



GOVERNOR'S
EMPOWER RURAL IOWA
INITIATIVE

ANNUAL REPORT

December 2023



Invest Task Force

Webster City, IA
May 3, 2023



WELCOME FROM CHAIRS

The future is bright for rural Iowa! Since the creation of the Governor's Empower Rural Iowa Initiative five years ago, we have covered major ground in improving the quality of life in our rural communities. Tasked with connecting, growing, and investing in rural Iowa, we have worked to develop rural leaders; support the revitalization of rural downtown districts; expand housing availability; and improve broadband connectivity. We have also worked to support rural business succession through employee ownership and entrepreneurship. Tackling the challenges of rural emergency medical response with an innovative new program, called Iowa United First Aid, will be life-altering for the people of Iowa.

With over five years success behind us, 2023 has brought important and exciting changes. Governor Kim Reynolds signed an updated executive order, streamlining our structure while sparking innovation and forging opportunity and prosperity in rural Iowa. This new, clear focus on innovation will allow us to devote our time to testing ideas and projects that are on the cutting edge of rural policy and development. Most importantly, it will allow us to continue pursuing our mission – empowering rural communities to thrive!

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read "Adam Gregg". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Lt. Governor Adam Gregg

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read "Sandy Ehrig". The signature is cursive and elegant, with a long tail on the final letter.

Sandy Ehrig

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Lt. Governor Adam Gregg
Co-Chair
Des Moines

Sandy Ehrig
Co-Chair
Nevada

David Barker
Iowa City

Kimberly Tiefenthaler
Carroll

James Hoelscher
Cedar Falls

Jenae Jenison Sikkink
Pella

Katie LaBree
Aplington

Task Force Members*

Barb Baker
Stacy Besch
Ryan Boone
Donna Boss
Kevin Cabbage
Jamie Daubendiek
Carla Eysink
Stephanie Fromm
Billi Hunt
Nathan Katzer
Rachael Kinnick
Caleb Knutson
Brian Lenzmeier
Deb Lucht
Shalimar Mazetis
Ashley Moyer
Jason Neises

Michael Ott
Ethan Pitt
Jenna Pollock
Bonnie Ramsey
Jenna Ramsey
Mark Reinig
Emily Schmitt
Amanda Snakensberg
Sharon Stroh
Gary Taylor
Krista Tedrow
Jim Thompson
Brian Waller
Troy Weary
Emily Williams
Rick Young

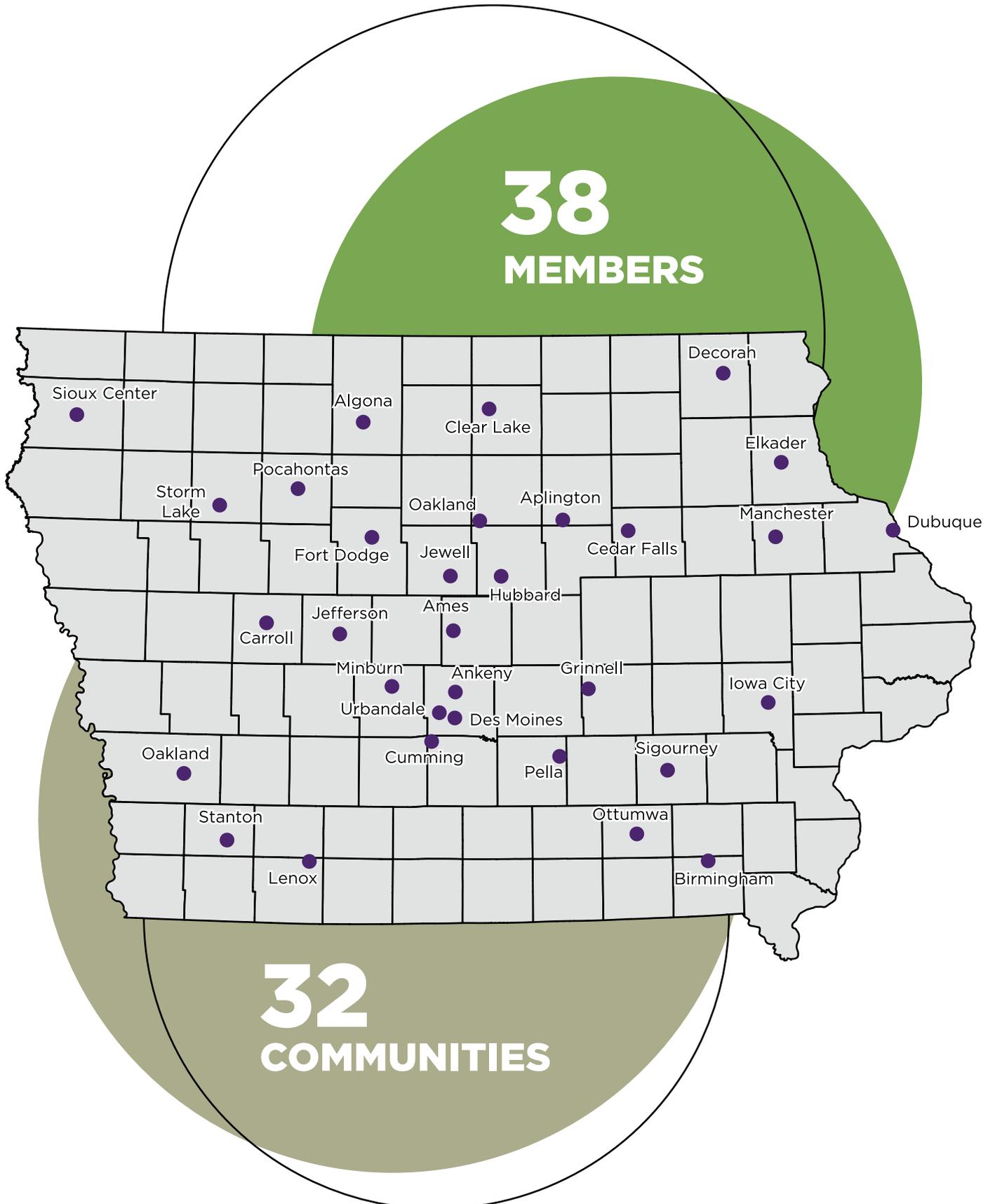
*Task force members effective December 13, 2023. See a full listing of members that served in 2023 [here](#).

Staff

Liesl Seabert - Program Lead
Iowa Economic Development Authority

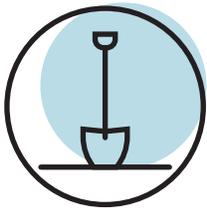
Sacha Wise
Iowa Economic Development Authority

TASK FORCE MEMBER LOCATIONS



EMPOWER RURAL IOWA INITIATIVE

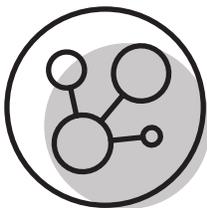
The Governor’s Empower Rural Iowa (ERI) Initiative was formed by Governor Reynolds through the signing of Executive Order No. 3 on July 18, 2018. The order created a partnership with the Iowa Rural Development Council (IRDC) and tasked Lt. Governor Adam Gregg and Iowa Rural Development Council Chair Sandy Ehrig with co-chairing the initiative. The executive order created three task forces, which developed policy recommendations for Governor Reynolds’ consideration. Over the years, the task forces have addressed the following topics:



Investing in Rural Iowa Task Force – Rural housing shortages, derelict and dilapidated buildings, online business presence, business transition planning and entrepreneurship.



Growing Rural Iowa Task Force – Leadership development in rural communities, creating welcoming communities, and attracting and retaining residents or workers.



Connecting Rural Iowa Task Force – Financing broadband connectivity, leveraging connectivity and remote worker readiness.

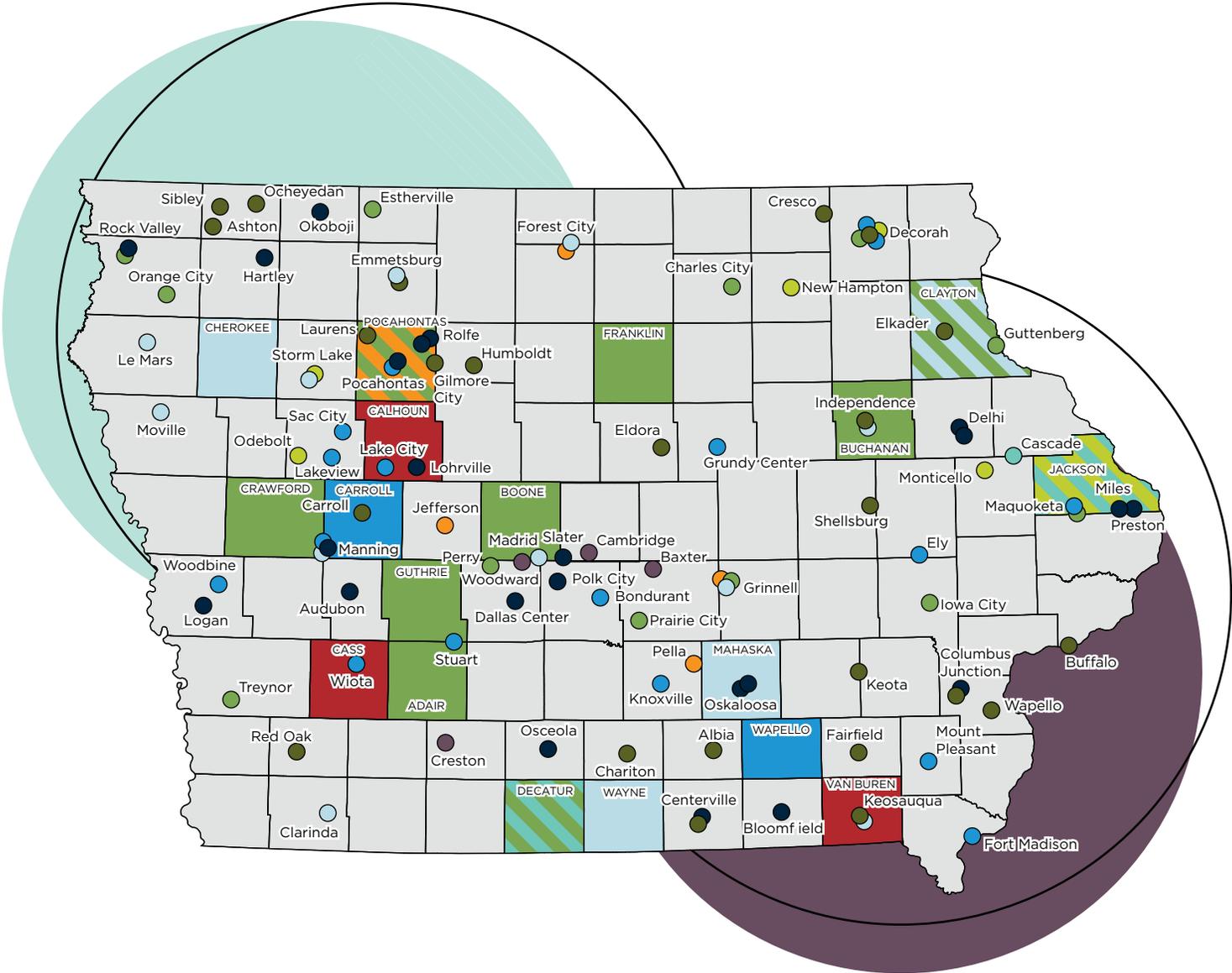
Since its inception, ERI has successfully crafted policies that positively impact rural communities through grant funding, creative programming, and advocacy that drives investment, growth, and connectivity to rural Iowa.

On October 19, 2023, Governor Reynolds signed Executive Order 11 aimed at updating the ERI initiative. The new Executive Order will follow the natural development of ERI through strategic changes to purpose, organization, and operations. Changes include a new focus on functioning as a startup incubator for innovative rural policy. This model allows ERI to work with multiple stakeholders across the state to quickly launch an innovative concept, learn from participants, initiate scaling efforts, and, if successful, pass to another agency or organization to continue forward.

Organizational changes include updating and streamlining operations by reducing membership from 66 appointees to 25 and going from three task forces to one committee. ERI will be co-chaired by the Lieutenant Governor and a representative from the Iowa Rural Development Council appointed by the Governor.

GRANT PROGRAMS ASSISTED

FY 22 - FY24



GRANT TYPE

- BOOST
- Rural Housing Assessment Grant
- Iowa United First Aid
- Rural Innovation Grant
- Rural Child Care Market Study
- Rural Leadership Bootcamp
- Rural Child Care Planning Grant
- Rural Return Grant
- Rural Enrichment Grant
- Rural Scale Up Grant

Iowa United First Aid
Grant Program

*Creston, IA
July 12, 2023*



IOWA UNITED FIRST AID GRANT PROGRAM



The Iowa United First Aid pilot program, formerly called the Rural EMS Pilot, aims to leverage technology and volunteers to address challenges in rural emergency response. The mission is to provide immediate medical intervention during the critical window between the onset of an emergency and the arrival of traditional ambulance assistance. Recognizing the challenge of resources in rural Iowa’s vast geographic area, this pilot supports three applicants to leverage GPS-location technology with trained volunteers to decrease the immediate response time and stabilize emergencies while coordinating with emergency assistance. Funding may be used to provide training and equipment to volunteers.

Calhoun County

This opportunity will build a system of volunteer responders in communities and townships across Calhoun County. Within minutes of an emergency a volunteer responder will be able to perform basic lifesaving care and a calming presence quickly until the transporting ambulance can arrive. The volunteers will be trained on equipment, the phone technology, and working around emergency vehicles. Calhoun County is planning a “Go” bag with first aid equipment, wound care dressings, tourniquets, CPR mask, personal protective equipment, and an AED.

Cass County

Cass County aims to utilize local volunteers in emergency response situations in our most rural settings where EMS and law enforcement would have to travel a significant distance to reach the incident. This program will allow our local volunteers to provide immediate, lifesaving care to our rural residents until trained emergency response agencies are onsite. The funds will be utilized to purchase AEDs and go-bag equipment, such as bleeding control items, to be utilized by trained volunteers.

Van Buren County

The goal of the project is to create small groups of volunteers who are geographically dispersed throughout Van Buren County. The role of these volunteers will be to provide quality first aid in emergency situations until professional EMS personnel arrive on the scene. At minimum, they will be trained in basic first aid, CPR (including AED use), and Stop the Bleed. The majority of the funding will go toward the purchase of equipment and supplies for qualified volunteers.

RURAL INNOVATION GRANT PROGRAM



The Rural Innovation Grant program supports unique, creative, non-traditional ideas focused on current issues and challenges faced by rural communities' investment, growth, and connection. At its root, innovation means to improve or to replace something, such as a process, a product, or a service. It is the concept of bringing creativity into implementation with a definitive outcome.

Wapello County - Rural Youth Community CoDesigners

This cross-sector coalition will leverage the grant investment to launch the first youth led rural community pre-apprenticeship in the nation. Youth (ages 14-26) in Wapello County communities will be trained and paid to design a youth engagement and retention strategy and implement data-driven social change initiatives in response to challenges persisting in our rural communities.

Carroll County - HUB 712

HUB 712 is a scalable hub and spoke model of physical and virtual resources to be shared throughout Western Iowa in support of entrepreneurship-led economic development. Funds will be used to build out the Carroll hub facility; provided to partner EDOs to virtually connect hub and spoke facilities; and build a marketing campaign for the initiative. HUB 712 collaborative model will reignite startup activity to pre-pandemic levels and create new local businesses, wealth, and jobs.



Photo courtesy of:
HUB 712

Carroll, IA



RURAL HOUSING ASSESSMENT GRANT PROGRAM

7
GRANTS

\$70,000
AWARDED

The Rural Housing Assessment Grant program supports the use of publicly available, online information through the “Profile of Iowa” tool and rural community efforts to interpret publicly available hard data to implement changes through development codes, local ordinances, and housing incentives specific to individual community needs. In partnership with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach’s Rural Housing Readiness Assessment workshops, program funding empowers communities to assess the current development environment and enact changes resulting in the creation of policies and procedures attractive to potential developers.

Gilmore City

Wrapping up a community visioning process, Gilmore City is ready to take control of their future with new energy and intention. They have identified challenges and opportunities but need a plan on how to best move forward. The community is ready to work with ISU Extension and Outreach on developing that path.

Cresco

The City of Cresco has identified a need for affordable housing options to meet current demands of their workforce. With outdated data and plans, Cresco is ready to proactively identify solutions, work with partners, and think collaboratively about housing.

Independence

Ready to take a bold step forward and strategically approach housing initiatives, Independence is eager to work with ISU Extension and Outreach on this process. With a near-term goal of procuring a Thriving Communities designation, they see this work as the next logical step in a long-term strategy.

RURAL CHILD CARE PLANNING GRANT



The Rural Child Care Planning Grant program supports the use of data and analysis by rural communities to determine the specific needs and solutions for child care in their area. Many factors are analyzed to determine the feasibility for development of a child care center, expansion of an existing one or support for in-home providers. Through greater understanding of their geographic market, demographics, competition, financials, and other factors, communities can be armed with the information needed to take proactive steps towards addressing child care challenges. Funding from the program empowers communities to assess their current child care environment and develop strategies.

Cascade

As a community of approximately 2,386, the City of Cascade has a close relationship with their primary local child care center, Aquin Little Angels. Over the past few years, the center has had frequent staffing challenges, exacerbating an already pressing childcare need in the community. This grant funding will be used to work with First Children's Finance on a business plan to assist with sustainability of the child care organization.

Decatur County

This project is spearheaded by Decatur County Hospital, a key partner and stakeholder in the region and county. Their motivation for working with First Children's Finance is to better understand how the hospital can be directly involved in developing a solution to childcare challenges and put data to anecdotal information currently available.

Jackson County

The timing is right for Jackson County to work with First Children's Finance. The county has a variety of new opportunities and growth potential, but they are limited by childcare availability and lack a clear path forward. Developing a plan to understand their needs and build implementation steps will set them on the path to build child care capacity and capitalize on regional business expansions.

BOOST Community
Walk-through
Creston, IA



BOOST GRANT PROGRAM



The Rural Building Ownership and Organization by Strengthening Teams (BOOST) program provides teams of experts to assist passionate community and business leaders with intentional plans for next step growth. This pilot program was designed for rural communities, nonprofits, and employers to receive personalized technical assistance for identifying and implementing action steps to launch into the next stage of success. Rural BOOST has two tracts, targeting communities or businesses. Rural BOOST is designed to assist communities or businesses which have plateaued or hit an unexpected challenge to gain momentum for new growth. The applicants and steering committee are committed to leading a transformation in their community. Rural BOOST dispatches three to five experts to meet with a local committee and discuss the existing conditions, assets, and anticipated needs. The Center for Rural Revitalization and supporting partners create an action plan and provide targeted financial support to launch next steps.

Creston

The pilot project will help Creston's leaders focus attention on some best strategies that a) build on past efforts, b) address recent trends exacerbated by COVID, and c) address issues outlined in past planning efforts, including the 2019 IEDA Downtown Assessment. Our long-term goal is to modernize, revitalize, and beautify Uptown Creston, the Adams Street corridor west of Creston, and McKinley Park. We seek to improve market conditions so private investors will invest for years to come, improving local quality of life and sense of place in public spaces.

Woodward

An action plan and grant funding provided by BOOST will help Woodward prepare for growth of the Des Moines metro, ensuring Woodward is not overlooked or steamrolled by the anticipated wave of urban expansion. The community wants to be prepared for the growth of the Des Moines metro and business development leads; take advantage of the traffic flowing through the community; and encourage a strong presence of their schools and younger generations. BOOST will help Woodward achieve these goals and prepare for new growth.

Baxter

Baxter is a unique community located near Des Moines, Newton, Marshalltown, and Ames areas. Because of this, the community attracts many young families seeking a slower lifestyle to raise children. Baxter takes pride in its welcoming, close-knit community. Baxter Economic Development's goal is to identify exactly what the community needs to grow and prosper by gathering information on housing, business, and infrastructure needs.

Cambridge

Cambridge is a small town with opportunity to grow in both its commercial and residential areas. This grant will help the steering committee, city leaders and residents search out answers on how to help the community grow sustainably. Cambridge is a small community eager to work with partners to prepare for its future. The community needs the help of qualified experts to find ways to identify resources, develop its resources and develop a comprehensive plan.

RURAL LEADERSHIP BOOTCAMP GRANT PROGRAM

3
GRANTS

\$3,000
AWARDED

The Rural Leadership Bootcamp Grant program provides training, mentorship and funding to communities and regions initiating leadership programs. Many communities have created effective leadership programs, as have various Iowa industries. Leveraging these efforts as examples and partners, this program targets rural communities who would like to start a local leadership program and engage participants in community leadership roles. The grant award includes participation in the two-day Leadership Bootcamp and partners the community with a mentor to assist with launching new, local leadership programs.

Boone County

Over the last year, Boone County has seen a sharp increase in investment due to its low land prices, local grant opportunities and attractive tax incentive packages. However, most employers share their struggles finding the developed leaders they need to fill managerial and executive positions. This spring, as part of the plan to be designated a Main Street Community, an assessment team for IEDA Downtown Revitalization helped the community understand its blind spots in having a thriving, vibrant downtown. One of the strongest recommendations was to professionally develop current and emerging leaders.

Buchanan County

Buchanan County Economic Development Commission currently has a Leadership program in partnership with Hawkeye Community College. The goal is to expand the partnership with the Independence Chamber, Buchanan County Tourism, and additional county leaders to connect communities and create a dynamic leadership committee.

Crawford County

Denison has recognized the need for effective and visionary leadership to address challenges and opportunities. Despite the community's many strengths, there is an identified gap in leadership development and engagement, particularly among young adults and emerging leaders. The community is eager to initiate a leadership program that will empower individuals from various backgrounds to lead, address critical issues, and foster inclusive growth.

Story County - sponsored by Leadership Iowa

Lead Story County - Boards and Commissions Training will be a leadership program designed to develop dynamic and impactful board and commission members. The program for board and commission members will provide newly appointed members and current members an opportunity for professional growth and further understanding of their roles in county government. Through a developed training program, they will gain stronger understanding of the basic structure of Story County government, the mission, vision, and guiding principles of Story County government, including boards, commissions, county policies, state laws affecting boards, membership responsibilities and how to conduct an effective meeting utilizing Iowa Open Meeting laws and Robert's Rules of Order.

RURAL ENRICHMENT GRANT PROGRAM



The Rural Enrichment Grant Program supports small, quality of life projects that create meaningful results in rural communities. This was the second round of the Rural Enrichment Grant program, supporting communities in the development of quality spaces where people want to live, work, play, and engage.

Pocahontas – County Kaleidoscopes

The Pocahontas County Leadership class of 2023 (Inspire PoCo) will create a unique, life-size kaleidoscope in each of the four largest communities in Pocahontas County. The group chose kaleidoscopes because of The Kaleidoscope Factory, located in Pocahontas. Installing these large kaleidoscopes will give people of all ages a great reason to explore Pocahontas county.

Logan – Safe Routes to School & Rec Trails

This is the initial phase of implementation for Logan’s first-ever city-wide trail system. The project intends to address the most significant community concern regarding pedestrian movement in Logan, which is the lack of connectivity between the majority of Logan residents and Lo-Ma CSD, which serves PK-12 students. Final design and construction include establishing an 8’ wide concrete trail while also providing a safe at-grade crosswalk on heavily trafficked State Hwy 127.

Oskaloosa – All-Inclusive Nature Playscape

The Caldwell Park Environmental Learning Center will create an outdoor adventure area that is all-inclusive for children and adults. The Nature Playscape will include climbing and water features, ADA-compliant walkways, picnic and shade areas, and texture trails. This Nature Playscape will provide a safe area for children and adults to learn, explore and partake in outdoor activities while fostering an appreciation for conservation and the world around them.

RURAL SCALE-UP GRANT PROGRAM



Over past funding cycles, Rural Innovation Grant recipients have illustrated creative and unique solutions to address issues and challenges facing rural communities. For the second year, the Rural Scale-Up Grant program aims to support the replication and spread of these innovative concepts and projects by funding similar solutions in communities across the state.

Odebolt - Mat Rats Wrestling Club Facility Renovation

Mat Rats Wrestling Club will renovate a derelict building on Main Street in Odebolt into a year-round, non-profit wrestling facility that will serve youth of all ages from small rural communities in northwest Iowa.

Decorah - Contributing to Community

Decorah will initiate a parklet project that builds on existing parking space concepts in Iowa to better address design aesthetic, safety, and accessibility. The project installs two professionally designed, modular parklet structures, creates policy, and incorporates public space amenities into economic development work. The project pairs safe, city-owned structures with small businesses committed to excellence and increases the outdoor gathering infrastructure in an award-winning downtown district.

Maquoketa/Jackson County - Together We Build

Together We Build is a collaborative effort of the Jackson County (JCo) Extension Council, JCo Fair Association, JCo Board of Supervisors and other community members. The committee has been working together for five years on plans to build a new Outreach Center and community certified kitchen on the JCo Fairgrounds in Maquoketa. The Center will house the JCo/ISU Extension Offices, a community certified kitchen, and an educational/conference space.

Photo courtesy of:
Mat Rats Wrestling Club

Odebolt, IA



Future Home
of

MAT RATS



WRESTLING CLUB

Donate to our
renovations with VENMO:
@MatRatsWrestlingOdebolt



Leadership Exchange

*Nevada, IA
October 27, 2023*

EMPOWER RURAL IOWA CONNECTED INITIATIVES

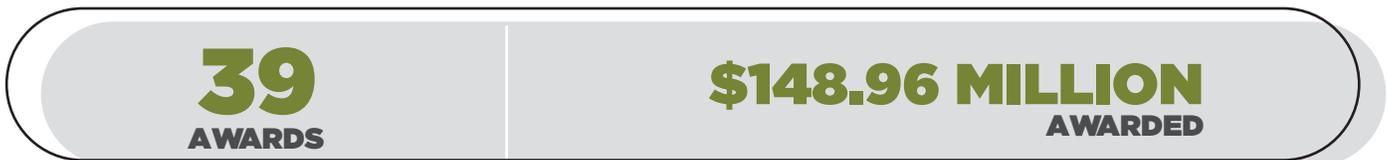
Leadership Exchange

The Annual Iowa Leadership Exchange is an educational event held to bolster existing rural leadership programs, support a statewide network of program leaders, and empower communities to grow local leaders. Co-hosted by the Center for Rural Revitalization and Leadership Iowa, the fourth annual event was held in Nevada, Iowa and featured two days of strategies for elevating local leadership, roundtable discussions on alumni engagement and measures of success and skill development for building influence. More than 100 attendees, including existing leadership program directors and managers from across the state, shared best practices for strengthening existing programs. Additionally, communities or organizations interested in starting their own programs or fostering leadership development attended to learn from statewide experts.

Rural Iowa AmeriCorps

The Rural Iowa AmeriCorps Program partners with local nonprofit or government organizations to provide AmeriCorps member support for community development and capacity building projects that encourage people to live, work, play, and engage in vibrant rural places. Each community finds unique solutions to enhance the quality of life for their residents and visitors. The Rural Iowa AmeriCorps program provides person power to support solutions to improve community health, retain local talent, attract new residents, and build a sense of place. Examples include an AmeriCorps member in Cass County administering and supporting the rollout of the IA United First Aid pilot project and Northeast Iowa Community Action Corporation in Waverly hosting a member to expand food pantry operations and raise community awareness of available services and resources.

Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant Program



The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) administers the Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant Program designed to reduce or eliminate areas of Iowa that are unserved or underserved. This is done through broadband service, leveraging federal funds and public and private partnerships where possible, awarding grants to communication service providers installing broadband infrastructure that facilitates broadband service in Targeted Service Areas. The OCIO's most recent Notice of Funding Availability (#008) made available \$148,960,000; Notice of Intent to Award was announced October 30, 2023.

Workforce Housing Tax Incentive Program



IEDA’s Workforce Housing Tax Incentive program provides tax benefits to developers to provide housing in Iowa communities, focusing especially on projects using abandoned, empty, or dilapidated properties. A small cities set aside for this program is available to eligible projects within the 88-least populous counties in Iowa. In 2023, the program was appropriated \$35 million, with half the funds set aside for small cities. In addition, carry forward from unused credits were awarded to small cities, increasing the small city awards to \$20.7 million. Since inception of the program in 2015, nearly 4,300 units have been completed or are under construction in small cities.

Community Catalyst Building Remediation Program



Through the Community Catalyst Building Remediation Program (regular, emergency and theater), IEDA provides grants to communities for the redevelopment, rehabilitation, or deconstruction of buildings to stimulate economic growth or reinvestment in the community. Of the 31 awards, 10 were made to cities with populations under 1,500 (totaling \$950,000) and 18 to cities with populations between 1,500 and 20,000 (totaling \$1.79 million).

Iowa Center for Employee Ownership - Drake University Law School

Empower Rural Iowa and Iowa Economic Development Authority are founding members of the Iowa Center for Employee Ownership (IA-CEO) Advisory Council, organized and staffed by University of Northern Iowa (UNI) Advance Iowa. The Council is comprised of employee-owned business leaders, trade associations, government executives, ranking academic officials, and professional advisors who advocate for the advancement of shared ownership in the state of Iowa. IA-CEO’s mission is to support local business prosperity in Iowa by advocating for employee ownership to promote local economies, employee wealth creation, strong workforce, and vibrant communities. As part of this initiative, Empower Rural Iowa has partnered with Drake University Law School’s Entrepreneurial and Transactional Clinic to develop informational materials, training opportunities, and policy recommendations in support of IA-CEO’s mission.

Drake University law students meet with Lt. Governor - Iowa Center for Employee Ownership





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As a rural county in northwest Iowa, we're grateful for the opportunities through the Empower Rural Iowa Initiative. They have opened the door to various possibilities and have led to even more connections and growth in our communities. Rural Iowa thrives through partnerships, and these grants spotlight the importance of establishing partnerships and networking throughout Pocahontas County and the entire state.”

- Pocahontas Chamber of Commerce,
Pocahontas County Economic Development,
Pocahontas County Hometown Pride

APPENDIX

Annual Appropriation For Empower Rural Iowa Initiatives

FY'23	\$800,956	\$700,000 APPROPRIATED	\$100,956 CARRYOVER	\$791,000 OBLIGATED
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Child Care Planning Grants	\$90,000
Enrichment Grants	\$207,000
Housing Assessment Grants	\$60,000
Innovation Grants	\$100,000
Leadership Bootcamp Grants	\$4,000
Scale-Up Grants	\$60,000
BOOST	\$20,000
Iowa United First Aid	\$150,000
Drake Law	\$100,000
Total Unobligated, Carryover to FY24	\$9,956

FY'24	\$709,956	\$700,000 APPROPRIATED	\$9,956 CARRYOVER	\$477,366 OBLIGATED
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Child Care Planning Grants	\$30,000
Enrichment Grants	\$194,366
Housing Assessment Grants	\$70,000
Innovation Grants	\$100,000
Leadership Bootcamp Grants	\$3,000
Scale-Up Grants	\$60,000
BOOST	\$20,000

2023 Community Hosts

Six communities hosted task force meetings in 2023. These meetings provide the opportunity for a rural community to be in the spotlight. Task force members participate in a walking tour, visit local businesses, and learn about past projects highlighted by the community.

- Alleman
- Creston
- Grinnell
- Pocahontas
- Webster City
- West Bend

See a listing of all past meeting locations [here](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

View Last year's Annual Report: [2022 ERI Report](#)

View [Previous Task Force Recommendations](#)



IOWA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
Center for Rural Revitalization

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