

Strategies for Rural Development

New Mexico is the fifth-largest state in the nation in terms of land area and, somewhat conversely, it is the 36th-most populous state. This means that New Mexico is largely rural, with 26 out of 33 counties considered “frontier counties” (six or fewer people per square mile). While a majority of the population in the state lives in three urban areas (Albuquerque, Las Cruces and Santa Fe), New Mexico maintains a significant population base that honors its rural roots. Among both tribal and Hispanic communities, a rural way of life remains fundamental to a cultural connection with the landscape of the state and to the values that many families honor and maintain. In addition, many in our metropolitan areas are connected to rural traditions through familial and other connections.

Strategies and approaches that work in the state’s urban areas often fail in other parts of New Mexico, because of the geographic challenges implicit with rural landscapes and also because of cultural divides that exist between urban and rural communities. Nonetheless, the cultural, familial and social connections that exist between rural and urban communities provide opportunities to creatively connect with resources, programs and initiatives that have already developed support for work being done in urban areas.

The following specific leverage points have been identified to help focus and drive our grant making within this priority area:

Key Leverage Points

Economic development. High levels of poverty are often pervasive across New Mexico’s rural areas, with the trend becoming increasingly pronounced with the consolidation and decline of land-based activities, including agriculture, wood gathering, minding and logging in the last generation. New initiatives that seek to revitalize the most sustainable — and most traditional — land-based practices, including agriculture, in creative ways and support creation of food-based businesses in rural areas among vulnerable populations are of interest to the Foundation. We also support businesses that provide cultural benefit, including those based in the arts. In addition, innovative applications of technology (e.g. video conferencing or new uses of broadband connectivity) that support development of new businesses or enhance operation of existing enterprises are also supported by the Foundation.

Educational advancement. While the state has poor educational outcomes rural areas tend to have more challenges in this area. Rural schools and libraries often lack resources yet also frequently play broader roles in the community as hubs for activity and social cohesion. Strategies that seek to leverage and support the position of these institutions as gathering places and social hubs in rural communities are priorities to the Foundation, as are innovative approaches that integrate “learning by doing” and deep student support into curriculum and practice.

Built environment. Small towns across the state often feature main streets and town centers that have become degraded or populated by decaying buildings or facades. These conditions often discourage a sense of community and vitality. The Foundation cannot support major capital projects, it does support community-informed initiatives and programs that seek to upgrade rural built environments in terms of energy efficiency, revitalization and general community cohesiveness and connectivity.