



NATIONAL 4-H
COUNCIL



Four Mindsets for Funding Economic Mobility in the Black Rural South

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Forewords, National 4-H Council



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I grew up working hard on a family farm in rural Alabama, the epitome of the “Black rural South.” As a first-generation high school graduate, I recognized very early that the pathway to a better life—economic mobility—was through education, specifically a college degree. A fire had already been ignited in me to explore science as a career—something virtually unheard of for a little Black girl in the South. I attribute that fire to two factors. First, I was exposed to science through a 4-H project at my segregated elementary school. Second, I was motivated by the challenge that girls “can’t do math and science.” With the scholarships and support provided by Talladega College and Atlanta University, both historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), I became the first in my family, and, indeed, my community, to earn a college degree and a doctorate. 4-H and these HBCUs, with the support of their generous donors, changed the trajectory of my life. Throughout my more than 35-year career in higher education, I have sought to serve as a role model for Black girls and women and to extol HBCUs as portals to success.

HBCUs play a critical role in the Black rural South. The over 100 HBCUs, primarily located in the Black rural South, have a proven track record of producing Black graduates in all professions and of being tremendous assets for economic development and upward mobility in their communities. Yet these institutions are sorely underutilized and overlooked by corporations and philanthropists seeking to reach Black communities.

This report explores data and uses interpersonal exchanges to identify four mindsets that, if changed, could significantly impact the effectiveness and support of existing institutions, such as HBCUs, already active in the Black rural South. There is tremendous untapped knowledge, expertise, and experience available to help direct resources to close the opportunity gap. This report provides insights and recommendations to help tap these.

As the axiom goes, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” This is a mantra I have heard over the years as a wake-up call to transformational thinking. This report is, likewise, a wake-up call to review and evaluate what we have been doing, the mindsets behind the actions, and the outcomes. We already know that we have not significantly closed the opportunity gap with the actions we have engaged. Let’s take a fresh look at our mindsets and see whether changing those mindsets might lead us to “do something that we have *not* always done.” Perhaps this is the key to getting something new: *progress*.



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All my life, I've heard stories of how the main street of my rural north Louisiana town was once a bustling center of economic and community development. Today, the businesses, job opportunities, and recreational facilities that once fostered thriving families in Ringgold, a town of about 1,300 people, have been replaced with vacant storefronts, workforce underdevelopment, and high youth disconnection rates. Growing up there, I was aware of the disadvantages, but, more importantly, exposed to the profound joys of rural Southern life. My simple upbringing nurtured a deep sense of pride and an obligation to civic engagement. 4-H was the first club I ever joined (it was the only club offered at my elementary school); its positive youth-development programming, coupled with church, school, and community organizing, transformed my life and developed my unwavering zeal for rural America.

The potential for impact and four mindset barriers addressed in this report are not theoretical pondering. Instead, the findings represent the everyday struggles of communities and individuals both historically and systemically underserved. In high school, my peers and I met a restaurant owner from a neighboring city whose wife came from our town. When we inquired why he had not opened a business in our community, he replied, "Because we wouldn't make any money there." While we accepted this explanation at the time, five years later, I wonder about the jobs, work culture, skill training, and social mobility that business, or any consistent investment, could've catalyzed in our town. Later, during the pandemic, Louisiana's Student-of-the-Year competition transitioned to a virtual Zoom platform. Because I lacked quality internet at home, my counselor let me conduct my interview at school. Even so, broadband proved weak, and I had to conduct my interview by phone. I became the first state finalist from my district, not to mention the first winner. In the process, I unintentionally provided an apt example of the broadband access gap.

Despite limited resources, communities like mine work hard to instill in their youth a strong sense of belonging and help them access opportunities. For example, a partnership between our local school board and nearby community colleges has helped hundreds of students in our district graduate high school with college credit, degrees, vocational training, and technical certifications. In addition, for the past 15 years, our parish summer internship program has offered countless teens their first employment opportunity as well as financial management training and networking skills. Imagine how much more of an impact could be made throughout the entire Black rural South if individuals, enterprises, and philanthropic organizations would respond to the recommendations in this report.

The Black rural South offers the greatest potential for community revitalization and youth agency building. This report presents a chance to hear the stories of the challenges on the ground and examine the magnitude of inequities through data, while sharing the power of revolutionary investment and envisioning a nation where all young people can achieve upward mobility. I hope your heart and mind will not only be touched, but moved to action.

Executive Summary

There is a troubling injustice in America’s Black rural South: the same communities that played a disproportionate role in building the nation’s wealth face the highest levels of poverty today. Approximately 30 percent of Black residents in non-metropolitan Southern areas live in poverty—a higher rate than for any other race or ethnic group, urban or non-urban.¹

Such poverty is exceedingly difficult for young people to escape. Of the approximately 200 rural counties in the South with Black populations of 25 percent or more (what we here refer to as the “Black rural South”²), all but two land in the bottom half nationwide for upward mobility for young people.³ And despite the determination of young people in the region and the rich human, social, and cultural capital of their communities, the Black rural South lags behind national averages on many benchmarks, including this one: While over a quarter of the US population lives in the South, only 3 percent of philanthropic dollars nationwide flow to the region,⁴ and only a fraction of that to rural communities of color.

In 2018, The Bridgespan Group partnered with National 4-H Council on a field report, [Social Mobility in Rural America](#). In that report, we identified six factors that may foster economic mobility—the chance to climb the income ladder—present in a subset of rural communities that have been most successful at enabling young people to build pathways out of poverty. We were struck by the common themes across these communities, yet we also know that rural America is not a monolith and that our research touched less than 1 percent of rural counties in the United States. In addition, most of the rural counties featured in our original report that are managing to help their young people transcend poverty do not have meaningfully large Black populations with enduring legacies of slavery.

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- 1 USDA, Economic Research Service, “[Data Show US Poverty Rates in 2019 Higher in Rural Areas than in Urban for Racial/Ethnic Groups](#),” 2019. Non-metropolitan American Indians experience nearly the same levels of poverty.
 - 2 For this report, we’ve used the same definitions we used in our 2018 report, [Social Mobility in Rural America](#), whereby “Black” counties are those with Black populations of 25 percent or more and “rural” counties are those with Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) of 6 or greater. In addition, we have defined “the South” as the following states (numbers of Black rural counties in parentheses): Alabama (18), Arkansas (18), Florida (3), Georgia (44), Louisiana (18), Mississippi (41), North Carolina (15), South Carolina (15), Tennessee (3), and Virginia (18). Four states outside the South also each had one Black rural county, not covered in this report. See the Joint Center’s excellent history of how the Black rural South has been characterized in their report, [An Introduction to the Future of Work in the Black Rural South](#) (February 2020).
 - 3 Bill Breen, Mark McKeag, Luis Ramos, and Mike Soskis, [Social Mobility in Rural America: Insights from Communities Whose Young People Are Climbing the Income Ladder](#), The Bridgespan Group, November 2018.
 - 4 Grantmakers for Southern Progress, “[Philanthropic Action for Structural Change Work in the South](#),” 2020.

Given this context, Bridgespan and National 4-H Council have partnered again to focus squarely on economic mobility in the Black rural South. In our conversations with more than 80 nonprofit leaders; Cooperative Extension staff at historically Black colleges and universities (or HBCUs, including those administering 4-H);⁵ and funders, researchers, and field experts in the region, we found much to be excited about: caring communities and innovative organizations are trying to move the needle on economic mobility for young people. However, we also found that a profound and ubiquitous lack of philanthropic funding hampers these efforts. The Black rural South is at the intersection of three philanthropic funding challenges: rural communities see less funding than their metro counterparts,⁶ the South as a whole has historically been underfunded, and leaders of color receive less funding than white leaders.⁷

Funders with fresh mindsets have a huge and timely opportunity

Throughout our conversations, we heard a palpable sense of urgency for what philanthropy can accomplish if it acts now. Newly available large-scale federal funding has the potential to benefit communities in the Black rural South—if they can find ways to access those dollars. What’s more, a current push for broadband expansion has the potential to connect young people to education and work opportunities if it makes its way to rural Black communities. We also see exciting energy and experimentation across the region from funders and nonprofits alike, including many burgeoning efforts to lift up young people. Indeed, the public dollars and technology are, in theory, available, and innovation is already in play. But funders can play a pivotal role in helping the Black rural South access the available resources and maximize the momentum of this moment.

Tapping into opportunities in the Black rural South requires new thinking, from dispelling framings and misconceptions that deter funding to encouraging mindsets that can help fuel economic mobility for young people.



1. The Black rural South is likely more integral to your philanthropy than it might appear—and worthy of a special look. Whether focused on education, mental health, women’s empowerment, or other issue areas, funders looking to move the needle on equity and economic mobility in the United States cannot be successful without addressing this high-need region—a region closely tied to the country as a whole through migration and wide-reaching public policy. In fact, your funding is likely already affecting the Black rural South: if you’re not focused on it, there’s a chance you’re contributing to an ever-widening divide.

5 4-H youth development is a part of the Cooperative Extension system administered by the nation’s land-grant universities, including land-grant HBCUs.

6 Approximately 7 percent of US grantmaking goes to rural areas (Betsey Russell and Allen Smart, “[Eight Ways Funders Can Engage in Rural Philanthropy](#),” Candid, December 5, 2018).

7 In [Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table](#) (May 2020), Bridgespan and Echoing Green report that the revenues and unrestricted net assets of Black-led organizations are 24 percent smaller and 76 percent smaller, respectively, than white-led organizations.



2. One committed funder *can* make a difference, while field-testing approaches for more enduring change.

Funders intimidated by the scope of the need might instead consider the scope of opportunity. There are many entry points for funding: from strengthening schools to positive youth-development programs, cradle-to-career support to financial service access, broadband to power building, and even direct cash transfers, funders are supporting a range of efforts, every one of which needs more funding to test out which strategies will work best in places of persistent poverty.



3. In the Black rural South, social ROI—the impact a funder achieves with each dollar invested—is high as long as you’re willing to think about impact differently.

Advancing economic mobility in the Black rural South requires depth, not breadth. Funders willing to invest in smaller populations and exercise staying power can reach entire communities and truly change systems. Funders can also help communities connect with public dollars to multiply their impact. Case in point: The Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) estimates that \$9.5 million in philanthropy to CORI has yielded \$169 million in grants (including federal grants) and follow-on capital going directly to the rural communities in which CORI engaged.



4. You have excellent partners for giving in the Black rural South—if you know where to look.

Funding in the Black rural South is highly relational: intermediaries and local leaders can help direct funding with ease. Every foundation, feminist fund, credit union, HBCU, and national network we spoke with centers on being in relationship with communities, earning their trust, and empowering them to achieve their goals. And there are many local Black leaders ready for funding.

The Black rural South is ready

Creating pathways out of poverty for young people in the Black rural South is difficult. But for funders willing to adopt these mindsets, this is an area where even one funder—in fact, especially one funder—can help realize change. And the Black rural South is ready. We see a region hungry for change, and we see funders leaning into the need and promise of the Black rural South.

Introduction

In 2022, the Georgia Resilience and Opportunity (GRO) Fund launched the [In Her Hands initiative](#), providing an average of \$850 per month for 24 months to 650 Black women in several locations in Georgia—no strings attached. This guaranteed income helps women care for themselves and their families, pay down debt, and create their own opportunities. When given to mothers, guaranteed income empowers women to seek the health care, education, extracurricular activities, and other resources that will help their children thrive.

So far, guaranteed income in the United States has largely been concentrated in cities. Initially, GRO followed suit, originating its program in Atlanta’s Old Fourth Ward and opening a second Metro Atlanta site. But as GRO CEO Hope Wollensack shares, her goal “was to do the hard work and go to the hard places,” and the data was taking her to a decidedly non-urban area—Southwest Georgia, where Georgia, Alabama, and Florida meet. Wollensack explains:

Looking at the data, Southwest Georgia is part of a region of the country that had some of the highest cotton production for a sustained period of time. Undoubtedly, this region has contributed immeasurably to the wealth of this country, particularly the great-grandparents of many of the people in the community we work with today. To look at the divestment that’s happened and the economic and financial insecurity that’s so pervasive, especially among Black communities there, is not just upsetting, it is an injustice.

Wollensack and GRO followed the data, launching in Southwest Georgia’s Clay, Randolph, and Terrell counties. Wollensack knew working in rural counties would require her to exercise different muscles—from building trust, finding staff, and getting the word out to securing funding. “People tend to donate to things that are in their area,” she says. Many Atlanta funders have a mandate to support Metro Atlanta, a phenomenon that has no equivalent in rural areas. (“National funders, I think, probably have a huge role to play here,” Wollensack notes.) But GRO did the hard work, and Southwest Georgia overenrolled, quickly becoming GRO’s largest location.

GRO is just one of the innovative organizations trying to support upward economic mobility—the possibility that children will grow up to earn more than their parents—in communities with sizable Black populations in the rural South, where the legacies of slavery, extractive economies, and systemic racism live on. Of the approximately 200 rural counties in the South with Black populations of 25 percent or more, all but two land in the bottom half nationwide for upward mobility for young people.⁸ Home to over 90 percent

⁸ Bill Breen, Mark McKeag, Luis Ramos, and Mike Soskis, [Social Mobility in Rural America: Insights from Communities Whose Young People Are Climbing the Income Ladder](#), The Bridgespan Group, November 2018.

of Black Americans living in rural communities,⁹ the Black rural South lags behind national averages on many benchmarks, including this one: only 3 percent of philanthropic dollars nationwide flow to the Southeast,¹⁰ and only a fraction of that to rural communities of color.

To be sure, the Black rural South may lack philanthropic capital, but it is rich with human, social, and cultural capital. Informal support systems—churches, neighbors, community leaders—also weave a social fabric.

Why does a region with so much opportunity for funders see such little investment? The Black rural South is at the intersection of three philanthropic funding challenges: rural communities see less funding than their metropolitan counterparts,¹¹ the South as a whole has historically been underfunded, and leaders of color receive less funding than white leaders.¹²

This is an important moment

In speaking with more than 80 individuals focused on the Black rural South, including 23 funders, 16 field experts and researchers, 27 nonprofit leaders, and 12 Cooperative Extension staff of historically Black colleges and universities (or HBCUs, including those administering 4-H), we heard a palpable urgency for what philanthropy can accomplish if it acts now. Beyond the tremendous need in the region, there are timely opportunities for funders to have an oversized impact. Here's why.

Newly available large-scale federal funding, with a greater focus on equitable distribution, could benefit the Black rural South. Recent economic-development legislation, such as the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, has the potential to benefit rural communities—if they can find ways to access those dollars.

Broadband truly does have the potential to bridge gaps in access to the Black rural South. Many people discussed their hopes for technology. According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 38 percent of Black Americans in the rural South say they lack internet access, compared to 23 percent of white Americans in the same counties.¹³ This handicap can keep Black young people from turning in assignments or applying for jobs.¹⁴

Funders are getting better at coordinating with and supporting the energy and experimentation happening in the region. Our conversations uncovered many nonprofits, community foundations, field leaders, educators, and other organizations innovating and pursuing promising efforts across the Black rural South, including newly formed initiatives to coordinate community support.

9 Fozia Ajmal and Janice C. Probst, [Social Determinants of Health Among the Rural African American Population](#), Rural and Minority Health Research Center, July 2019.

10 Grantmakers for Southern Progress, [Philanthropic Action for Structural Change Work in the South](#), 2020.

11 Approximately 7 percent of US grantmaking goes to rural areas (Betsey Russell and Allen Smart, [“Eight Ways Funders Can Engage in Rural Philanthropy.”](#) Candid, December 5, 2018).

12 In [Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table](#) (May 2020), Bridgespan and Echoing Green report that the revenues and unrestricted net assets of Black-led organizations are 24 percent smaller and 76 percent smaller, respectively, than white-led organizations.

13 Dominique Harrison, [Affordability and Availability: Expanding Broadband in the Black Rural South](#), Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, July 2021.

14 Ibid.

Funders with fresh mindsets will see past the challenges to the profound opportunity

There are challenges in the Black rural South, of course, including a checkered history of philanthropic initiatives, deep political complexity, and generations of unmet needs. But one of the biggest challenges is the disconnect between how funders perceive the Black rural South and the actual opportunities that exist. Tapping into the opportunities in the region requires that funders shift their mindsets, flipping the script on some of the more prevalent ways of thinking that currently deter funding toward mindsets that encourage investment.

Four Mindset Shifts for Funding Economic Mobility in the Black Rural South

From this mindset ...

Funding the Black rural South may be a worthwhile cause for others, but it is not necessarily tied to my philanthropic goals.

The challenges in the Black rural South are so strong that there's little my philanthropy can actually accomplish.

Since I can't reach as many people in the Black rural South, my limited resources may be more effective elsewhere.

There just aren't a lot of fundable nonprofits in the Black rural South aligned to my philanthropic goals.

... to this mindset



The Black rural South is likely more integral to my philanthropy than it might appear—and worthy of a special look.



One funder *can* make a difference in the Black rural South, while proving out approaches for more enduring change.



The social ROI in the Black rural South is high as long as I'm willing to think about impact differently.



There are excellent partners for my giving in the Black rural South—if I know where to look.

Source: The Bridgespan Group

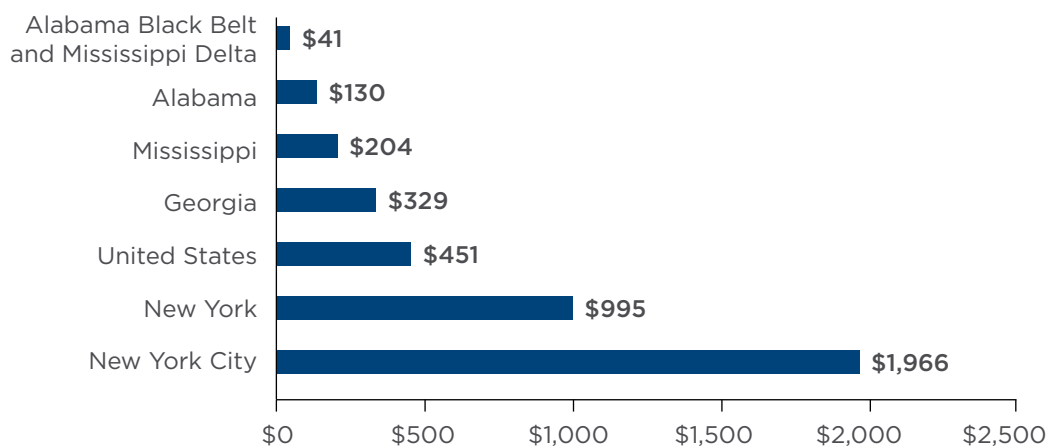
In the following pages, we explore these mindsets—and, along the way, offer examples of others who are doing the work and of ways for any funder to join in. Before we do that, however, we give credit to those who have preceded us in researching and working in the Black rural South. This report mentions many of them and links to their important work.

We're grateful for all the previous work that made this research possible and acknowledge the many voices that informed our understanding, both directly and indirectly, of the Black rural South.

The Black rural South receives less philanthropic funding per capita than other regions

While there have been ebbs and flows of funder interest, the Black rural South,¹⁵ which itself has a small philanthropic base, may not be on the radar of many national and regional funders, who typically reside in major cities. In their seminal series, *As the South Grows*, Grantmakers for Southern Progress and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy reported that, from 2010 through 2014, foundation funding per person was as follows:¹⁶

Per capita grantmaking, 2010-2014



Source: Data from the 2017 report *As the South Grows: Strong Roots*, from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and Grantmakers for Southern Progress; adapted by The Bridgespan Group.

Clearly, there is much more investment in places like New York City than in the South. But even within Alabama or Mississippi, there are big discrepancies in investment between places with the highest Black rural population—the Black Belt and Delta—and other areas. By funding elsewhere and not in the Black rural South, philanthropy actually contributes to a wide and growing divide.

15 For this report, we've used the same definitions we used in our 2018 report, *Social Mobility in Rural America*, whereby "Black" counties are those with Black populations of 25 percent or more and "rural" counties are those with Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) of 6 or greater. In addition, we have defined "the South" as the following states (numbers of Black rural counties in parentheses): Alabama (18), Arkansas (18), Florida (3), Georgia (44), Louisiana (18), Mississippi (41), North Carolina (15), South Carolina (15), Tennessee (3), and Virginia (18). Four states outside the South also each had one Black rural county, not covered in this report. See the Joint Center's excellent history of how the Black rural South has been characterized in their report, *An Introduction to the Future of Work in the Black Rural South* (February 2020).

16 Ryan Schlegel and Stephanie Peng, *As the South Grows: On Fertile Soil*, Grantmakers for Southern Progress and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, April 2017.

About this report

In 2018, Bridgespan partnered with National 4-H Council on a field report, [Social Mobility in Rural America](#), that identified factors that may foster economic mobility—a chance to climb the income ladder—among young people in rural America. For that report, we went where the data on mobility took us, which was mostly to predominantly white communities. While that report focused on communities that were succeeding in building pathways out of poverty, many rural communities are still struggling. Economic mobility is particularly low in the Black rural South.

Given this context, Bridgespan and National 4-H Council partnered again to focus squarely on economic mobility in the Black rural South. 4-H comes to this work as an organization rooted in rural communities and land-grant historically Black colleges and universities.¹⁷ 4-H has its own unique model of sharing ideas and resources with communities and promotes economic mobility for all young people, including those in underserved rural communities. Meanwhile, as an advisor to nonprofits and funders, Bridgespan has worked with many organizations that aspire to support communities in the Black rural South and has heard interest from funders looking in this area.

As with our previous report, we found communities in the Black rural South are dedicated to their young people. The context in the Black rural South is very different from, say, a rural community in North Dakota; the factors we identified in our earlier report aren't enough to pave pathways out of poverty in communities fighting more than 250 years of historic and enduring disadvantage and disinvestment. Many areas with the lowest economic mobility today overlap with the areas where slavery and sharecropping extracted value from the land and created a racial wealth and opportunity gap that has compounded over generations.¹⁸ The same communities that played a disproportionate role in building America's wealth face the highest levels of poverty today. Indeed, an estimated 40 percent of Black children under the age of 18 in the deep South experience poverty¹⁹—and generational and ongoing underinvestment by the public, private, and social sectors makes it extremely difficult for them to transcend it.

In another recent report, [Unlocking Social Progress by Addressing Structural Racism](#), Bridgespan and the [Racial Equity Institute](#) laid out how current US social, economic, and political systems are designed to perpetuate and reinforce this gap. As a result, race is one of the most reliable predictors of life outcomes. [Maps of US health, education, and employment data](#)—and many other wellness factors related to economic mobility—show an intersection of poor outcomes for nonwhite rural communities, mostly in the South. Even when Black and white boys grow up next to each other, Black boys fare worse than their white neighbors in 99 percent of the country.²⁰

17 Kittrina Thompson, “[4-H Celebrates 1890 Land-Grant Universities](#),” February 01, 2018.

18 Thor Berger, “[Places of Persistence: Slavery and the Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States](#),” National Library of Medicine, July 3, 2018.

19 The Annie E. Casey Kids Count Data Center, “[Children in Poverty by Age Group and Race and Ethnicity in the United States](#),” 2022.

20 Emily Badger, Claire Cain Miller, Adam Pearce, and Kevin Quealy, “[Extensive Data Shows Punishing Reach of Racism for Black Boys](#),” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2018.



MINDSET #1:

The Black rural South is likely more integral to my philanthropy than it might appear—and worthy of a special look

Many funders focused on economic mobility may not see a need to consider the Black rural South as a distinct opportunity worthy of their attention. Or, if they do, investing there may seem like a worthwhile cause for others but an overextension for them. We believe if you're looking to move the needle on economic mobility in the United States, this region is key to achieving your mission.

The fortunes of the Black rural South are closely tied to cities, states, and the country as a whole

MDC Senior Fellow (and Bridgespan Knowledge Advisory Board member) David Dodson recalls speaking with a group of middle schoolers in rural Louisiana in the 1990s, when Atlanta was preparing to host the Olympics. When Dodson asked them about their plans for the future, 40 or 50 percent said they aimed to go to college. Dodson asked the other kids, “So, what do the rest of you plan to do?” *Every one of them* planned to move to Atlanta. Dodson explains:

The Black rural poor very easily becomes the Black urban poor. If you look at why parts of Atlanta or Memphis are as poor and distressed as they are, they're very often that way because people have migrated from the rural South without skills, connections, relationships. So, getting to the source of the problem in a place where very few of the systems of uplift are present and operate is worthy of priority attention.

Beyond the perceived opportunities in cities, family ties also connect rural folks with cities across the United States, mirroring the distant social ties created during the Great Migration.²¹ Whether for jobs or social connections, migration patterns knit many cities and rural areas into larger ecosystems.²² Economic progress in the Black rural South, therefore, has ripple effects on Black economic mobility throughout the country.

Perhaps the clearest link between economic mobility in the Black rural South and the nation is the concentration of need. “If equity is in your mission and vision statement and you don't have a rural BIPOC strategy, you've missed the mark,” says Justin Burch, president and CEO of Mississippi's Washington County Economic Alliance. “The data tells

21 Between 1916 and 1970, six million Black Americans moved from their homes in the South to find opportunities in cities around the United States. Before this period, 90 percent of Black Americans lived in the South, and 75 percent of them lived on farms. Afterward, half of Black Americans lived in the South, and 20 percent lived in rural areas (“[The Great Migration](#),” History.com, August 30, 2022).

22 “[Domestic Migration Patterns Foster Strong Ties Between Many Nonmetro and Metro Areas](#).” US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, January 4, 2023.

us this is where poverty is still living and where it's more entrenched. So when we are trying to make decisions, there's not only this moral imperative to it for us, but there's an economic imperative to it as well."

Chances are, for better or worse, your funding is already affecting the Black rural South

Funders who invest in policy change may already be working on issues that profoundly impact the Black rural South. But they may not yet be fully considering how to advance those communities' interests and help them build power. Whether in criminal justice reform, education, or social welfare, both state and federal policies can perpetuate barriers or can build opportunities in communities.

Emerging legislation around the new energy economy illustrates this phenomenon: "When you look at a set of policy priorities like climate change, it's totally in the areas that we're talking about," says Tony Pipa, senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution. "That's who bears the brunt of the oil and gas industry and will be ... affected in a clean-energy economy. Those affected communities will also have new opportunities—wind, solar, perhaps mining or manufacturing for batteries. But who benefits, and how widely those benefits are shared, is a present and urgent issue."

This conundrum is top of mind for Melanie Allen, co-director of the [Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice](#), who wants the opportunities that come from clean energy to reach affected communities. "We're living through a transformation in our energy system, and in many ways, that's happening in rural communities without them necessarily receiving or benefiting from the energy that's being produced where they are," says Allen. Because of a combination of state and local policies and structural inequities, communities in the Black rural South are often getting neither the energy nor the jobs. "Thinking about what it looks like for folks to be included in this new economy, and not the new economy to just be built up around them, has been and will continue to be really important," she says. To this end, Hive grantee [The Roanoke Center](#) is helping Black landowners benefit from lucrative solar leases—leases that pay 10 times what those landowners may receive for other uses, such as farming.²³

Funders and nonprofits alike must ensure communities can take their seat at the table for policy discussions that affect them and economic opportunities for their young people.

Without intentionally looking at the Black rural South, funders tend to miss it entirely

Funders often miss rural Black communities if they don't seek them out explicitly. For example, natural disasters, which are common in Mississippi, weigh heavily on rural Black communities. In 2016, the state agency managing disaster relief pointed out that the

23 Hive Fund, [Triennial Report](#), 2022.

state's seven community foundations covered only 40 of the state's 82 counties, leaving sizable gaps. In response, the community foundations joined forces and divvied up the state, with the [Community Foundation for Mississippi](#) absorbing 19 previously unserved counties, many of them rural and with large Black populations. When the March 2023 tornadoes struck four counties in Mississippi, every county had a community foundation ready to help. Yet disaster preparedness is just one piece of the work, and a precondition for economic security. In time, the Community Foundation for Mississippi aims to tackle workforce development, broadband, and other building blocks of economic mobility in its newly adopted counties.

When funding isn't similarly intentional, rural Black communities often fall into gaps. National nonprofit [Communities in Schools](#) (CIS) found this to be the case when it looked at how it was serving rural communities across the Southeast, where the number of Black students CIS was serving didn't represent the population. "In almost every state, counties

"When we build our structure to reflect state structures, what that leaves is a set of gaps."

CHRIS MURRAY, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF
INNOVATION AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES,
COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

are segregated," says Chris Murray, CIS senior director of innovation and strategic initiatives. "When we build our structure to reflect state structures, what that leaves is a set of gaps. It's because of the schools we're serving, where money flows, how money flows, how politics flows in those communities."

To address the gaps, CIS of South Carolina merged three individual affiliates into a statewide entity focused on more efficiently reaching rural Black communities along the

I-95 highway corridor in South Carolina. "We were just never going to have the capacity as separate affiliates to be able to reach the students that needed us the most," says Jamie Cooper, CIS of South Carolina's president and CEO—which, thanks to the merger, now has the capacity to push into those high-need communities. An added bonus: as a statewide entity, CIS of South Carolina has been able to advocate effectively for public dollars from the state.



MINDSET #2:

One funder can make a difference— while proving out approaches for more enduring change

The challenges limiting economic mobility in the Black rural South—including strong economic headwinds, harmful state policies, and the effects of historic and enduring structural racism—are daunting. As a result, the prospect of making a difference in the region may feel dim. But given the tremendous unmet need and the mere trickle of philanthropy headed to the region, this is a place where even one funder can have a profound impact while proving out approaches for more enduring change.

Even one funder can make a difference

When it comes to plugging into a community, hometown funders have an advantage. Consider investor and funder Darla Moore, who has turned her attention to her hometown of Lake City, South Carolina. Located in the northeast Pee Dee region of the state, Lake City (population 6,000) once grew tobacco and cotton but has struggled to transition to a post-agricultural economy. Given Lake City’s shrinking, aging population, Moore wanted to help young people thrive.

She seized upon the lack of dual-enrollment and advanced placement high school classes. “You had a whole region of high school students who were missing out on the opportunity to access college-level classes that their compatriots in more urbanized and better-off areas had access to,” says Darla Moore Foundation Executive Director Harry Lesesne. “Even if they were able to scrape together the resources to go to college and have the initiative to apply and get admitted, they were going to start day one behind through no fault of their own.”

Moore partnered with local colleges to fill that gap. The result is [The Continuum](#)—an abandoned retail location turned state-of-the-art facility that offers dual-enrollment programs for high school students in the morning and workforce development skills, including two- and four-year degrees, in the afternoon. Launched in 2019 on the eve of the pandemic, The Continuum currently draws 600–700 students, approximately 50 percent of them Black, from 13 regional high schools, some of whom drive 60 miles each way to access classes. The Continuum may only be a piece of the puzzle to enable greater economic mobility for young people in the surrounding rural communities, but it is making a difference.

Moore, who has made a 30-year commitment to her work in Lake City, knows her community well. But you don’t have to be a hometown funder. Other individual funders who lack insider insights and relationships are also finding ways to advance economic mobility for young people in the Black rural South.

Take South Carolina’s [Coastal Community Foundation](#) (CCF), where a group of funders established the Reverend Pinckney College Readiness and Scholars Programs in 2016 in

memory of a beloved reverend killed in the Emanuel AME Church massacre. Originally, the scholarship was available to three counties in and around Charleston. The Pinckney program has a stellar track record: to date, 93 out of 95 total participants remain actively engaged in the program.

Recently, a married couple (who prefer to remain anonymous) funded CCF to expand the program into Colleton and Hampton counties, both very rural and with high Black populations. The donors are not originally from those counties, but, having received scholarships themselves, they know how scholarships can change lives. Without their support, the opportunity gap for Black rural communities would have continued to widen; instead, CCF is reaching a new set of first-generation college students.

CCF's story is not unique. Repeatedly, we heard of individual donors, board members, and staff propelling vital efforts in the Black rural South, demonstrating how even one individual can make a difference.

There are many promising approaches—but a shortage of funds to test them

Local leaders usually have the best ideas for how to dismantle barriers to economic mobility, and this is certainly true in the Black rural South. But given the political, economic, and social challenges to progress—all existing in racialized systems—it will take time for the field to build on community expertise and work out the greatest leverage points. While Moore has chosen education to boost economic mobility, we see funders supporting a range of efforts—from banking to broadband and from direct service to community-driven systems change.

It's not yet apparent which strategies will work best in regions of persistent poverty like the Black rural South; transformational change will likely require a combination of strategies. In the meantime, funders can advance learning about what may drive economic mobility. Beadsie Woo, director of family and youth financial stability at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, keeps a learning orientation top of mind. "We try to focus on a particular project or geography and then use that as a launch point for a broader set of investments," she says.

While the following approaches, and many not listed here, are still being tested, they are already advancing economic mobility for young people in the Black rural South. And yet they all suffer from limited funding in the region that holds back progress.

Strengthening schools. If you believe effective schools are the key to individuals' and communities' economic mobility, consider investing in schools across the Black rural South, as the NEA Foundation has through a [Community Schools](#) initiative. While existing power structures often repress Black community control over education, community schools center community priorities, assets, and voice.

- ▶ **Why invest here?** The legacy of segregation has established an unequal education system in the rural South, denying young people the chance to broaden and pursue their career opportunities. While the 16 schools the NEA Foundation has invested

Understanding the impact of Rosenwald Schools

Perhaps the ultimate example of the power of a single funder in education is not new at all: from 1914–1931, Sears Roebuck President and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald—inspired by Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute—funded through his foundation the construction of nearly 5,000 schools in the Black rural South, which went on to serve approximately 36 percent of Black school-aged children in the region. Like The NEA Foundation’s community schools (see “[Strengthening schools](#)”), Rosenwald schools were driven by and for communities. [Research](#) credits Rosenwald schools with 30 percent of the sizable educational gains Black students made during that period as well as a 35 percent gain in wages for Southern Black people relative to Southern white people over the longer term.



Plaisance Rosenwald School (Photo: National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, National Park Service)

in to help them be transformed into community schools are still in their early days developmentally, historically, the Rosenwald schools did something similar—and made real progress in closing the educational opportunity and racial wage gap for Black attendees and the communities in which they were situated (see “[Understanding the impact of Rosenwald Schools](#)”).

Positive youth-development programs. If you believe exposing young people to new experiences can build their aspirations and expand their opportunity, and that young people themselves must help lead community efforts, consider [positive youth-development programs](#) such as [4-H](#), Boys and Girls Clubs of America, YMCA, and YWCA. Creating a line of sight to other life possibilities is especially important in communities with persistent poverty, points out Dwayne Patterson, chief equity officer of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation. “It’s hard to be what you can’t see.”

- ▶ **Why invest here?** Among the most powerful drivers of economic mobility: “economic connectedness,” or relationships that cross class lines.²⁴ But such relationships may be hard to develop in the highly segregated Black rural South. Youth-development programs, including networks that offer a link outside the community, can help form and nurture these relationships. Lack of access to youth-development programs—especially for the “kid at the end of the dirt road” (as some 4-H professionals might say)—remains a serious problem, one that philanthropy can help address.

24 Raj Chetty, et al., “[Social Capital 1: Measurement and Associations with Economic Mobility](#),” *Nature*, August 4, 2022.

Cradle-to-career support. If you believe young people need a continuum of support to address the barriers they face on the pathway to economic mobility, consider cradle-to-career models. The [Strive Together Network's Indianola Promise Community](#) is one of few rural Promise Neighborhoods,²⁵ providing programs from early childhood health through workforce development and beyond for children and families.

- ▶ **Why invest here?** In areas of concentrated poverty, it's likely no single intervention can boost economic mobility if other barriers aren't also addressed. Coordinating support and fostering a shared vision for success can have a powerful effect on a community.

Access to financial tools and services for small business. Two root challenges to economic mobility are the absence of meaningful job opportunities and core institutions to develop them. To address these challenges, consider investing in community development financial institutions (CDFIs), which enable access to credit. "We need to advance ownership opportunities, particularly among people of color," says Cassandra Williams, executive vice president and chief program officer of [Hope Credit Union](#). "Children of homeowners do better in school and have more favorable outcomes than children who are not in the same situation. Likewise, the racial wealth gap shrinks significantly among Black business owners." Currently with 23 branches in five Southern states, Hope has a 30-year track record of providing financial products and services informed by local people and designed to meet the unique needs of its member-owners living in under-resourced communities.

- ▶ **Why invest here?** Small business is an engine of job creation, but lending options for would-be business owners are few in the Black rural South. Access to credit can help people grow businesses, buy homes, and—possibly most importantly—develop economic independence from and buttress political power against unjust systems. A mix of public, private, and philanthropic investors contributed the initial capital to launch Hope and enable its lasting impact.

"For us, it's about resources flowing to communities to help them have agency in charting their own future."

MATT DUNNE, FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
CENTER ON RURAL INNOVATION

Broadband. Broadband internet can revolutionize access to resources and opportunities in previously impossible ways. If this issue is important to you, consider funding technical advisors who are working with communities to build infrastructure that centers community wants and needs. Thirty-eight percent of Black residents in the rural South report not having access to home internet, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies—

more than almost any other demographic.²⁶ The Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) is helping communities bring broadband to one rural county at a time. "For us, it's about resources flowing to communities to help them have agency in charting their own future," says CORI Founder and Executive Director Matt Dunne.

25 Inspired by the [Harlem Children's Zone](#), the US Department of Education's [Promise Neighborhoods](#) have expanded and adapted into other types of communities, including rural communities.

26 Dominique Harrison, "[Expanding Broadband in the Black Rural South](#)," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, July 2021.

- ▶ **Why invest here?** While other parts of the country Zoomed their way through COVID, rural communities without broadband fell further behind. “Some people in upper-level jobs benefitted from remote work,” says Dr. Claudette Smith, associate administrator of Cooperative Extension at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A&T). “But those who did not have remote work didn’t have the same opportunity.” Broadband has the potential to reduce inequities by alleviating transportation issues, making possible remote work and training, creating technology jobs in rural spaces, and generally helping bridge the urban/rural divide. It isn’t easy, but, done well, broadband can improve almost every factor that influences economic mobility. [4-H Tech Changemakers](#) are working through their HBCU partners, like NC A&T, to teach digital skills to adults in their community so they can be effective when broadband reaches them.

Power building. Lasting change comes from shifting the public policies that hold communities back from economic mobility. To help effect such change, consider supporting local movements that are helping Black rural communities build power, set the local agenda, and influence public decision making affecting their communities. Case in point: in Mississippi, a majority-white state legislature voted in March 2023 to expand the roles of state police and appointed judges in Jackson, a majority-Black city.²⁷ [Grantmakers for Southern Progress](#) is helping strengthen the infrastructure for BIPOC-led groups seeking to transform policy through voting rights, criminal justice reform, LGBTQIA+ rights, and more.

- ▶ **Why invest here?** For generations, Black people in the rural South have been systematically disenfranchised from power. Many still struggle to have a voice in decisions that affect them and their economic opportunities. Grassroots movements recognize and illuminate systemic barriers and seek to empower people to make decisions on behalf of their own communities. Meanwhile, like the civil rights leaders of the 1960s, Black leaders continue to organize their communities to demand change.

Direct cash transfers. More programs aren’t always the answer to economic mobility. As an alternative, consider innovative funds, such as the [GRO Fund](#), that are directing cash transfers to individuals in the Black rural South so they can create their own opportunities.

- ▶ **Why invest here?** A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of direct cash transfers in areas that face stubborn and complex challenges.²⁸ Direct cash transfers also present an opportunity to learn from individuals and communities in the Black rural South about how they prioritize needs and opportunities.

Each of these approaches requires additional funding to prove itself in the Black rural South. Funders can have a tremendous impact in helping to support testing and refinement.²⁹

27 Emily Wagster Pettus, “[Mississippi Senate OKs Bill Affecting Majority-Black City](#),” Associated Press, March 7, 2023.

28 GiveDirectly, “[Research on Cash Transfers](#),” December 22, 2020.

29 Note that there are numerous approaches in addition to those described here, such as the movement seeking to [reform the criminal legal system](#), which causes outsized harm in the Black rural South.



MINDSET #3:

Social ROI—the impact a funder achieves with each dollar invested—is high as long as I’m willing to think about impact differently

Funders who gravitate toward traditional population counts as a measure of success may feel they can’t reach as many people in the Black rural South. But encouraging economic mobility in the Black rural South is about depth, not breadth, in addition to turning the tide on decades of marginalization. Philanthropic funding can deeply affect and even transform rural communities, where it’s possible to serve a greater portion of the population. What’s more, funders can multiply their impact by helping communities tap into the wealth of public funding currently available—funding that has historically failed to make its way to the region.

Investments can reach the whole community and truly change the system

In 2019, postsecondary education and workforce funder [Ascendium Education Group](#) developed a new rural strategy. For a funder that aims to help low-income learners earn a degree or credential, a rural focus was a natural fit: rural learners graduate from high school on par with national rates, but they enroll in and complete postsecondary education and training programs at lower rates than their urban and suburban peers. And Ascendium sees rural regions as crucial to its racial equity mission. “It’s really hard to say you’re a funder focused on equity if you’re just completely overlooking 20 percent of the population that lives in rural places and that’s increasingly diverse,” says Senior Program Officer Kirstin Yeado.

“Instead of going a mile wide and an inch deep, we would rather go a mile deep and an inch wide, and then just have more organizations be able to do that and have a deeper, more rooted approach in the community.”

SAMUEL BELLAMY, PROGRAM OFFICER, COASTAL COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Yeado is also keenly aware of the calculus in funding the Black rural South. “Serving 300 people in a rural place versus 30,000 in an urban environment—one might seem to offer more return on investment and appear more attractive to a funder,” she continues. “But in rural communities, that rural investment can truly change systems.”

The Black rural South offers funders the chance for tremendous depth of impact across communities. Those who take a more nuanced view to calculating ROI (versus purely focusing on reach) understand their investments can go much further in a rural community that has seen little investment.

At the same time, just as with their endowments, responsible funders must also think in generational terms, recognizing the decades of disinvestment and ongoing barriers they must address. At one end of the spectrum, Darla Moore intends to continue her investment in South Carolina’s Lake City for 30 years. In contrast, funders who move on to new opportunities after a few years can jeopardize progress and damage community trust.

Philanthropy can bring public funding and multiples of impact

Leveraging public dollars is a preferred strategy for many funders, and one that can substantially improve social ROI. But for communities in the Black rural South, there are many challenges to accessing those dollars. At the moment, there is a wealth of dollars that can go to communities—if they know of the available funds and how to access them. Funders can play a key role in helping communities connect with public funds.

The Brookings Institution Reimagining Rural Policy initiative has documented the dizzying maze of [federal development assistance to rural and tribal communities](#).³⁰ Overworked rural leaders wearing multiple hats struggle to navigate these opportunities while caring for their families and sometimes holding down other jobs. And many public grants are offered as reimbursements, which put already cash-strapped communities with little borrowing power in the Black rural South at a disadvantage.

For those able to navigate that maze, the opportunities for rural communities to benefit from public funding are especially high right now. In 2021, there were 55 federal grants totaling \$880 million going to rural areas; in 2022, there were 122 awards worth more than \$2 billion, mostly due to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.³¹ And the Inflation Reduction

Act, funded through the USDA, created the largest investment in rural electrification in nearly a century.³²

“A lot of money came out of the federal government in the last few years, and rural [areas were] not able to access it in super meaningful ways.”

JUSTIN BURCH, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
WASHINGTON COUNTY ECONOMIC ALLIANCE

Some specific opportunities could greatly benefit rural communities. For starters, the US Economic Development Association is offering the [\\$1 Billion Build Back Better Regional Challenge](#) to help American communities recover from the pandemic and from decades of disinvestment. And in December 2022, the federal government announced the [Tech Hubs and Recompete](#)

[Pilot Programs](#), appropriating \$700 million to the association to drive technology growth and connect workers in distressed counties.

30 Anthony Pipa and Natalie Geismar, “[Reimagining Rural Policy: Organizing Federal Assistance to Maximize Rural Prosperity](#),” Brookings Institution, November 19, 2020.

31 Ximena Bustillo, “[Rural Communities Want to Tap Federal Funding. But It’s Hard to Know Where to Start](#),” NPR, March 8, 2023.

32 USDA, “[Inflation Reduction Act Funding for Rural Development](#),” n.d.

The multiplier effect of public dollars

Consider the [Center on Rural Innovation](#) (CORI), which is helping to bring broadband to rural areas across the country, including 12 counties across Tennessee as well as a number of communities in the Black rural South like Helena-West Helena, Arkansas. It takes CORI six to eight months to complete an infrastructure deployment plan in a single rural community—each one with unique assets and needs. “There are a million ways to get broadband to a rural community, but every single one of them takes a lot of time and planning,” says Alex Kelley, director of broadband consulting at CORI. “Figuring out ways to get local leaders a couple more hours in their week to work on this is what you need to do across the board—no matter what path they’re taking.”

CORI is willing to invest the time and planning, knowing these very challenging projects can pay off big time for communities. “In the last three years, if you include the broadband funding, \$9.5 million in philanthropy to our organization has yielded \$169 million going directly to rural communities that are tremendously under-resourced,” says CORI Director of Research and Knowledge Mark Rembert. Those funds include competitive federal grants for tech accelerators, broadband deployment grants, and follow-on investment capital for rural start-ups. Given recent increases in federal funding, CORI anticipates the returns on philanthropic investment will be significantly higher over the next several years.

Stepping back, CORI CEO Matt Dunne reflects on the future of broadband in the Black rural South: “There is incredible opportunity in the Southeast, in communities where there are significant and often-underserved Black populations, to help leverage assets that have always been there but perhaps have been under-realized.”

How can philanthropy ensure some of these dollars get to the Black rural South? Funders can contribute to advocacy and power-building efforts to lobby for available public dollars, such as the movement work of Grantmakers for Southern Progress or the Hive Fund. Funders can also contribute to capacity building and leadership development, such as MDC’s [Investing in Leaders of Color Fellowship](#), to help local leaders better access funding. Funders can help develop the partnerships that public funding often requires. Finally, philanthropy can front funds so communities can bridge the period before reimbursement for a grant they’ve already begun to spend.

Resource Rural, a new [Heartland Fund](#) Federal Implementation Initiative, recognizes the timeliness of this opportunity. They are targeting a five-year, \$70 million investment to leverage billions of dollars in federal funding for rural communities, especially communities of color and low-income communities. Through a network of place-based implementation partners providing on-the-ground technical assistance, funding for grassroots organizing, climate partnerships, and strategic communications, Resource Rural is giving investors a chance to ensure these unprecedented levels of federal infrastructure, economic development, and climate-focused resources land where they are most needed.



MINDSET #4:

There are excellent partners for my giving— if I know where to look

Funders without relationships in the Black rural South may not know whom to fund or how to support economic mobility. Given the importance of relationships in this region, funders can often have the greatest impact working with an existing wealth of passionate intermediaries, organizations, and leaders already carrying the work forward.

Intermediaries are your feet on the ground—and some you might even know already

For Yeado, who leads Ascendium’s rural efforts, the shift to rural has required new ways of working, especially in the Black rural South. For starters, Ascendium was accustomed to making grants to big, national intermediaries. But intermediaries in the rural space tend to be smaller and more closely tied to communities. “We’re in the process of trying to identify local and regional funders who have more of a presence in, relationships with, and expertise in rural places,” says Yeado. Ascendium knows from experience that relationships are key: when it made an early national call for grant applications from rural community colleges, not a single institution from the rural South applied.³³

To reach the Black rural South, Yeado also finds herself working with a new set of trusted partners. Last year, Ascendium made a grant to the [Association for Chambers of Commerce Executives](#) to help rural-serving chambers develop education and training opportunities that will provide pathways to well-paying, high-demand jobs. Yeado has also worked with the [United Negro College Fund](#) and the [Lumina Foundation](#) to understand how to best support rural adult learners at HBCUs. She has partnered with the [Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation](#) to ensure stronger alignment between training and jobs. And she has recognized the importance of creating spaces that allow rural leaders to learn from one another.

Funding in the Black rural South is highly relational; effective intermediaries understand what communities most want and need and can help direct funding accordingly.³⁴ In

33 In contrast, when relationships are in place, the response is very different. MDC, which works to advance equity and economic progress in the South, received nearly 300 applications for 12 spots in the first year of its [Investing in Leaders of Color Fellowship](#). The Coastal Community Foundation received 107 applications for the [Facebook Grant for Sustaining Black Communities](#) program (see “[In the Black rural South, local leaders are your guides—and inspiration](#)”). The [Mike & Gillian Goodrich Foundation](#), which has an advisory committee of community members to guide its decision making, was “flabbergasted” by the substantial turnout at community meetings it held to advertise grant opportunities.

34 In [Rural Hubs: Strengthening America’s Rural Innovation Infrastructure](#) (June 2020), the Aspen Institute celebrates rural hubs that “are main players advancing an asset-based, wealth-building approach to rural community and economic development.” From credit unions to community colleges, these groups are the best kind of intermediaries: those focusing on all the elements in a region that can advance or impede progress, including people, businesses, institutions, and partnerships. Often constrained by capital, rural hubs have the relationships that, with funding, have the power to transform communities.

“Relationships are our
greatest infrastructure.”

MELANIE ALLEN, CO-DIRECTOR,
HIVE FUND FOR CLIMATE AND GENDER JUSTICE

Bridgespan’s research for this report, we saw remarkable work from community and family foundations, feminist funds, credit unions, HBCUs, and national networks—every one of which centers on being in relationship with communities, earning their trust, and helping to empower them to achieve their goals.

Take Grantmakers for Southern Progress Director Tamieka Mosley, who understands that new vehicles to move money in the South are critically important to ensuring philanthropy can partner with movements to distribute resources equitably in the region. For example, the [Southern Power Fund](#), launched in partnership with movement leaders and funder allies, has helped move \$18.4 million to over 375 organizations since 2020. Mosley knows her constituency so well that the grant application is almost a formality. Indeed, it’s intended, she says, to “give us info so we can send a check—because we already know who you are.” Mosley also asks applicants who else is doing similar work to help surface additional organizations and fund the ecosystem. The grant application is of less concern to Mosley, who prioritizes “transformational relationships instead of transactional relationships.”

Below, we highlight two types of intermediaries that are likely familiar to most funders, but may not yet be fully utilized as connections to economic mobility in the Black rural South.

Historically Black colleges and universities

These pillars of economic mobility are tremendous investment opportunities because of their educational outcomes: for example, HBCUs graduate half the Black doctors in the country, as well as half the Black lawyers.³⁵ But their impact can go far beyond education to foster economic development in the communities they serve. Indeed, the 19 land-grant HBCUs in the United States have an explicit mission to benefit a wider swath of the communities in their states.

Manola Erby, a 4-H Extension youth specialist at Alcorn State University, an HBCU, performs outreach to 13 surrounding counties in southwest Mississippi. With 50,000-60,000 young people in their region, which is 90 percent rural, Erby and her staff of four each serve multiple counties. That’s a lot of driving. “Just think of what we could do with a staff of 50,” says Erby. “We could serve so many more.”

Still, Erby and her staff press on, determined to support hard-to-reach rural places with programming that spans health and wellness, tobacco and drug-abuse prevention, leadership, and college and career readiness. Transportation for attendees is also a challenge, and most programming is conducted in rural churches or schools. In communities where opportunities are extremely limited, Erby lives and breathes economic mobility, keeping her eye on every grant, employer, and chance that comes her way for the young people she serves. “I see my role as finding the connections,” she says.

35 Miriam Hammond, LaToya Owens, and Brian Gulko, [HBCUs Transforming Generations: Social Mobility Outcomes for HBCU Alumni](#), UNCF, 2021.

Many HBCUs are dramatically under-resourced, by any measure, but especially when compared to non-HBCUs in the region. The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities has documented these funding gaps: for example, from 2010 to 2012, 61 percent of land-grant HBCUs did not receive their full one-to-one matching funds from their respective states.³⁶ This chronic underfunding deprives HBCUs of resources to support economic mobility in their regions and leaves them with smaller staffs than non-HBCU land-grant universities—while serving multiple counties.

It's worth noting that some see great potential for HBCUs as capacity builders in the Black rural South. Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, played such a role in establishing the Rosenwald Schools with the support of a philanthropist (see "[Understanding the impact of Rosenwald Schools](#)"). To coordinate and build capacity across the region, HBCUs need more bandwidth themselves, both to deliver their current set of services and to build the capacity of others.

National nonprofit network offices with affiliates in the region

National networks such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), YMCA, YWCA, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and others have affiliates throughout the Black rural South. Many of these affiliates straddle a line between providing food, clothing, and other wraparound supports so children can succeed in school and connecting students with opportunities for leadership, scholarship, and beyond. "You can't get to economic mobility until you change the environment the boys are in," explains Michael DeVaul, national executive director for the YMCA's [Boys and Young Men of Color](#), or BYMOC, strategy, speaking about the Black rural South. "Those environments should be aimed at elevating conversations about why shared values and culture are important. A great environment should nurture identity development, cultivate civic-engagement skills, and provide academic opportunities for BYMOC to practice and translate skills into careers beyond high school."

Despite this important role, network affiliates in the Black rural South often struggle for funding on par with their peers in metro areas on the coasts. Some national offices are innovating to bridge the funding gap for rural affiliates, particularly in the Black rural South; CIS of South Carolina's merger into a statewide entity (see [Mindset #1](#)) is one such example.

Similarly, the BGCA's Advance Mississippi initiative involved, among other things, merging certain affiliates to better serve the state. With Mississippi ranking at or near the bottom of many national youth-development indicators, BGCA launched Advance Mississippi to strengthen its board and staff and grow its operations in underserved communities. Merging first the Philadelphia and Kosciusko affiliates, and then merging that combined entity with the BGC of East Mississippi, helped BGCA streamline operations and reach more rural communities, especially those in the Mississippi Delta. The changes have resulted in stronger organizations, almost all of which have grown under the new model. BGCA is currently considering comparable restructuring in New Mexico and Louisiana.

36 John Michael Lee, Jr., and Samaad Wes Keys, "[Land-Grant but Unequal: State One-to-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities](#)," *Office for Access and Success Policy Brief*, Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, September 2013.

In another effort, CIS recently introduced a Reaching Rural Communities grant, which invites affiliate offices to identify gaps in CIS’s service and apply for grants that will enable them to fill those gaps. For example, a CIS affiliate in Milledgeville, Georgia, applied for a grant to fund telehealth services. Established pre-pandemic, the program expanded to include mental health services as well—a key need for young people during and after the pandemic.

Indeed, being part of a national network connects affiliates, resources, and ideas, further spurring innovation in the face of limited funding. For example, having recently received a \$5 million state grant, CIS of Virginia will expand into two currently underserved Black rural communities using an “embedded office” model piloted at other CIS locations.³⁷ This model, whereby the affiliate has site coordinators but no local office or executive director, will allow CIS of Virginia to serve two high-need communities that lack sizable businesses and philanthropy in a more sustainable way.

Similarly, a network structure enables organizations in distant communities to work together and learn from one another, an important consideration to combat rural isolation. For example, local Ys in the South and elsewhere are implementing the YMCA’s BYMOC strategy—though the team has struggled to reach Black boys in the rural South, as young people are constantly pulled to make money instead of attending youth-development programs.

To a funder outside the Black rural South, a national network office that knows its affiliates well can be a great asset. As Kent McGuire, program director of education at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, attests, “They can more efficiently find organizations and introduce philanthropic or other assets and make it easier for folks who want to play ball down there.”

[Philanthropy Southeast](#) offers many stories of those working to address economic mobility in the Black rural South, including those in its report [Philanthropy as the South’s Passing Gear: Fulfilling the Promise](#) (2017), published in collaboration with MDC.

In the Black rural South, local leaders are your guides—and inspiration

Every rural community has key players: people who everyone knows and who wear many hats. Funders willing to reassess their sourcing and diligence processes and revisit notions of what a leader looks like will find many impressive leaders and organizations with deep knowledge of their communities.

When looking to find such leaders, Facebook worked with the CCF of South Carolina to distribute \$1 million to Black-led, Black-serving organizations in the state, including in rural communities and the Gullah Geechee islands. The application process for the funding, called the [Facebook Grant for Sustaining Black Communities](#), surfaced 107 organizations—fewer than half of which had ever applied to CCF for funding. CCF ultimately granted

³⁷ The Bridgespan Group advised on the design of this model, drawing on experiences supporting other nonprofit networks.

\$685,000 to 37 organizations. What led to the huge increase in their ability to source these funding opportunities? “We often name grants based on where the funding comes from,” says Program Officer Samuel Bellamy. “This is the only program that said specifically we want to be for African American communities.” On top of this, CCF employed much more intentional outreach to Black communities.

For CCF, the journey was enlightening. “We saw what the organizations were able to do with the money we received from Facebook,” says Bellamy, who was also struck by the overwhelming need the grant surfaced among Black-led, Black-serving organizations. The experience left CCF hungry to do more and to get to know the many new organizations that have now entered its orbit. “As our CEO would say, ‘We can do more with more.’”

Just as funders struggle to identify local leaders in the Black rural South, so, too, do peer organizations. “Part of the challenge in rural areas is isolation,” says MDC’s Dodson. This isolation not only renders the Black rural South invisible to many funders, but it’s also a barrier among communities and organizations working toward similar goals. “There is an opportunity for philanthropic leadership to nurture creative thinking and connection among people who are trying to deal with these issues,” Dodson says. For example, MDC’s [Rural Forward](#) project aims to foster connection among nonprofit leaders of color in rural North Carolina—with funders providing critical financial and capacity-building resources.

The Path Forward

There is no denying that creating pathways out of poverty for young people in the Black rural South is difficult. That's exactly why philanthropy is a critical piece of the solution.

While we've offered many examples of funders and nonprofits who are carrying this work forward, we recognize organizations that couldn't meet with us due to capacity constraints—including the [Black Belt Community Foundation](#), mentioned by several of those we interviewed, which has been working overtime to help Selma, Alabama, recover from the January 2023 storms. In addition, mindful of CCF's experience uncovering new organizations with its grant from Facebook, we acknowledge all those striving to lift up young people in the Black rural South who have never applied or received funding for their important work.

The path forward looks different for each philanthropic organization. But these four next steps will be important for many:

- 1. Assess your current priorities and portfolio.** The individual picture for most funders will show an underinvestment in the region. Many of the funders featured in this report have followed the data, identifying opportunities in the Black rural South as key to their overall impact. Buy-in and leadership from boards is essential. "So much is about educating a board about how the world has changed," says MDC Senior Program Director Kerri Forrest.
- 2. Include voices from the Black rural South in your planning and decision making.** Deliberately and authentically including voices from the Black rural South in convenings and meetings will enrich the conversation. This is precisely what Whitney Kimball Coe, vice president of national programs and director of the Rural Assembly at the Center for Rural Strategies, did, to profound effect. "We set out to make sure 60 to 70 percent of our speakers at any events represent the voices of those who are most often not heard or represented—including leaders in the Black rural South—so they are driving the conversation," says Coe. "It moved from kind of shop talk to real talk."
- 3. Continue learning about the past, present, and future of the region and its communities.** This report links to several recent landmark studies detailing the context, current state, and future opportunities for philanthropy in the South, including the Black rural South. For example, Philanthropy Southeast's [Leading with Courage](#) report documents how foundations in the South are pushing boundaries and centering their work around equity to usher in a new era of giving. [As the South Grows](#), a series developed by Grantmakers for Southern Progress and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, is also an excellent resource to learn more about the current state—and future potential—of funding in the South.

For some funders, in-person convenings and funding partnerships make a big difference. When Christine Reeves Strigaro was the executive director of The Sapelo Foundation, a family foundation in Georgia, she organized a retreat for leaders in Georgia to develop census strategies for the state's hardest-to-count populations. That work attracted interest from the [Census Equity Fund](#), a national funder collaborative. "A local foundation like Sapelo gave the Census Equity Fund confidence to invest at least five times my

budget,” says Reeves Strigaro. “There was some legitimacy of a local foundation that’s been there 70 years that knows the group on the ground.”

- 4. Start giving—or give more.** Each of the funders in this report developed their mindsets on the Black rural South at least in part through investing in the region and learning from local leaders about how to give responsibly. For those who have not yet funded within the region, all of the intermediaries mentioned in this report have powerful ideas about how to advance economic mobility in the region.

[Race Forward](#) describes racial equity “choice points:” decision-making opportunities where an organization can step back and consciously consider racial equity.³⁸ For many funders, a conscious consideration of the Black rural South may reveal opportunities not immediately apparent. For every funder, we invite you to adopt new mindsets that will enable success in the Black rural South. Most importantly, in a region where even one funder can make a great difference, we urge you to be the one.

“There are conditions for philanthropic investment that I think have to be understood at the outset, such as that not everything you’re going to pursue is going to succeed, or that you might have to slow the pace, and it has nothing to do with the capabilities of the people who are involved. It has to do with the need to bring in and use resources in ways that haven’t happened before. ... But that can be done.
Bottom line, it can and must be done.”

SARA SNEED, PRESIDENT AND CEO, NEA FOUNDATION

³⁸ Nayantara Sen and Terry Keleher, *Creating Cultures and Practices for Racial Equity: A Toolbox for Advancing Racial Equity for Arts and Cultural Organizations*, Race Forward, April 2021.

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