



WELCOME FROM CO-CHAIRS

The Governor's Empower Rural lowa (ERI) initiative marked a year of exciting changes. With a continued focus on innovation and rural community development, ERI launched a new grant program to expand housing options in Iowa's small towns. The program prioritized communities demonstrating measurable results and proposing creative, replicable approaches to address local housing needs.

ERI also is working toward the thoughtful and sustainable expansion of the lowa United First Aid program, broadening the reach of trained volunteers equipped to provide immediate, lifesaving assistance to neighbors in distress.

Leadership development remains a cornerstone of ERI's mission, connecting individuals and communities to resources and funding that support growth. Through the Building Ownership and Organization by Strengthening Teams program, task force members and partners share experiences and expertise to cultivate a statewide network of rural leaders.

Together, these efforts underscore ERI's ongoing commitment to helping lowa's rural communities thrive.

Chris Cournoger

Chris Cournoyer

Co-Chair

Carla Eysink

Co-Chair

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Lt. Gov. Chris Cournoyer

Co-Chair

Carla Eysink Co-Chair Pella

David Barker

Iowa City

James Hoelscher

Cedar Falls

Katie LaBree Aplington Jenae Sikkink

Pella

Kimberly Tiefenthaler

Carroll

Task Force Members*

David Barker Donna Boss

Theresa Hildreth
James Hoelscher
Andrew Hoppmann
Adam Koppes
Katie LaBree
Deb Lucht

Shalimar Mazetis

Erin McCaulley David Miller Ashley Moyer Jason Neises

Ethan Pitt

Jenna Ramsey

Mark Reinig

Jenae Sikkink

Mindy Stalker

Krista Tedrow

Jim Thompson

Kimberly Tiefenthaler

Brian Waller

Troy Weary

Rick Young

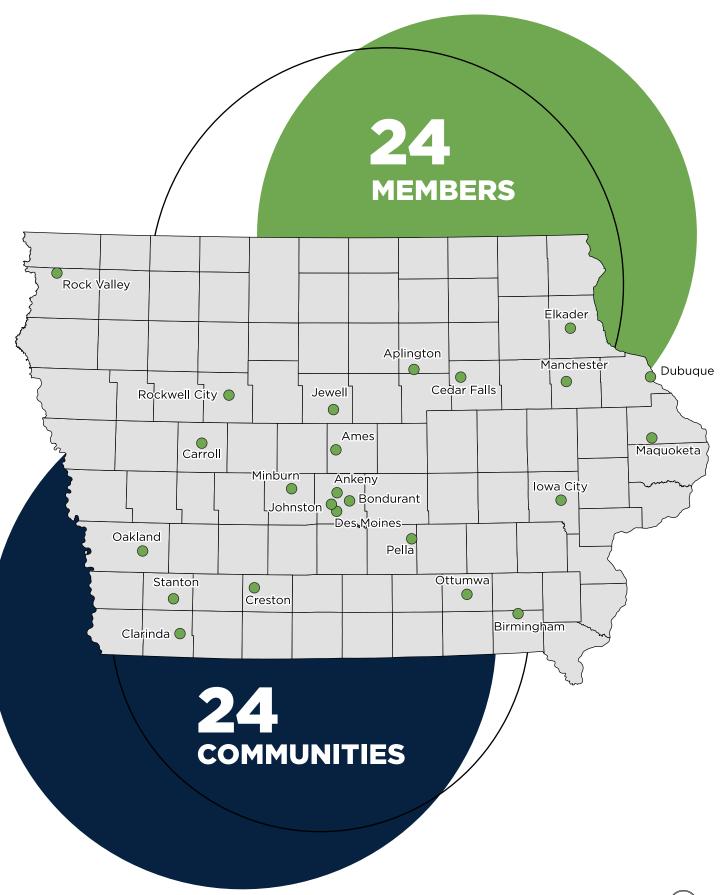
Staff

Sacha Wise

Iowa Economic Development Authority

^{*}Task force members effective September 1, 2025. See a full listing of members that served in 2025 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 the lieutenant governor 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 shortages, business transition planning and entrepreneurship, leadership development, creating welcoming communities, attracting and retaining residents or workers, and financing and leveraging broadband connectivity.

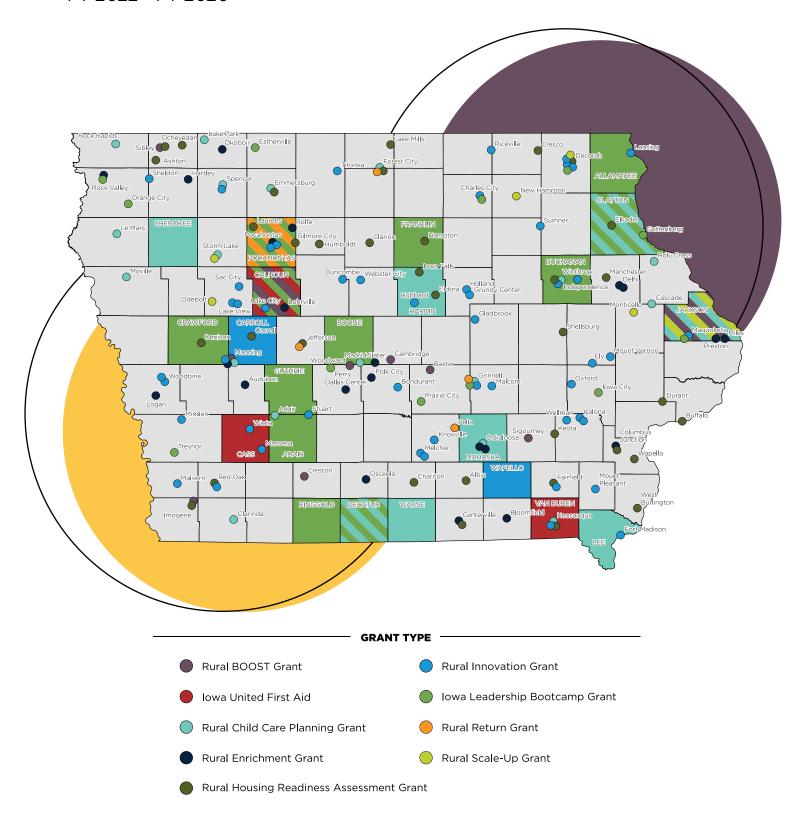
On October 19, 2023, Reynolds signed Executive Order No. 11 aimed at updating the ERI initiative. The new executive order followed the natural development of ERI through some strategic changes to purpose, operations and organization. Changes included a focus on functioning as a start-up incubator for innovative rural policy, allowing ERI to work with multiple stakeholders across the state to 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 reducing membership from 66 appointees to 25 and going from three task forces to one committee.

Since its inception, ERI has successfully crafted policies and programs that positively impact rural communities through grant funding, creative programming and advocacy that drives investment, growth and connectivity to rural lowa. ERI is co-chaired by Lt. Gov. Chris Cournoyer and Carla Eysink, representing the IRDC and appointed by the governor.

The Center for Rural Revitalization, housed within the Iowa Economic Development Authority, 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 2022 - FY 2026





RURAL INNOVATION GRANT: HOUSING 2.0



\$300,000 AWARDED

\$1,191,608TOTAL PROJECT COSTS

The Rural Innovation Grant program supports creative, nontraditional ideas that address current issues and challenges facing rural communities, and are associated with the themes of community investment, growth and connection. The fiscal 2026 grant opportunity, Rural Innovation Grant: Housing 2.0, aims to increase available housing stock in rural lowa by leveraging funding programs, driving private investment and rewarding creative solutions. The goal is to provide funds to communities that have demonstrated significant progress on housing initiatives and that propose to bring innovation into implementation with a definitive outcome. Grants were awarded to:

- **Decorah:** Winneshiek County Economic Development and Tourism, in collaboration with Decorah Jobs and the city, plans 18 to 24 energy-efficient homes on a 3.5-acre infill site. With small footprints many featuring second stories the homes will be clustered around shared green spaces and parking to make the most of available land. Designed for households earning 60% to 80% of the area median income, the development addresses a critical workforce housing need.
- Fairfield: In partnership with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, the city will develop a housing pattern book tailored to local building types. The guide will include zoning strategies, design templates and planning tools to support updates and improvements to older homes. As a statewide pilot community, Fairfield will share its model with other towns and engage lowa State University design students to help build future capacity.
- **Kalona:** The city, in partnership with local schools and contractors, will continue an 11-week summer program in which students gain hands-on job skills by building or renovating homes creating affordable homes in the process. Grant funds will help offset construction costs and provide down payment assistance to ensure affordability for households earning less than 80% of the area median income. Funding will also support development of a tool kit to help other rural communities replicate the model.
- **Keosauqua:** Engage Keosauqua will use funding to buy and prepare land for new homes. Partnering with the Van Buren County Community School District construction trades program, the initiative will deliver affordable housing while reducing labor costs by engaging local students and contractors. The project is rooted in community collaboration, local investment and innovative partnerships.
- Red Oak: The city will create a comprehensive property-level database of housing within the central district and floodplain areas. The project will include an action plan that evaluates each property, outlines feasible options within floodplain regulations and sets a course for rehabilitation, redevelopment or reuse. Designed in partnership with lowa State University, Ames, and JEO Consulting Engineers, Ankeny, the initiative will leverage lowa State faculty and student teams alongside JEO's engineering and mapping and data analysis expertise.
- Spencer: Northwest Iowa Corridor Habitat for Humanity will add storm-ready garages and carports featuring safe rooms and backup power to modular homes built through the Homes for Iowa program by inmates at the Newton Correctional Facility. (Homes for Iowa provides hands-on experience in the building trades while supporting rehabilitation and workforce development.) The Spencer project addresses a local need for affordable, resilient housing and offers a model for small-lot rural infill development.

RURAL HOUSING READINESS ASSESSMENT GRANT

6 GRANTS

\$120,000 AWARDED

\$180,000 TOTAL PROJECT COSTS

The Rural Housing Readiness Assessment Grant program helps communities use publicly available data and local insights to guide housing development. In partnership with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Rural Housing Readiness Assessment workshops, the program empowers rural communities to evaluate their current development environment and implement changes – through development codes, local ordinances and housing incentives – that meet their unique needs. Funding supports communities in creating policies and procedures that attract potential developers and promote sustainable housing growth. Recipients are:

- City of Forest City
- · City of Imogene
- City of Lake Mills
- City of Manchester
- City of West Burlington
- Clarion Development Alliance

RURAL CHILD CARE PLANNING GRANT

S60,000 \$90,000 TOTAL PROJECT COSTS

The Rural Child Care Planning Grant program helps rural communities use data and analysis to identify specific child care needs and solutions. Communities assess factors such as market demand, demographics, competition and financial feasibility to determine whether to build new centers, expand existing ones or strengthen in-home provider networks. Through this process, communities gain a clearer understanding of their child care landscape and develop informed strategies to improve access and quality. Program funding equips local leaders with the tools needed to take proactive steps toward sustainable, community-based child care solutions. Recipients are:

- City of Lake Park
- Little Smiles & Company, Adair
- Mahaska Health, Oskaloosa



RURAL BOOST GRANT

1 GRANT \$10,000 AWARDED

\$16,250
TOTAL PROJECT COSTS

The Rural Building Ownership and Organization by Strengthening Teams (BOOST) Grant program connects teams of experts with rural communities, nonprofits and employers to help chart a clear path toward next-step growth. Designed for organizations that have plateaued or faced unexpected challenges, BOOST provides personalized technical assistance and financial support to regain momentum and implement actionable plans. Each BOOST team – typically three to five experts drawn from the Empower Rural lowa task force, the lowa Rural Development Council and the lowa Economic Development Authority – works with a local steering committee to assess conditions, identify assets and outline practical next steps. A second application round will open in early 2026. This year's recipient is:

Manning: The city received BOOST assistance to explore potential reuses for its only vacant
downtown building, a former 52-bed nursing home. The project aims to assess local service gaps
and strategically align needs with spaces – whether existing, newly created or reimagined – to
meet current demands and support sustainable growth for future generations.

"We really benefited from the planning session with the BOOST team, which provided valuable guidance and direction, as well as from the funds utilized to further our land acquisition project. The support from the Rural BOOST Grant has helped us move our goals forward and create new opportunities for local growth."

Josh Earll President Sibley Housing & Development Corporation Sibley, IA



IOWA UNITED FIRST AID PROGRAM

The Iowa United First Aid program leverages technology and trained volunteers to strengthen emergency response in rural areas. Its mission is to provide immediate medical intervention during the critical window between the onset of an emergency and the arrival of traditional ambulance services. Recognizing the resource and distance challenges in rural lowa, the program supports pilot communities (Calhoun, Cass and Van Buren counties) to use GPS-location technology and coordinated volunteer response to decrease reaction times and stabilize emergencies.

Grant funding supports volunteer training and equipment, as well as the annual technology service fee. Each pilot community received \$50,000 in 2023 to launch the program and an additional \$50,000 in 2024 to replenish supplies and extend their technology service contracts. As of September, the three pilot communities had trained and equipped 58 volunteers who collectively responded to nearly 400 emergency calls, including incidents involving falls, cardiac events, overdoses, choking and hemorrhaging.

Program expansion was temporarily paused in 2025 following a strategic planning session led by James Hoelscher from the University of Northern Iowa's Institute for Decision Making. Stakeholders decided to explore alternative technology options to address data collection and long-term sustainability before moving forward with additional sites.

Lt. Gov. Chris Cournoyer, Empower Rural Iowa task force members Theresa Hildreth, James Hoelscher and Shalimar Mazetis, and Empower Rural Iowa Director Sacha Wise presented on the program's development and pilot progress at the National Rural Economic Developers Association annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in November. The group highlighted the program's origins, community partnerships and plans for expansion in 2026.

INITIATIVES CONNECTED TO EMPOWER RURAL IOWA

Iowa Leadership Exchange and Bootcamp

The annual Iowa Leadership Exchange is an educational event designed to strengthen existing leadership programs, build a statewide network of program leaders and empower communities to grow local leaders. Hosted by the Iowa Rural Development Council in partnership with Empower Rural Iowa and Leadership Iowa, the sixth-annual event took place in Indianola in October.

Leadership program directors and managers from across the state – along with communities, organizations and individuals interested in launching new programs or developing the next generation of leaders – participated in breakout sessions on topics including navigating conflict, leveraging artificial intelligence and cultivating servant leadership. The agenda also featured a keynote presentation by Sinikka Waugh, "Empowering Changemakers, One Day at a Time," and a

lunch-and-learn session with Lexi Marek Beeler, "How to Get More Time in Your Day." Waugh is a trainer and coach with the Indianola-based firm Your Clear Next Step, and Beeler, of LMB Consulting, is a project manager and fractional marketing expert serving agriculture and rural-based businesses. Held in conjunction with the Iowa Leadership Exchange, the Iowa Leadership Bootcamp — managed by the Iowa Rural Development Council — is a grant-funded initiative tailored for all-sized communities, cities, counties or nonprofits looking to launch, relaunch or significantly refresh a local leadership development program. The program provides training, mentorship and a \$1,000 Iowa Leadership Bootcamp Grant to help build sustainable, community-driven initiatives that strengthen leadership capacity across Iowa.

lowa Leadership Bootcamp Grant recipients send a team to attend a half-day session immediately preceding the Iowa Leadership Exchange and then join the Exchange event for continued learning and program development. Bootcamp grants are supported by multiple funding sources, with those awarded to rural communities and organizations funded through Empower Rural Iowa.

The 2025 Empower-funded Iowa Leadership Bootcamp Grant recipients were Ringgold County Development Corporation and Allamakee County Economic Development and Tourism.

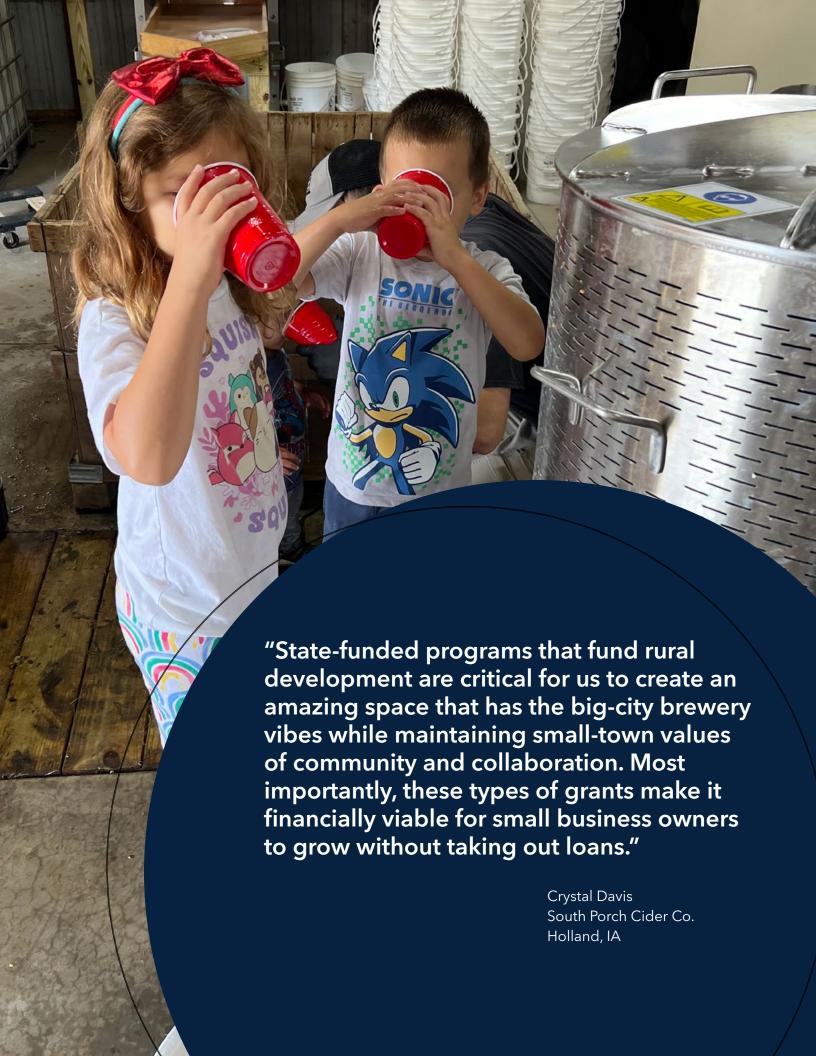
Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition

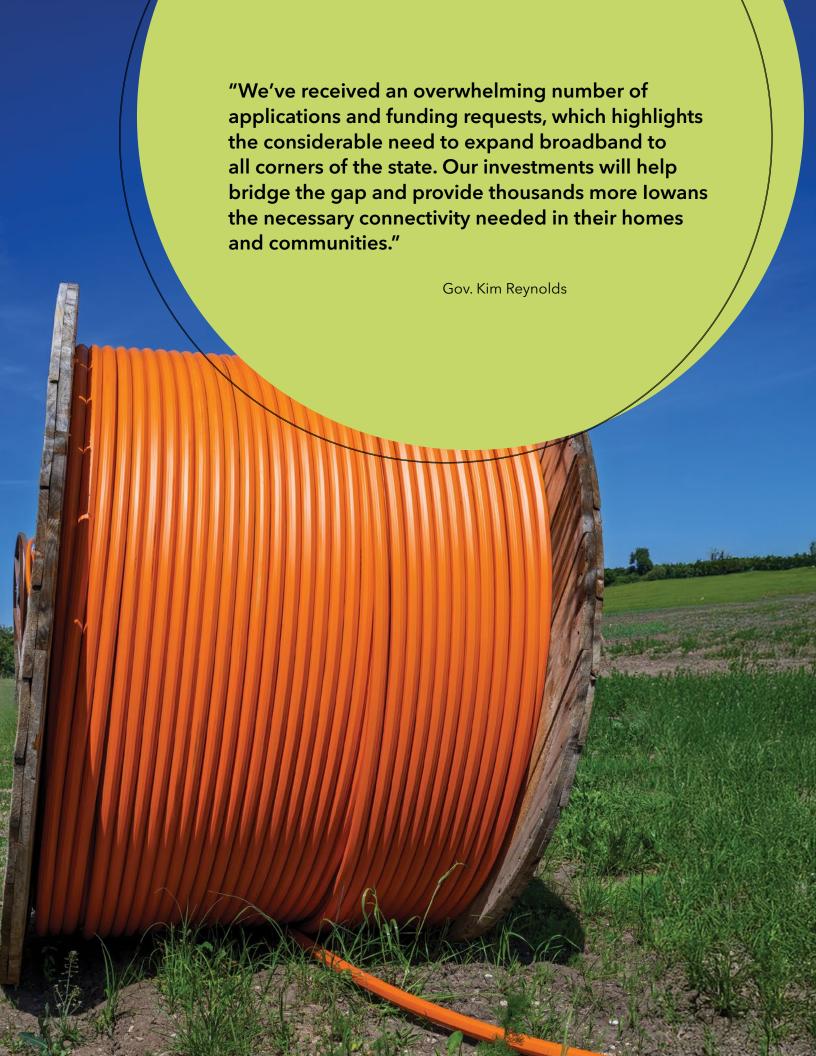
The Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition formed when member organizations – each independently involved in rural development – recognized the value of combining their resources, expertise and efforts to create sustainable, community-driven solutions. The coalition includes the Iowa Rural Development Council, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, the Institute for Decision Making at the University of Northern Iowa, the University of Iowa College of Public Health, Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and the Empower Rural Iowa initiative.

Together, these partners are implementing a comprehensive, evidence-based strategy to strengthen rural vitality statewide. Central to this effort is the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework, developed by the Rural Policy Research Institute and other scholars. The framework broadens the definition of wealth beyond financial assets to encompass a wide range of community resources – helping to identify both strengths and opportunities within rural areas.

Over the next two to three years, coalition partners will work closely with two pilot communities – Van Buren County and the city of Manchester – to:

- Explore the interconnectedness of various forms of community "wealth capitals"
- Develop and implement tailored strategies that build on local assets and address specific challenges
- Foster ripple effects that enhance overall health, well-being and long-term vitality





Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant

127
PROJECTS

\$221 MILLION AWARDED

\$347 MILLIONTOTAL PROJECT COSTS

Administered by the Iowa Department of Management's Division of Information Technology, the Empower Rural Iowa Broadband Grant program works to reduce or eliminate unserved and underserved areas across the state. The program leverages federal funding and public-private partnerships to expand broadband infrastructure, enabling reliable, high-speed internet service in targeted areas.

Through Notice of Funding Availability #009, using Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment funds, up to \$400 million was made available for broadband expansion in Iowa. The Notice of Intent to Award, released September 4, announced 127 projects receiving more than \$221 million in grant funding, representing more than \$347 million in total project costs.

Workforce Housing Tax Credit

40 AWARDS \$21.2 MILLION AWARDED

737 UNITS

Administered by the Iowa Economic Development Authority, the Workforce Housing Tax Credit program provides tax benefits to developers constructing or rehabilitating housing in Iowa communities. The program prioritizes projects that repurpose abandoned, vacant or dilapidated properties, as well as owner-occupied single-family homes.

In 2025, half of the program's \$35 million appropriation was reserved for small cities – those located within lowa's 88 least-populous counties. The remaining half was competitively scored between urban and small cities, resulting in small cities receiving \$21.2 million. Since the program's inception in 2015, more than 5,700 housing units have been completed or are under construction in small cities across lowa.

Community Catalyst Building Remediation Program

23 AWARDS

\$3.55 MILLION AWARDED

\$9.89 MILLION

The Iowa Economic Development Authority's Community Catalyst Building Remediation program – including regular, emergency and theater projects – provides grants to communities for the redevelopment, rehabilitation or deconstruction of buildings to stimulate economic growth and reinvestment. Of the 23 awards, 10 went to cities with populations under 1,500, totaling \$1.15 million, and 13 went to cities with populations between 1,500 and 20,000, totaling \$2.4 million.

Drake University Law School

APPENDIX AND RESOURCES

Iowa Leadership Exchange and Bootcamp event

Annual Appropriation For Empower Rural Iowa Initiative

FY'25	\$758,370	\$700,000 APPROPRIATED	\$58,370 CARRYOVER	\$609,762 OBLIGATED
Rural Innovation	on Grants		\$343,762	
Rural Housing	Readiness Assessme		\$100,000	
Rural Child Ca	re Planning Grants		\$80,000	
Iowa Leadersh	nip Bootcamp Grants		\$1,000	
Rural BOOST	Grants		\$50,000	

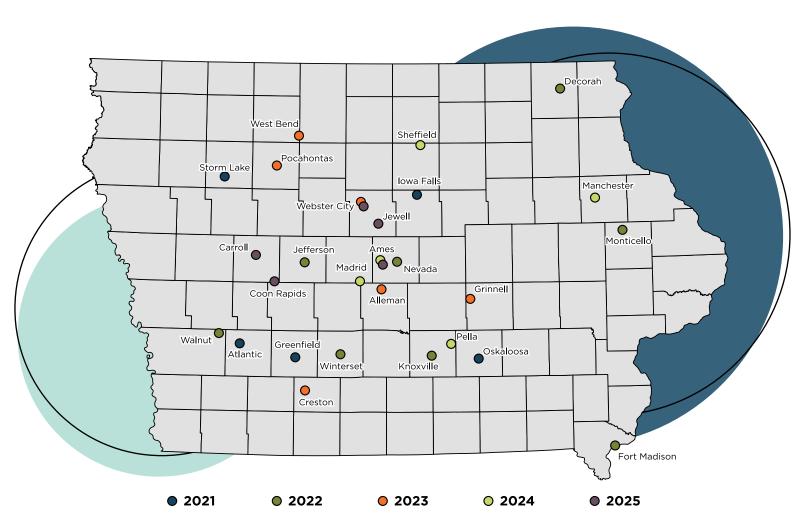
\$30,000

\$5,000

FY'26	\$839,755	\$700,000 APPROPRIATED	\$139 , CARRYO		\$812,000 OBLIGATED
Rural Innovation	on Grants				\$300,000
Iowa United First Aid					\$195,000
Rural Housing Readiness Assessment Grants					\$120,000
Rural Child Care Planning Grants					\$60,000
Iowa Leadership Bootcamp Grants (rural recipients)					\$2,000
Rural BOOST Grants					\$40,000
Iowa Leadersh	nip Exchange and Boo		\$5,000		
Rural Business Initiative					\$90,000

Task Force Meeting Locations

Task force meetings were held in five communities in 2025: Jewell, Ames, Carroll, Coon Rapids and Webster City. 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.



Previous ERI Annual Reports

ERI Annual Report (December 2022)

ERI Annual Report (December 2023)

ERI Annual Report (December 2024)

IOWA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITYCenter for Rural Revitalization

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