



2023 Highlights & the Year Ahead

Since Governor Whitmer established the Michigan Office of Rural Development, our office positioned itself as an important resource for rural communities in state government. Now housed in the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity as the Office of Rural Prosperity, the Office acts as a cross-agency liaison and navigator, advocate, and community partner, working to build capacity in rural communities and improve rural access to funding and other resources.

As our office's first full year, 2023 was action-packed. On the heels of the organizational groundwork conducted after the office was created in mid-2022 and three staff joining in early 2023, we launched a new grant program, built an extensive rural network through robust engagement activities, ensured rural needs were a part of new policies and programs across state government, and developed a comprehensive statewide strategy – the Roadmap for Rural Prosperity. 2023 highlights are detailed below, with an eye towards what's coming up for 2024.

Rural Readiness Grant Program

In 2023, we developed and launched the Rural Readiness Grant Program, awarding over 40 grants to communities and regions across Michigan for planning and capacity-building initiatives. The grants are building pipelines for housing projects, funding grant writing capacity, and supporting housing plans and needs assessments, behavioral health initiatives, nonmotorized transportation initiatives, childcare programming, comprehensive emergency response planning, and more. The Rural Readiness Grant program was designed in direct response to needs persistently identified by rural communities. With flexible funding that can address an array of rural priorities, the program features a simple application process and rural-specific scoring and eligibility criteria, targeting communities with greater need as demonstrated by income, population change and capacity limitations. With over \$9 million in funding requests for \$1.85 million in funding, our team offered one-on-one support to connect applicants to technical assistance and appropriate funding opportunities, coordinating with state agencies and philanthropies to identify additional funding opportunities for Rural Readiness Grant applicants.

What's next: While no additional funding is available for the Rural Readiness Grant program at this time, we will work throughout 2024 to develop programming and opportunities that will continue to connect communities to resources.

Rural Engagement and Leadership Summits

A key priority for the ORP is building a strong network of rural partners across Michigan. In the summer of 2024, a series of six Rural Leadership Summits connected over 350 rural stakeholders with peers, best practices, and resource providers. In addition to connecting rural leaders to solutions, success stories and potential partners, the Leadership Summits helped inform the Roadmap to Rural Prosperity (below) – as did a 'Rural Priorities and Preferences' survey distributed across the state. With over 2,400 responses from rural residents and leaders, the survey captures the opportunities and assets of rural communities, while highlighting key issues that must be addressed to build rural prosperity.

What's next: ORP is planning a statewide Rural Summit in May 2024, featuring national speakers, statewide success stories, resources and policy conversations that advance the Roadmap to Rural Prosperity.

Roadmap to Rural Prosperity

To synthesize rural trends, feedback, and policy priorities, we engaged rural leaders and residents across Michigan to build the Roadmap to Rural Prosperity. The Roadmap provides a vision and strategy for cross-government, statewide action to build rural prosperity, and identifies key rural trends, opportunities, and resource needs for communities, regions and the state.

What's next: The strategies in the Roadmap will guide our policy, engagement and capacity-building work across state government and within rural communities throughout 2024 and beyond.

Continuing Cross-Governmental and Cross-Sector Partnerships

A central, foundational role for Rural Prosperity is to act as a 'connector' for rural communities, state and national agencies, and philanthropy, universities, and other partners. This work is instrumental in elevating rural priorities, building understanding and connecting communities to resources, and depends on strong relationships with a broad range of organizations, agencies, and communities. The partnerships we built will continue to inform and support our work as a navigator and partner in 2024 and beyond.

Highlights of these efforts include:

- Our newsletter, launched in April 2023, now provides regular information and highlights on relevant funding programs and educational opportunities to over 2,500 rural stakeholders. Share this [link](#) for colleagues and friends to [sign up for our email updates here](#).
- In response to **Executive Directive 2023-3: Helping Michiganders Pay for College**, we engaged diverse stakeholders to develop a comprehensive report that reviews programs and practices, as well as outlines strategies, costs and benefits for programs that position Michigan as an attractive and affordable place to live and work, helping advance the Governor's goals to lower student loan burdens, increase in-demand talent and grow Michigan's population.
- ORP fostered robust rural dialogue throughout 2023, through participation in over 200 local and regional conversations as well as roundtables and webinars that informed key initiatives like the Growing Michigan Together Council, MSHDA housing funds, MEDC programming, and Office of the Foundation Liaison initiatives. With focused stakeholders including a newly formed Young Rural Champions network, border communities, employers, and housing leaders, ORP was able to elevate key needs in policy conversations and programming decisions. These regular engagement opportunities will continue throughout 2024, virtually and in person, to ensure rural partners have access to information, mentors, peers and programs that will help them succeed.
- To better connect rural communities to specific funding resources, we conducted targeted outreach to rural communities to explore opportunities in partnership with the State Land Bank Authority, the Michigan Public Service Commission, and other funding partners.
- We continued to develop strong relationships with national rural partners like USDA and EPA, other state rural prosperity offices, and national rural experts to identify opportunities for rural Michigan and to ensure its priorities are reflected in national initiatives.
- We worked with agency and legislative partners to provide timely review and input on policy and program changes impacting rural areas, including housing funds, small business support, energy and infrastructure funding opportunities, and the new Growing Michigan Together Council. Now positioned as an important resource on rural trends, Rural Prosperity will continue working as a cross-governmental liaison to ensure rural voices are an integral part of policy conversations.
- Because rural capacity limitations have such profound impacts on grantmaking and funding access, funders and other community partners across the state and country are working to understand and address capacity limitations in rural communities. We provided important input and guidance on rural capacity needs in initiatives across state government, state and national nonprofit and research organizations, philanthropy, and more throughout 2023, and will continue to inform funding, grant writing, and capacity building initiatives at the state and national level in 2024.
- A wealth of resources and opportunities are available to rural communities through Michigan's universities and colleges, and we developed strong working relationships with universities centered on land use, energy and capacity building issues on behalf of rural communities. In 2024, we will work closely with university partners to explore opportunities for enhancing rural research initiatives and university collaborations that address rural capacity and research needs.
- We officially transferred from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) to the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) in December 2023. The transfer allows us to build new opportunities and integration within the department and its partner agencies, while maintaining a strong working relationship and partnership with MDARD.