

Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Office of Rural Development: 2023 Strategy

Established by Governor Whitmer in 2022, the Office of Rural Development will create opportunity in rural Michigan by working across sectors to build capacity and resources for rural stakeholders to meet local and regional goals.

Michigan's long-term prosperity depends on the success of our rural regions: urban and rural economies are linked through our markets, natural resources, tourism opportunities, and workforce.

Rural Michigan makes up over 95% of the state's geography, and is home to unparalleled natural resources, 21 universities, and 20% of our population. Its farmland, forests, and mines drive hundreds of millions of dollars in exports, while its scenic beauty and outdoor recreation amenities attract the new residents, tourists, and businesses that drive statewide economic growth. What's more, the state's workforce pipeline depends on the students and workers throughout rural Michigan; and with national trends changing where people live and how we work, rural Michigan is poised to leverage these assets for even greater statewide success.

Yet, rural Michigan faces a complex set of challenges, including changing populations, housing shortages, needs for costly infrastructure improvements, and limited high-speed internet access. While these challenges may be found in both urban and rural communities, demographic shifts in rural areas have resulted in limited resources and acute workforce needs for many communities: with aging and declining populations, employers and service providers struggle to fill needed positions, which impacts our communities' quality of life, access to services,

and opportunities for future economic success. Meanwhile, rural areas typically have lower wages and incomes, resulting in greater need and fewer resources with which to address them.

Remote work, growing interest in rural areas as a place to live and do business, and unprecedented public investment nationwide are bringing new opportunities to rural areas. But to take advantage of them, **communities must be able to proactively plan for comprehensive solutions and coordinate with partners.** Unfortunately, many rural areas lack the resources they need to do so. Populations and tax revenues are stagnant or declining in many rural communities, which results in limited local funding for needed projects. While grants are available for a variety of different types of projects, underlying rural conditions – such as lower population densities – mean that rural communities often don't compete successfully for those grants. Further, grants require the ability to plan proactively for projects and investment, identify funding opportunities, navigate applications, and administer funding – and most rural communities simply don't have the staff to do so successfully. Ultimately, building opportunity in rural communities requires investments in community capacity – including staff, organizational structures, and collaborative processes.

Governor Whitmer established the Office of Rural Development (ORD) in 2022, housed in

the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) to build prosperity and create opportunity in rural Michigan by fostering strategic and coordinated investments in people and place. As the ORD builds its organizational foundations and programming, input from rural communities throughout Michigan is informing programs that will build rural capacity, prepare communities for future investment and funding opportunities, lead coordination and research to impact rural policy, ensure the efficient use of public resources, and result in tangible outcomes on priority rural issues.

As the ORD continues to build its organizational foundations and programming, the 2023 ORD Strategy outlines priority actions and focus areas.



Policy Support & Interagency Coordination

Assess policies, programs, and plans that affect rural communities, and identify opportunities for improved policy outcomes in rural areas.

- Work with partner agencies, legislators, and rural stakeholders to identify rural Michigan policy opportunities, funding needs, and programmatic solutions to create new opportunities for rural areas
- Work with federal agencies and national rural partners to coordinate strategy, resources, and research on shared priorities
- Identify, track, review and provide input on proposed policy and program changes impacting priority rural issues

Capacity and Grant Programming

Build local administrative and financial capacity to address rural needs and access resources

- Provide grant and funding information, regular updates, resources, and connections to rural stakeholders, in partnership with state agencies and other organizations
- Provide financial support for projects that further local and regional goals around high-priority issues and build readiness for long-term solutions
- Work with communities and partners to identify funding opportunities for new initiatives and projects with broad regional impacts

Rural Engagement & Outreach

Increase engagement within and between rural communities and state agencies

- Through events, communications, and research, increase engagement with and understanding of rural needs and opportunities among rural and urban stakeholders, policy makers, and state and federal partners
- Connect communities to share rural best practices and successes on priorities like housing, childcare, infrastructure, transportation, health, and economic and workforce development through regular webinars, roundtables, focus groups, and other events
- Improve coordination and collaboration within and across regions by supporting plans, coordination, and events that build preparedness for future investment and funding applications
- Ensure rural input and participation in new statewide programming and resources, through regular participation in statewide, local/regional, and project-specific workgroups
- Build regional and statewide readiness and economic competitiveness in coordination with statewide partners
- Develop and support research and initiatives that enhance statewide and national understanding of rural needs, in partnership with universities, colleges, and other state and national partners

2023 ORD Programs & Events

- **Virtual Rural Roundtables** will explore issues of common concern around rural Michigan, build connections, and share best practices. Each roundtable will focus on a particular rural priority and will highlight success stories from throughout the State, as well as available resources and programs.
- **ORD Grants** will provide grants of up to \$50,000 to support development readiness, cross-sector collaboration, and capacity building activities that have broad regional impact and demonstrate innovative, systems-based solutions. Grants will prioritize 'underserved' rural communities that have experienced population decline or other significant demographic changes, lower incomes, and capacity limitations.
- **Regional Rural Leadership Summits** will bring success stories, best practices, and opportunities for discussion with regional and statewide partners and peers to regions throughout Michigan. These in-person events will feature a variety of topics and discussion on rural priorities, as well as opportunities to provide input on statewide rural strategy considerations.
- **The Rural Readiness Program** will provide community facilitation and coaching to prepare and support local and regional solutions to priority community issues. The program will focus on developing actionable workplans, connecting partners, and identifying resources to support next steps. Communities will be able to apply to participate in a pilot program through a simple application process.
- **Rural Resource Connections** will identify policy initiatives, partners, funding opportunities, and events to help rural stakeholders educate stakeholders, communicate, plan, fund, and implement their priorities. Information will be shared through direct connections, online, and via regular newsletter updates.



FAQ

What is 'rural?'

With over 75 different official definitions of 'rural,' the ORD considers 'rural' to encompass a variety of community types and regions. For data purposes, the ORD refers to the broad definition established by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Under this definition, all counties that are not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) are considered rural. However, understanding that some very small towns and rural communities don't fit within this definition, ORD programming and funding applications will provide opportunities for participation and inclusion for additional communities, based on population, income and other factors used to demonstrate need in rural areas.

Who do we work with?

The ORD works with all types of community and statewide partners, from local governments to nonprofits, community foundations, state agencies, federal partners, economic development organizations, regional planning agencies, and more. These organizations all play important roles in rural development, but their specific contributions vary from place to place. The ORD meets communities where they are and works collaboratively with a variety of partners to support shared goals.

What's your relationship with other MDARD divisions?

What about USDA Rural Development?

MDARD has a variety of divisions and programs that provide funding and other support for a variety of activities, including project-specific grants related to food and agriculture. The ORD works in coordination with these divisions, USDA-RD, and other state and federal agencies to identify areas of common concern, impacts of specific policies and programs, and collaborative, systems-based solutions to challenges around capacity and funding needs.

How do you work with other agencies?

ORD provides input and feedback to other agencies on rural needs and solutions, and works together with agency partners to coordinate outreach to and request input from rural communities.

Contact the ORD

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