



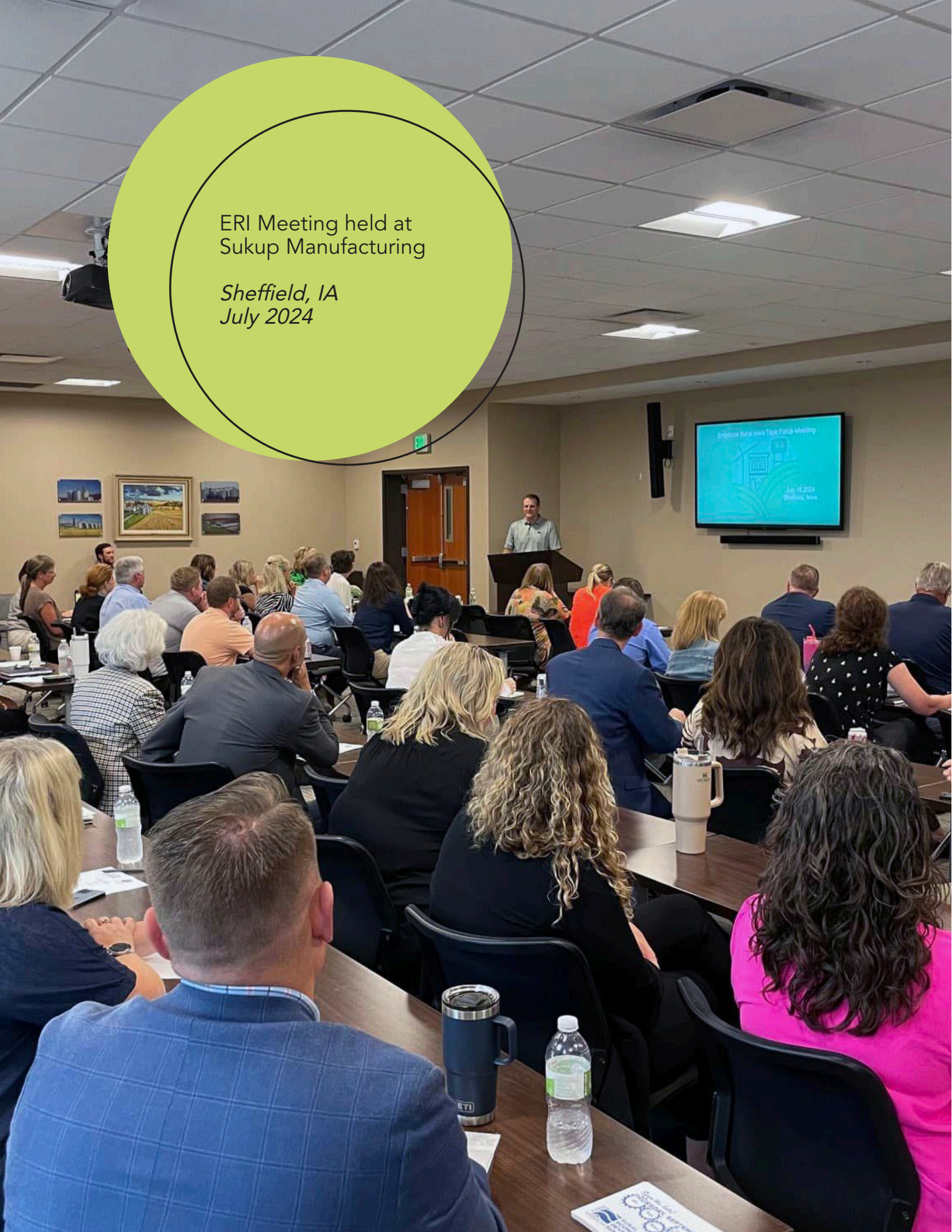
— GOVERNOR'S —
EMPOWER RURAL IOWA
— INITIATIVE —

ANNUAL REPORT

December 2024

ERI Meeting held at
Sukup Manufacturing

Sheffield, IA
July 2024



WELCOME FROM CHAIR

Change is the only constant in rural Iowa. Since the creation of the Governor's Empower Rural Iowa (ERI) Initiative six years ago, we have initiated innovative ideas to improve the quality of life in our rural communities and adapted programs to capitalize on dynamic opportunities. ERI has worked to develop rural leaders, supported community revitalization, expanded planning for housing & childcare, supported rural business innovation, and enhanced rural emergency medical response.

Our focus on innovation allows us to devote our time to testing ideas and projects that are on the cutting edge of rural policy and development. We do this work to improve the rural economy and ignite innovation. Together, we can empower rural communities to thrive!

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Carla Eysink". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Carla" and last name "Eysink" clearly distinguishable.

Carla Eysink

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Carla Eysink
Chair
Pella

David Barker
Iowa City

Kimberly Tiefenthaler
Carroll

James Hoelscher
Cedar Falls

Jenae Sikkink
Pella

Katie LaBree
Aplington

Task Force Members*

Stacy Besch
Ryan Boone
Donna Boss
Kevin Cabbage
Stephanie Fromm
Nathan Katzer
Caleb Knutson
Deb Lucht
Shalimar Mazetis
Ashley Moyer

Jason Neises
Ethan Pitt
Jenna Ramsey
Mark Reinig
Krista Tedrow
Jim Thompson
Brian Waller
Troy Weary
Rick Young

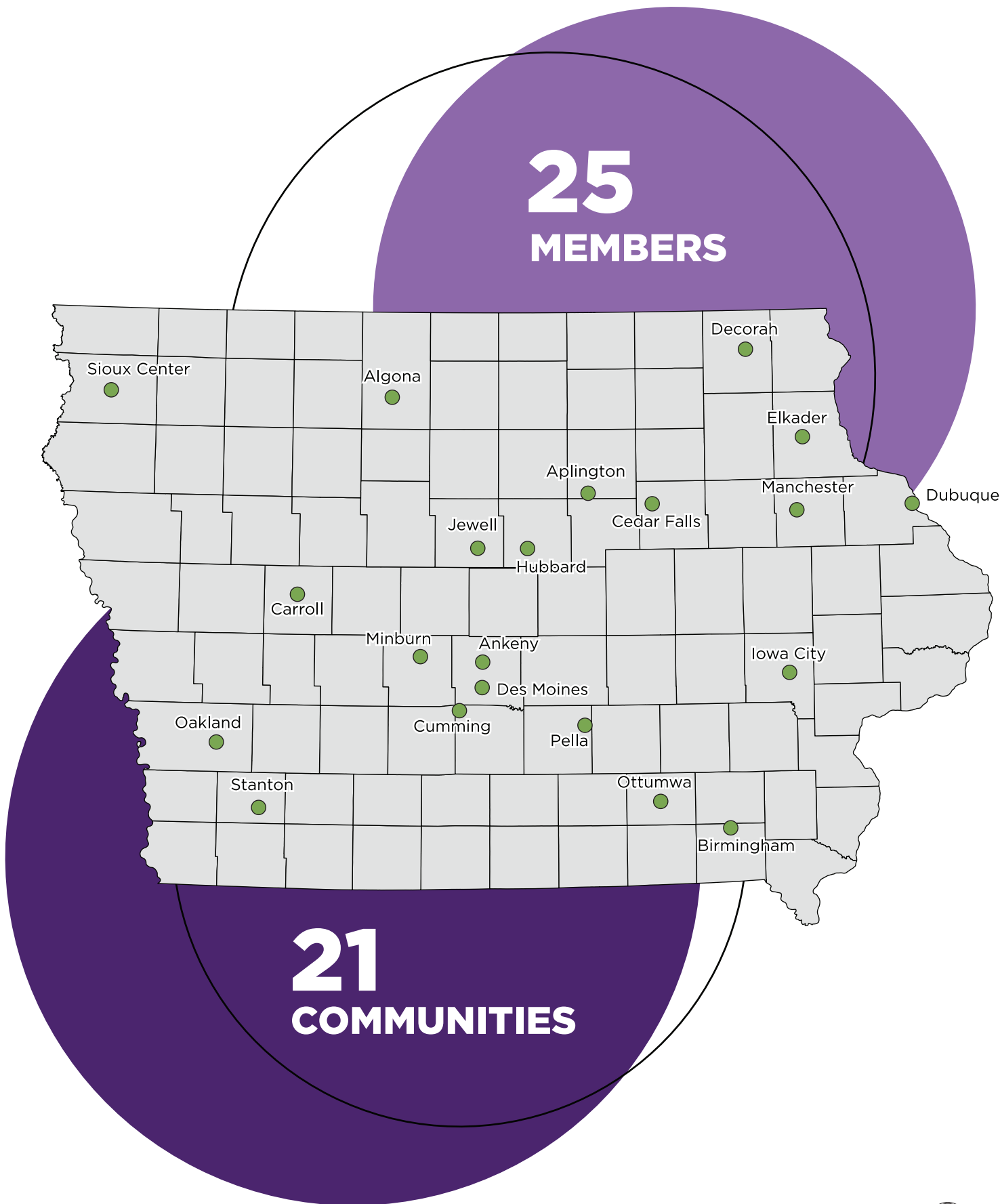
Staff

Robin Bostrom - Program Lead
Iowa Economic Development Authority

Sacha Wise
Iowa Economic Development Authority

*Task force members effective September 1, 2024. See a full listing of members that served in 2024 [here](#).

TASK FORCE MEMBER LOCATIONS



EMPOWER RURAL IOWA INITIATIVE

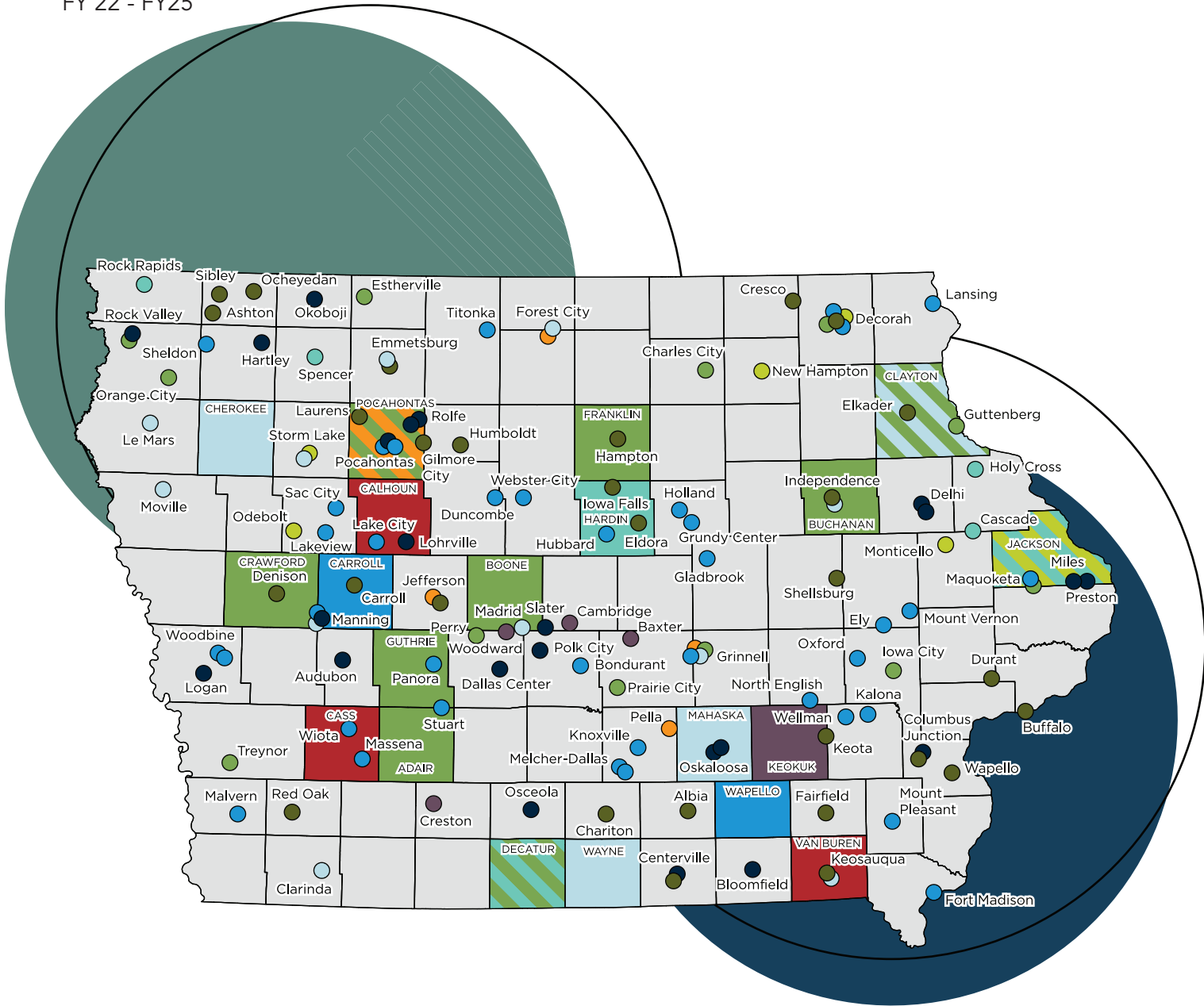
The Governor's Empower Rural Iowa (ERI) initiative was formed by Gov. Kim Reynolds through the signing of Executive Order No. 3 on July 18, 2018. The order created a partnership with the Iowa Rural Development Council (IRDC) and tasked then-Lt. Gov. Adam Gregg and a representative from the IRDC with co-chairing the initiative. The executive order created three task forces (Investing, Growing and Connecting). The task forces addressed topics such as rural housing shortage, business transition planning and entrepreneurship, leadership development, creating welcoming communities, attracting and retaining residents or workers, financing broadband connectivity and leveraging connectivity. 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, Gov. Reynolds signed Executive Order No. 11 aimed at updating the ERI initiative. The new executive order followed the natural development of ERI through some strategic changes to purpose, operations and organization. Changes included a new focus on functioning as a start-up 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 included updating and streamlining operations by reducing membership from 66 appointees to 25 and going from three task forces to one committee. ERI is co-chaired by the lieutenant governor and Carla Eysink, representing the IRDC and appointed by the governor.

The Center for Rural Revitalization, housed within the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), is responsible for the day-to-day operations of ERI, implementing ERI task force recommendations, acting as a liaison to rural communities and helping small communities access programs that support rural areas.

GRANT PROGRAMS ASSISTED

FY 22 - FY25



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



“ THE RURAL ENRICHMENT GRANT ENABLED OUR COMMUNITY TO BRING A COUNTY LEADERSHIP PROJECT TO LIFE. THANKS TO THE GRANT, WE WERE ABLE TO INSTALL SIX LIFE-SIZE KALEIDOSCOPES THROUGHOUT OUR COUNTY AS A QUALITY-OF-LIFE IMPROVEMENT AND TOURIST ATTRACTION. THIS PROJECT HAS CAUGHT THE EYE OF MANY ACROSS THE STATE, AND WE HOPE TO SOON ATTRACT VISITORS FROM OUT OF STATE IN THE YEARS TO COME. RECEIVING THE RURAL ENRICHMENT GRANT ALSO OPENED THE DOOR TO SECURING OTHER GRANTS AND FUNDING, AS WE WORK TOWARDS COMPLETING THE LOFTY GOAL OF EACH OF OUR NINE COMMUNITIES IN THE COUNTY HAVING ITS OWN LIFE-SIZE KALEIDOSCOPE.”

Parker Aden
Executive director
Pocahontas Chamber of Commerce

RURAL INNOVATION GRANT PROGRAM

The Rural Innovation Grant program supports unique, creative, nontraditional ideas that focus on current issues and challenges faced by rural communities, and are associated with the themes of community investment, growth and connection. It is the concept of bringing creativity into implementation with a definitive outcome. The Rural Innovation Grant program launched three new funding options in 2024 to assist rural entrepreneurs in strategically growing their businesses.

Rural Grocery

12 GRANTS | **\$236,138 AWARDED** | **\$554,539 TOTAL PROJECT COSTS**

Independent rural grocery stores play an important role in rural prosperity by being local anchor businesses that contribute to the vitality of rural places, offer employment opportunities, provide healthy and fresh foods and keep wealth in the communities. Grant funds were awarded for technology upgrades or the adoption of innovative approaches to service delivery.

Rural Food Processors

6 GRANTS | **\$30,000 AWARDED** | **\$86,744 TOTAL PROJECT COSTS**

Iowa has seen significant growth in small-scale food processors; the goal of this program is to provide critical information, services and resources to existing small businesses that are on the verge of growth. Grant funds were awarded for equipment and technology upgrades or contract fees for support services to help a business meet industry regulations and strategically grow the business.

Economic Gardening

2 GRANTS | **\$10,000 AWARDED** | **\$17,500 TOTAL PROJECT COSTS**

The program will use sophisticated tools for strategic research combined with analytical frameworks to help local companies scale up and create jobs and wealth in rural communities. Second-stage growth companies — those with more than \$1 million in sales that are looking to grow the market outside of Iowa — will be connected to a team of specialists, through the National Center for Economic Gardening, who use corporate tools to find new markets, provide competitive intelligence, identify industry trends, assess digital marketing efforts and find qualified leads. Grant funds were awarded to contract with the National Center for Economic Gardening and to implement recommendations.

RURAL HOUSING ASSESSMENT GRANT PROGRAM

5
GRANTS

\$100,000
AWARDED

The Rural Housing Assessment Grant program supports the use of publicly available, online information 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 will empower communities to assess the current development environment and enact changes resulting in the creation of policies and procedures attractive to potential developers.

- City of Denison
- City of Durant
- City of Hampton
- City of Iowa Falls
- City of Jefferson


RURAL CHILD CARE PLANNING GRANT PROGRAM

4
GRANTS

\$80,000
AWARDED

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 toward addressing child care challenges. Funding from the program empowers communities to assess their current child care environment and develop strategies.

- City of Holy Cross
- Rock Rapids Kids Club
- Hardin County Conservation
- Spencer Industries Foundation



“ WE HAVE DIFFERENT CHALLENGES THAT MAKE IT EXCEPTIONALLY DIFFICULT TO CONSTRUCT WORKFORCE HOUSING AND INSTEAD RELY ON REHABILITATION. FUNDING FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RURAL HOUSING READINESS ASSESSMENT PROGRAM GAVE HUMBOLDT A CLEAR DIRECTION ON HOUSING REHABILITATION, PROVIDED TOOLS AND FUNDING FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND GATHERED COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR THIS EFFORT.”

Cole Bockelmann
City Administrator
Humboldt, IA

RURAL BOOST GRANT PROGRAM

1
GRANT

\$10,000
AWARDED

\$15,000
TOTAL PROJECT
COSTS

The Rural Building Ownership and Organization by Strengthening Teams (BOOST) program aims to provide teams of experts to assist passionate community and business leaders in developing intentional plans for next-step growth. This pilot program was designed for rural communities, nonprofits or employers to receive personalized technical assistance for identifying and implementing action steps to launch into the next stage of success. Rural BOOST is designed to assist communities or businesses that have plateaued or hit an unexpected challenge, to gain momentum for new growth. The applicants and steering committees are committed to leading a transformation in their communities. Rural BOOST dispatches a team of 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. A second application period will open in early 2025.

- Keokuk County / Sigourney

IOWA UNITED FIRST AID PILOT PROGRAM

3
GRANTS

\$150,000
AWARDED

\$415,208
TOTAL PROJECT
COSTS

The Iowa United First Aid pilot program, in its second year, 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 and vast geographic area, this pilot supports three communities to leverage GPS-location technology with trained volunteers to decrease the immediate response time and stabilize emergencies, while coordinating with emergency assistance. Funding provides training and equipment to volunteers. Each pilot community received a \$50,000 award in 2023. The pilot was expanded in 2024 when the three pilot communities received an additional \$50,000 to replenish volunteer supplies and extend their service contract with the NowForce application service provider. As of October 2024, the three pilot communities had trained and equipped 50 volunteers who had responded to more than 100 calls for assistance for emergencies that included, but are not limited to, falls, chest pain, overdoses, choking and hemorrhaging.

“ FOR CAMBRIDGE THE BOOST GRANT HAS INCREASED COMMUNICATIONS AND INSPIRED BOTH CITY LEADERS AND RESIDENTS TO 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, CAPITALIZE ON ITS RESOURCES AND DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN.”

Barb McBreen
City Council Member
Cambridge, IA



// MANNING CITY PARK'S NEW EQUIPMENT THAT FEATURES PLAY AREAS FOR PEOPLE OF ALL ABILITIES AND RUBBER SURFACING HAS BEEN A GAME CHANGER. IT'S ALREADY PROVEN TO BE VERY POPULAR, AND IT'S ENCOURAGING TO SEE HOW MANY MORE PEOPLE THE PARK SERVES NOW THAN IT COULD BEFORE. AND THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING. MOMENTUM IS STRONG TO KEEP MAKING IMPROVEMENTS TO MAKE THE PARK EVEN MORE ENJOYABLE FOR PEOPLE OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES."

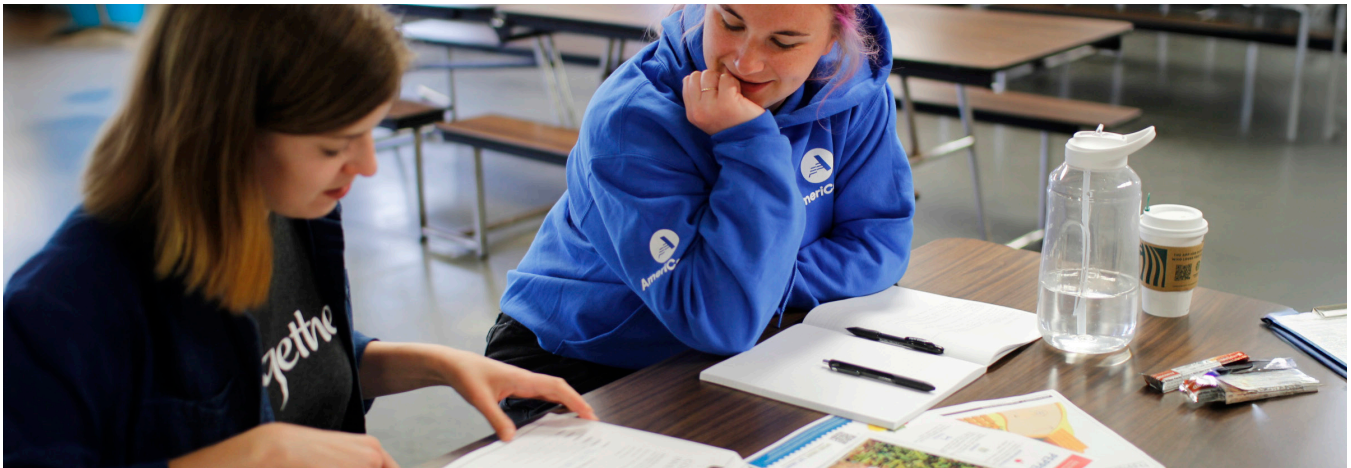
Dawn Meyer
City Clerk/Administrator
Rural Enrichment Grant Recipient
Manning, IA



INITIATIVES CONNECTED TO EMPOWER RURAL IOWA

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 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 AmeriCorps members in Woodbine supporting IGNITE Pathways by designing and implementing personalized career pathway experiences for high school students and AmeriCorps members serving at LINK Grinnell, building capacity and enhancing summer educational programming for school-age children.

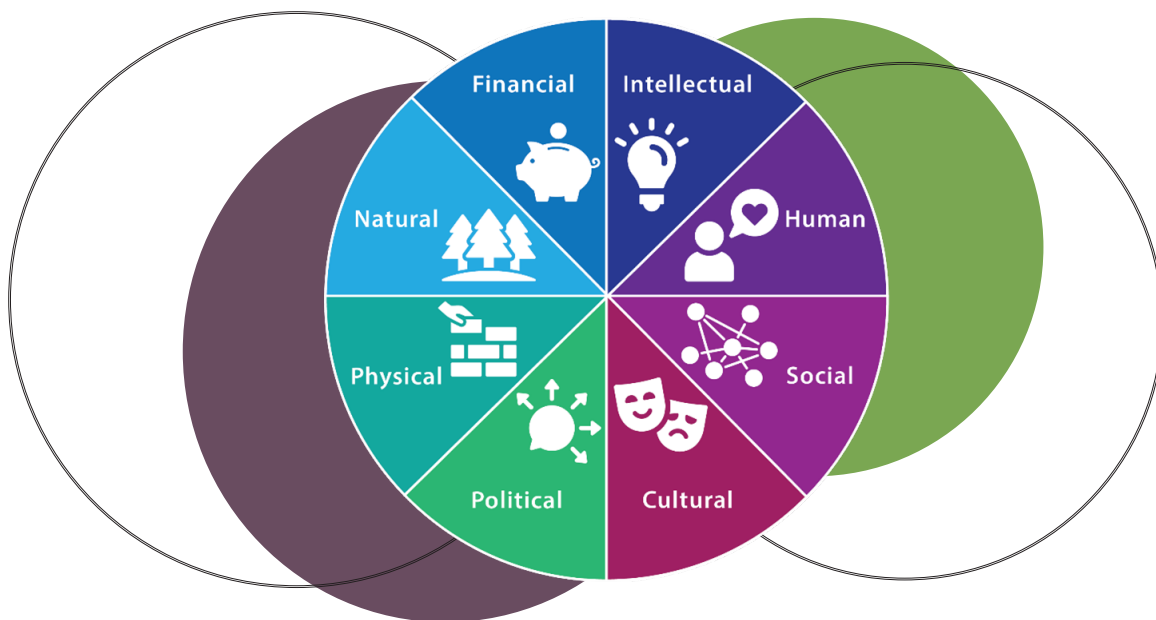


Leadership Exchange

The annual Leadership Exchange is an educational event intended to bolster existing leadership programs, support a statewide network of program leaders and empower communities to grow local leaders. In 2024, the event was handed off to the Iowa Rural Development Council, with support provided by the Center for Rural Revitalization and Leadership Iowa. The fifth-annual event, which took place in Perry, featured two days of strategies for elevating local leadership; roundtable discussions on alumni engagement and measures of success; and skill development for building influence. Existing leadership program directors and managers from across the state shared best practices for strengthening existing programs, and, additionally, communities or organizations interested in starting their own programs or fostering leadership development attended to learn from statewide experts. Along with facilitated breakout sessions, the event included a Working Genius session with Libby Roberts from ATW Training Solutions in Urbandale; a discussion on civility led by Tabitha Choquette from The Robert D. and Billie Ray Center at Drake University in Des Moines; and a session on personal confidence with Dr. Claire Muselman, a Drake professor.

Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition

The Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition was formed as member organizations — separately working in this space — recognized the value of pooling resources, expertise and ultimately working together to create sustainable solutions. The coalition is a collaborative initiative of the Governor’s Empower Rural Iowa initiative, the Iowa Rural Development Council, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, the Institute for Decision Making at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, the University of Iowa College of Public Health in Iowa City and Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield. The coalition has designed and is deploying a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to assist with improving rural vitality. Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework, pioneered by the Rural Policy Research Institute and other scholars, defines wealth as more than just financial means, and takes a comprehensive approach to identify the assets and gaps in a community. The coalition selected two pilot communities, Van Buren County and Manchester, in April of 2024. Over a two- to three-year period, the coalition will collaborate with the communities to explore the interconnectedness of the wealth capitals; develop and implement plans that build on assets and identify solutions specific to their needs; and create ripple effects that improve the overall health and well-being of their residents.



Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant Program

The Iowa Department of Management Division of Information Technology administers the Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant program, which is designed to reduce or eliminate areas in Iowa that are unserved or underserved by broadband service. Leveraging federal funds and public and private partnerships where possible, the program awards grants to communications service providers that reduce or eliminate targeted service areas by installing broadband infrastructure that facilitates broadband service in targeted service areas. The most recent Notice of Funding Availability (#008) made available up to \$148,960,000 for broadband expansion in Iowa in late 2023. The process for Notice of Funding Availability (#009) will begin in 2025, with an anticipated \$400 million available for broadband projects.

Iowa Center for Employee Stock Ownership

Drake University Law School, Des Moines

Empower Rural Iowa and the Iowa Economic Development Authority are founding members of the Iowa Center for Employee Ownership (IA-CEO) Advisory Council, organized and staffed by ADVANCE IOWA at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. The council is comprised of employee-owned business leaders, trade associations, government executives, ranking academic officials and professional advisers who advocate for the advancement of shared ownership in 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, a strong workforce and vibrant communities. As part of this initiative, Empower Rural Iowa partnered with Drake University Law School’s Entrepreneurial/Transactional Clinic in Des Moines to develop informational materials, training opportunities and policy recommendations in support of IA-CEO’s mission. During 2024, Drake Law School developed and executed a plan for effective distribution of the legal forms regarding formation and operation of an employee-owned cooperative, and developed two Continuing Legal Education presentations focused on employee ownership.

Workforce Housing Tax Incentive Program

32 AWARDS

\$18.6 MILLION AWARDED

706 UNITS

The Iowa Economic Development Authority’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 portion of the tax credit allocation is set aside for small cities, for eligible projects within the 88-least populous counties in Iowa. In 2024, the \$35 million appropriation was split equally between urban areas and small cities. In addition, carryforward from unused credits was awarded to small cities, increasing the small cities awards to \$18.6 million. Since inception of the program in 2015, more than 5,000 units have been completed or are under construction in small cities.

Community Catalyst Building Remediation Program

34 AWARDS

\$3.4 MILLION AWARDED

\$13.1 MILLION
TOTAL PROJECT COSTS

Through the Community Catalyst Building Remediation program (regular, emergency and theater), the Iowa Economic Development Authority provides grants to communities for the redevelopment, rehabilitation or deconstruction of buildings to stimulate economic growth or reinvestment in the community. Of the 34 awards, 10 were made to cities with populations less than 1,500 (totaling \$1 million) and 21 to cities with populations between 1,500 and 20,000 (totaling \$2.1 million).

APPENDIX

Annual Appropriation For Empower Rural Iowa Initiatives

FY'24	\$709,956	\$700,000 APPROPRIATED	\$9,956 CARRYOVER	\$707,366 OBLIGATED
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Innovation Grants	\$100,000
Housing Assessment Grants	\$70,000
Child Care Planning Grants	\$30,000
Enrichment Grants	\$194,366
Scale-Up Grants	\$60,000
Leadership Bootcamp Grants	\$3,000
Iowa United First Aid	\$150,000
Rural BOOST Grants	\$20,000
Drake University Law School	\$70,000
Leadership Exchange & Bootcamp Event	\$10,000

FY'25	\$761,156	\$700,000 APPROPRIATED	\$61,156 CARRYOVER	\$752,138 OBLIGATED
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Innovation Grants	\$276,138
Housing Assessment Grants	\$100,000
Child Care Planning Grants	\$80,000
Leadership Bootcamp Grants	\$1,000
Iowa United First Aid	\$200,000
Rural BOOST Grants	\$40,000
Drake University Law School	\$30,000
Leadership Exchange & Bootcamp Event	\$5,000
Employee Ownership Tech Assistance Grant Program	\$20,000

Task Force Meeting Locations

Five communities hosted task force meetings in 2024. 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.

YEAR	CITY	COUNTY
2021	Atlantic	Cass
2021	Greenfield	Adair
2021	Iowa Falls	Hardin
2021	Oskaloosa	Mahaska
2021	Storm Lake	Buena Vista
2022	Decorah	Winneshiek
2022	Fort Madison	Lee
2022	Jefferson	Greene
2022	Knoxville	Marion
2022	Monticello	Jones
2022	Nevada	Story
2022	Walnut	Pottawattamie
2022	Winterset	Madison
2023	Alleman	Polk
2023	Creston	Union
2023	Grinnell	Poweshiek
2023	Pocahontas	Pocahontas
2023	Webster City	Hamilton
2023	West Bend	Kossuth/Palo Alto
2024	Madrid	Boone
2024	Ames	Story
2024	Pella	Marion
2024	Sheffield	Franklin
2024	Manchester	Delaware

Previous ERI Annual Reports

[December 2022](#)

[December 2023](#)

IOWA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
Center for Rural Revitalization

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