH TRANSLATION IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

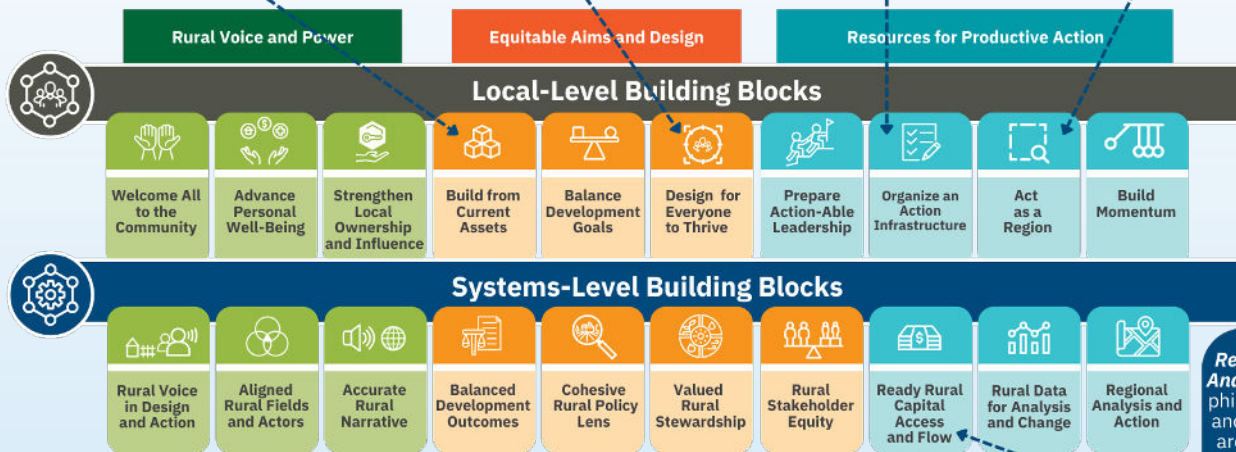
# THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK

**Build From Current Assets.** Local economic development approaches concentrate first on identifying and building on the area's existing people, place, business, and organizational assets to increase both well-being and equity outcomes.

**Design for Everyone to Thrive.** Equitable, actionable leadership means marginalized communities take an active role in designing solutions to community challenges.

**Organize An Action Infrastructure.** Communities have the local and regional institutions, policies, systems, data, information, media, and resources needed to establish, align and achieve priorities that increase both well-being and equity.

**Act As A Region.** Communities persistently analyze, develop strategies and act together within and across sensible and workable regions to address shared issues, challenges, and opportunities and achieve outcomes at a productive scale.



**Ready Rural Capital Access And Flow.** Public, private, and philanthropic financial capital and durable funding streams are reliably available, easily accessible and affordable, and consistently and strategically invested in rural people, places, organizations, and economies.

**Foundational Element:** Local organizations have the tools to identify and dismantle discriminatory practices based on place, race, and class.

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.

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