

Ground Truth from Rural Practitioners

Findings from a survey of U.S. rural practitioners with insights on the characteristics, expertise and needs of rural-serving organizations

June 2020

Research Brief

Introduction

Every day, organizations are working hard to improve the economy and livelihoods of residents in rural and tribal communities in the United States. From affordable housing to small business development and community building, these rural-serving organizations are essential; they meet immediate needs while keeping long-term goals on the horizon. This brief's findings reinforce insights rural practitioners know well: the wide array of rural-serving organizations are mostly small, often under-resourced and work in relative isolation from similar organizations. Small but mighty, they work in concert with local people, firms and governments to fill gaps and adapt to do whatever it is communities need done. With the COVID-19-imposed health and related economic crises, these very same rural-serving organizations are again on the front lines as they strive to meet immediate needs and to ensure long-term recovery results in a more inclusive, resilient future.

Why this Research Brief?

National narratives often paint rural America as a monolith, but rural America is diverse in geography, demography, economy, history and culture. It's also immense; 97% of the U.S. landmass is rural according to the Census Bureau. Given the size and array of rural places, it can be hard to see with any granularity what's happening on the ground in the many communities that collectively comprise rural America, whether they be in the Mississippi Delta, the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest or Indian Country, Alaska or on the southern border.

Good information and a bottom-up perspective on the characteristics and activities of rural-serving organizations is important to policy makers, investors and other people of good will. This information is essential to craft effective policies, make smart investments that are responsive to on-the-ground needs, and provide the right kind of

support to organizations working to deliver positive results in rural and tribal communities.

In order to make more visible the work of rural and tribal-serving organizations, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) and the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) conducted a survey to provide more information on the focus, size, expertise and needs of rural-serving organizations. Our aim in collecting and sharing this information is to catalyze ideas, programming, policy and investments that respond to practitioner needs and advance rural prosperity.

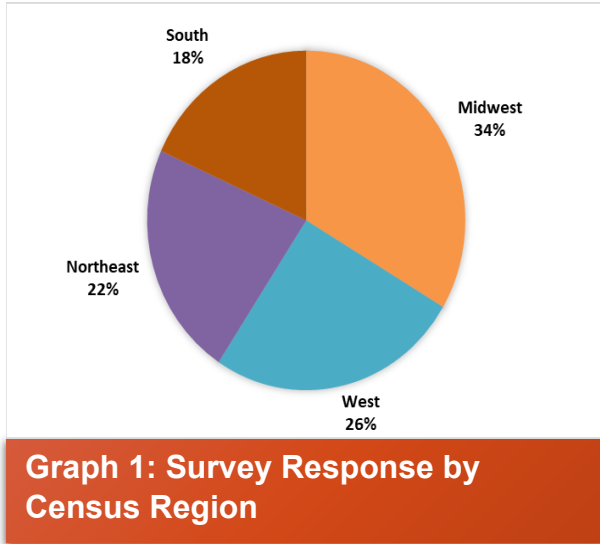
Survey Methods

In January – February of 2020, we gathered data from a range of rural-serving organizations via an online survey over a three-week period. In order to collect responses from a broad range of rural-serving organizations, we worked with other national and regional rural-focused organizations and networks to distribute the survey. This research brief draws on answers to multiple-choice questions, as well as open-ended responses to provide an assessment of the needs, strengths and concerns of rural-serving organizations. Cross-tabulation allowed us to analyze the statistical significance of interactions in multiple choice data, while open-ended responses provided a window into the opportunities, priorities and concerns of rural-serving organizations in their own words.

Survey Response

A total of 365 respondents across 44 states completed the survey during the three weeks the survey was open. As Graph 1 (below) demonstrates, the geographic distribution of respondents was fairly even, with a slightly higher concentration of respondents coming from the Midwest. Fifty-nine of the 365 respondents indicated their organizations cover a multi-state or national geography, and consequently the results

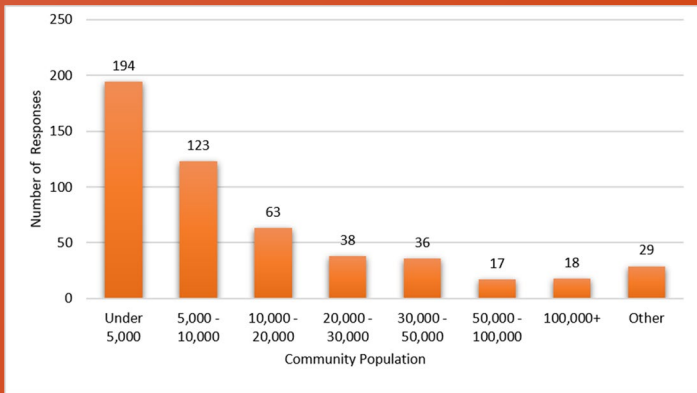
include some data related to the six states with no direct respondents. Although we received responses from several organizations specifically serving Indian Country, it was not a large enough cohort to enable us to identify findings specific to Indian Country or Native American-serving organizations.¹



The survey captured feedback from leaders knowledgeable about rural areas: 58% of respondents said they worked entirely in rural areas or with rural populations and another 23% of respondents worked in rural areas or with rural populations at least three-fourths of the time. Survey responses largely came from nonprofit organizations (60%). Government organizations were the next largest group at 15%, and the remainder were a range of community, regional and family foundations, for-profit businesses or quasi-governmental organizations.

When asked the population size of the community where they work, respondents were able to select up to two choices from the categories shown in Graph 2. While some organizations do serve only one geography, the 518 responses to this question indicate that rural-serving organizations tend to serve multiple communities of varying sizes. To better understand the capacity and reach of rural-serving organizations, respondents were asked to indicate how many people were on staff; nearly 42% of respondents indicated their rural-serving organization had between one and four full-time employees, and 76% of all respondents said they worked at organizations with 25 or fewer people.

Graph 2: Where Rural Organizations Work



What Rural Organizations Do — And How They Do It

Survey results paint a dynamic picture of the types and work of rural-serving organizations. The majority (56%) of survey respondents indicated that they consider their work to be both community development and economic development. In general, the survey results² indicate rural-serving organizations’ work covers a broad range of topics (Table 1 below), and rural-serving organizations employ a broad set of processes and tools to accomplish this work (Table 2 below). Considered together, the breadth of foci and tools suggests that rather than having one area of expertise, rural organizations tend to wear many hats, see systems as inter-related, or are motivated by varied interests. Further evidence of this breadth: from a list of nearly 20 topics, 99 respondents chose “other” as one of their answers. Many of these

Organizations surveyed operate in communities of various sizes, with the majority (380) working with communities of 20,000 or less. Organizations surveyed also work in a range of different geographies with the largest group (38%) working at a regional, multi-county level, while 16% work at the state level and 14% work at the county level. Only 8% of respondents operate at the national level.

For this analysis, regions were defined using the Census Bureau definition of U.S. Regions. See https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

Table 2 come from the question, “What process tools do you use to accomplish your work within your service area?” In both questions, respondents were asked to select all answers that apply. Both questions had 335 responses, while 30 chose to skip these two questions.

¹ We received survey responses from organizations in every state except Hawaii, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Rhode Island and South Carolina. Four respondents identified themselves as serving Indian Country.
² The data in Table 1 stem from a question that asked, “What are the topical focuses of your organization’s work?” The data represented in

multi-faceted organizations that are working regionally and across multiple sectors are intermediaries or *Rural Development Hubs*, place-rooted organizations working hand-in-glove with and across a region to build inclusive wealth, increase local capacity and create opportunity.³

Table 1 shows the self-identified areas of topical focus of respondents. Ranking high on the list are the related issues of business development and entrepreneurship, traditionally the realm of “economic development”; next on the list are education, housing and workforce, topics often thought of as “community development.” Over the

| Table 1: Areas of Topical Focus (By percentage of total responses and raw number of responses) | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| Business development | 51% | 170 |
| Entrepreneurship | 48% | 160 |
| Education | 47% | 156 |
| Housing | 46% | 155 |
| Workforce development | 41% | 138 |
| Leadership development | 39% | 131 |
| Health | 36% | 121 |
| Tourism/Recreation | 34% | 113 |
| Youth and child development | 33% | 112 |
| Agriculture | 33% | 110 |
| Environment | 30% | 102 |
| Other | 30% | 99 |
| Mobility from poverty/Social services | 24% | 79 |
| Transportation | 23% | 76 |
| Energy | 22% | 73 |
| Water/Wastewater | 20% | 67 |
| Technology, including broadband | 19% | 65 |
| Manufacturing | 13% | 43 |
| Media | 6% | 19 |

past couple of decades these fields have begun to merge — good news since an “all of the above” approach is essential to improving economic, social, health and environmental outcomes.

Missing Focus? — Media

Media was the least common “area of focus” with just 19 of 365 respondents indicating media is a focus (Table 1). Further analysis revealed the organizations that self-reported as media-focused tend to be small; over 50% of them have between one and four full time employees, and these respondents are significantly more likely to work at either the local (sub-county) or the state level, rather than regionally or nationally. Eight of the 19 respondents that indicated a media focus are local economic development, tourism or government organizations. The size and type of these organizations suggest their media work may be related to marketing the community and/or local businesses. The remaining 12 respondents with a focus on media are statewide and national organizations, which are often larger and may have staff whose job description includes communications and media. While few organizations noted media as a focus, when asked to comment on the processes and tools rural-serving organizations rely on (Table 2 below), 132 of 365 respondents mentioned media engagement or storytelling, suggesting there is awareness of the importance of communications to rural development, if not the staff or expertise to consider media a consistent area of focus.

Process and Tools

In Table 2 (below), processes and tools are grouped loosely into three categories: ones that engage with places, ones that engage with organizations and ones that engage with individuals. These data indicate that survey respondents overwhelmingly engage communities and organizations. The two methods that organizations selected most often are (1) community organizing and engagement and (2) convening stakeholders. Fewer respondents indicated that they provided direct services to individuals; even so, more than half of rural-serving organizations incorporate individual development methods, such as leadership and education, into their work.

³ For more on Rural Development Hubs, visit: [As.pn/ruralhubs](https://as.pn/ruralhubs).

Table 2: Process Tools Organizations Use
(By percentage and raw number of responses)

| Engaging with Place | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Community organizing and engagement | 74% | 247 |
| Convening stakeholders | 70% | 236 |
| Site visits | 42% | 142 |
| Media engagement and storytelling | 39% | 132 |
| Engaging with Organizations | | |
| Strategy/action planning | 60% | 201 |
| Technical assistance | 53% | 176 |
| Peer-learning sessions/exchanges | 43% | 141 |
| Grantmaking | 39% | 132 |
| Business coaching and development | 33% | 111 |
| Marketing assistance | 25% | 83 |
| Engaging with Individuals | | |
| Training and education | 56% | 189 |
| Leadership development | 44% | 147 |
| Youth engagement and/or service | 36% | 106 |
| Providing direct services | 24% | 81 |

sector or region-specific and disaggregated, rather than centralized. Additional inquiry and thought leadership on these topics are needed.

Some sources of information and learning were clearly less favored by survey respondents. Less than 10% rely on information from industry-specific publications like newsletters or reports from trade organizations, and notably (pre-COVID-19), less than 5% said they rely on webinars or virtual exchange. COVID-19, remote work and social distancing may be affecting this preference. Regardless, national organizations and technical assistance providers should consider this finding when developing online content and determining how best to engage rural-serving organizations.

Open-ended survey responses indicate that most rural-serving organizations rely on local or regional relationships and networks for information rather than national affiliation with national organizations. Asked to list their top five most valuable formal or informal networks, 72 of the total 336 respondents to this open-ended question mentioned peer networks (some formalized but many informal) and 65 respondents listed membership in a formal association such as local developers' associations and planning associations. Forty-four of the respondents mentioned regional chambers of commerce or local economic development councils. Of those 336 responses, the only national organizations with significant mentions were the American Planning Association (13 responses) and the Opportunity Finance Network (11 responses).

Rural Learning to Meet Mission

A goal of this survey was to surface the networks and sources of information that rural-serving organizations rely on to meet their mission. According to the organizations that responded, there were many different sources for information and learning, rather than a handful of trusted, go-to sources for information on issues affecting rural people and places. Asked to indicate the top three sources of information that help them do their work, approximately 80% of organizations indicated that input from the community and local stakeholders was important. Organizations also relied on input from their board of directors (52%) and conversations with peers (50%) for making informed decisions about their work. These data point to the importance of social capital and organizational development in rural regions. They could also indicate rural-focused information is

The Health of Rural Organizations

Since fiscal health and organizational capacity are essential to any organization's ability to deliver results, we wanted to know more about rural-serving organizations' financial situation and staffing. Survey results indicate that overall, most responding organizations feel they are doing okay, but lack the resources to undertake new endeavors or take risks. Over 80% of respondents stated they had adequate or very good ability to meet their organization's mission. Additionally, 75% of respondents stated their organization had adequate or very good financial health — with 40% rating their organization as having very good financial health. However, this perception of rather good financial health also seems to be fragile for many survey respondents. One hundred and forty-six respondents chose to share additional information about their organizational capacity and stability in

an open-ended question. One-half of these statements cited frustration with few funding sources and staffing challenges. Survey analysis also indicates that the majority (58%) of rural-serving organizations with one to four employees work in small communities of less than 5,000 people. These small organizations serving very small communities are significantly more likely to have poor financial health, and significantly less likely to be associated with very good financial health than larger organizations. This may be because very small organizations are likely working closest to the ground and in some of the most challenged communities where local resources are scarce.

Staffing

Around 70% of rural organizations said they are generally able to recruit, train or retain staff. However, there was a statistically significant correlation between small organizations with a staff

of one to four people, and the struggle to recruit and retain employees. Survey results indicated that 44% of organizations that serve communities with a population of less than 5,000 have only one to four staff.

Additionally, 46% of survey respondents who serve communities with a population less than 5,000 indicate they have a poor financial situation, defined as having a struggle month to month to stay afloat. Alternatively, organizations that reported excellent or good staffing situations were statistically more likely to have between 5 and 25 employees. Organizations serving locations with 20,000 to 30,000 residents were more likely to have more employees (in the range of 10-14 employees). Partnerships among small and larger organizations may be an important avenue for reaching very small or remote communities.

Table 3: Self-described Organizational Stability

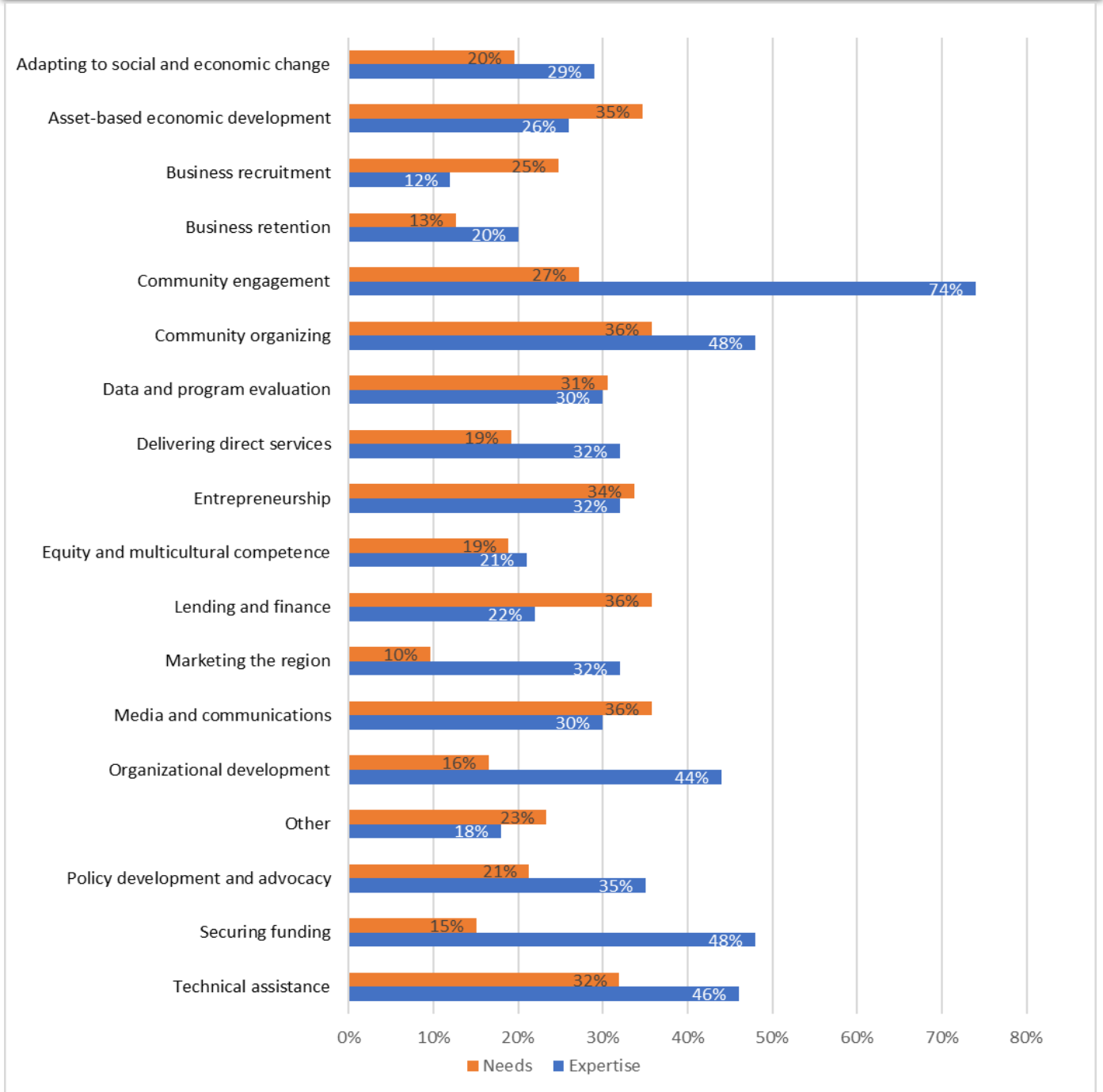
| What's Working | What's Not |
|---|---|
| <p><i>“Our organization will celebrate its 10-year anniversary this year. We are a respected organization that makes a visible impact in people’s lives. Our networks are rooted in community—we have earned their trust.”</i></p> <p>- National Hispanic Organization</p> | <p><i>“Our primary issue is lack of consistent cash flow in a rural region that is only starting to understand the importance of the creative sector in economic development and community wellness...We are partnered with the state’s economic development arm, but budget cuts are a constant threat.”</i></p> <p>- Regional Development Organization</p> |
| <p><i>“Our organization has served the Navajo Nation for 25 years and assisted hundreds of farmers and ranchers in developing and maintaining their farms and ranches while preserving traditional cultural approaches to agriculture. Our work directly supported many other Navajo entrepreneurs to build and maintain their enterprises within a strong culturally supportive environment.”</i></p> <p>- Tribal Education Organization</p> | <p><i>“We are over two hours away from the next largest ‘city’ and a day’s drive to metropolitan environments where most philanthropy is based. This puts us at a disadvantage in building discretionary, or even targeted philanthropic funding. Many in philanthropy want to know about numbers of people rather than lasting community change that stimulates growth of the economy and its people.”</i></p> <p>- County Economic Development Organization</p> |
| <p><i>“We have created a Rural Development Hub based on the model of rural development philanthropy with a primary goal of sustainability, transparency and accountability to the people in our region.”</i></p> <p>- Community Foundation in Appalachia</p> | <p><i>“The staffing issue is critical. There are simply no qualified candidates for the positions we are hiring for at the salary levels we can offer. And our salaries are considerably higher than most nonprofit salaries out there.”</i></p> <p>- Statewide Alliance</p> |

Public Funding

Survey results indicate government funding is an important source of revenue for rural-serving organizations. A statistically significant 60% of organizations that rely on federal, state or local public funds for more than half of their budget rated their organizations' financial health as "fair." These organizations are typically less than a year ahead of raising the funds or securing the revenue they need to continue their work. By contrast, a statistically significant 48% of organizations for

which public funding comprised less than half of their budget reported having an adequate financial position, defined as "good for now, but not sure of our financial position one or two years from now." In the past three fiscal years, 80% of respondent organizations had applied for public funding of some kind, and 78% of all surveyed organizations claimed that some or all of their applications for government funding were successful. We can infer from the data that rural organizations make careful choices, applying for public programs only when their chances of receiving funding are good.

Graph 3: Current Organizational Expertise — and Need for Expertise



Current Organizational Expertise— and Need for Expertise

In the survey, respondents were asked two related questions. One asked them to indicate the topic areas where their organization had expert-level know-how and capacity, and in a following question with the same topic areas, respondents indicated where they could use more know-how and capacity. Graph 3 (above) shows the responses to these questions side by side.⁴ A glance at these data together yields useful insights. There are five topic areas with which rural-serving organizations indicate they need more help and support than they have expertise: 1) adapting to social and economic change, 2) asset-based economic development, 3) community engagement, 4) equity and multicultural competence, and 5) media and communications. These topic areas—as well as data and evaluation and securing funding with over 100 answers each—are areas where national organizations can offer aid or support for rural-serving organizations.

Rural-serving organizations' self-reported need for additional media and communications expertise dovetails with our finding (Table 1 above) that media is not a focus for most rural-serving organizations. Since 216 (87%) of the organizations reported having expertise in community organizing, it was surprising to see community engagement identified as an outstanding need among rural-serving organizations. About 75% of the 247 rural serving organizations that indicated they use community organizing and engagement as a tool *also* indicated they need additional support with community engagement (see Table 2 above). Understanding with more specificity what kind of additional support these organizations need is an area for further research; the self-reported areas where assistance is needed also point to an important opportunity for peer learning among rural-serving organizations on the topics identified.

Policy Matters

The survey also assessed rural organizations' engagement with and needs around public policy. First, we found that many rural-serving

organizations are not currently engaged in changing public policy. A total of 222 survey respondents (61%) reported that their organization seeks to inform or influence public policy, while 143 respondents answered “no,” or skipped the question entirely.⁵ Forty-one (61%) of those who answered “no” were organizations with one to four staff members, which suggests that small organizations have less capacity to work on policy issues.

Table 4: At What Level Do Rural-Serving Organizations Engage in Policy Change?

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| Federal | 35% |
| State | 80% |
| County & Local | 66% |
| Tribal | 6% |

Table 4 indicates that the largest portion of respondents engage with state policy (80%) and that most also engage in policy change efforts at the county and local level (66%). By contrast, fewer rural-serving organizations engage in policy change at the federal level (35%). This is indicative of the importance of local and state policy on rural communities and rural organizations' fluency with state and local policy issues. The comparatively low percentage of respondents that report engaging in policy change at the federal level raises questions about barriers to engagement. This decision could be a practical cost-benefit analysis of the likelihood of realizing change, ease of access to decision makers, and fluency with policy processes with state and local issues winning out over federal. It could also indicate a shortage of compelling and low-friction, rural-specific avenues for engaging in federal policy. Understanding barriers that keep rural-serving organizations from engaging in federal policy change and what it would take to increase engagement are areas for additional inquiry.

When they do engage on matters of policy, rural organizations indicated they have influence. Around 64% of organizations responding to the questions

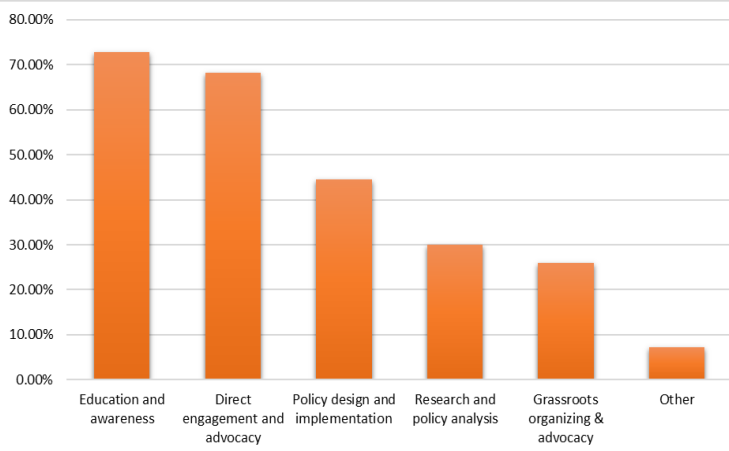
⁴ The questions for Graph 3 asked, “In what areas does your organization have expert-level know-how and capacity?” and “In what areas could your organization use more know-how and capacity?” In both questions, respondents were asked to select all answers that that apply. This question had 291 responses and 74 respondents skipped.

⁵ 67 respondents answered “no,” while 76 respondents skipped this entire section on public policy. The question for Graph 4 was “In what ways does your organization engage with public policy?” and received 220 responses.

about public policy reported success in influencing public policy. Not including the organizations that opted out of this section, only 3% of respondents reported they had no success in influencing policy.

Graph 4 shows that public education and awareness, and direct engagement and advocacy with policymakers are two of the most frequently used methods of engaging with public policy. Not surprisingly, organizations working on grassroots efforts, defined as “training and working with residents to organize their own communities,” were significantly more likely to have expertise in community organizing and equity and multicultural competence, and significantly less likely to be experts in business retention, data and program evaluation, and finance lending than other rural-serving organizations.

Graph 4: How Rural Organizations Engage in Policy



Organizations that Engage in Policy Have Different Needs

Survey results demonstrate that rural organizations that engage with policy have significantly different needs than those that do not. The 222 organizations engaged in policy were significantly more likely to need additional capacity to anticipate and adapt to larger economic and social trends than the “no” group. Conversely, organizations answering “no” to the policy question were significantly more likely to need additional organizational development capacity than the “yes” group. Ninety-eight of the total 289 policy question respondents also indicated they need additional capacity or help with equity and multicultural competence. A statistically significant 84 of those 98 responses work on public policy issues, while only 14 do not.

Discussion

The needs, priorities and challenges of rural-serving organizations are as varied as the rural and tribal communities they serve. This survey of 365 organizations is a source of data and insights on what rural organizations do, what they need, and how policy makers, investors and partners can help organizations working in rural regions rural realize positive results—and prosperity for *all*.

Key Finding #1: Most rural organizations are small, multi-faceted and mighty.

Local and regional rural-serving organizations are the boots-on-the-ground and trusted local entities for delivering programs and services essential to community vitality.

Action Imperatives:

- **Provide support** for organizational capacity building and for assistance in creating a diverse and stable financial base, especially for small organizations; this is important to organizations of all sizes and can help spur innovation.
- **Create opportunities** for funded technical assistance, strategic and succession planning, and knowledge transfer so local organizations can continue to learn and evolve.
- **Work with rural and regional intermediaries** (e.g. Rural Development Hubs). These place-based organizations work closely with a myriad of small, local organizations and can be essential partners to national organizations looking to make an impact in rural America.

Key Finding #2: Peer networks, staff, board members and local relationships take precedence.

Rural-serving organizations largely rely on advice from staff, board members, local organizations and peer networks to make decisions. This reflects the importance of social capital in rural regions and indicates a need for thought leadership and resources that are better tailored to the way these organization make decisions.

Action Imperatives:

- **Realize impact** by developing long-term partnerships with rural organizations and by cultivating local leadership. In rural communities, the messenger matters.

- **Foster learning** through peer-to-peer exchange opportunities so organizations with expertise and needs in targeted topic areas can teach one another.
- **Catalyze action** through targeted staff training and board engagement to bulk up expertise in areas where it's needed.

Key Finding #3: Public policy and communications capacity are in relatively short supply.

Many rural-serving organizations do not engage in the public policy process; those that do tend to focus on local and state policy issues. Relatively few rural-serving organizations have dedicated communications capacity or media know-how.

Even as they have a desire to make policy impact, our data indicate many rural organizations have a limited ability to engage in policy or to shed light on what's working and what's not.

Action Imperatives:

- **Build expertise** in policy and communications within rural-serving organizations through partnerships or with new targeted funding.
- **Share stories** of grassroots success and rural community that help uplift rural voices who aren't currently heard in national news media.

Key Finding #4: The pandemic and related economic crisis just made systemic challenges a lot worse.

Even before the pandemic struck in the spring of 2020, rural-serving organizations were facing a host of systemic challenges on the horizon. Changing demographics and aging populations, the cultural challenges posed by immigration, political divides, and the existential crisis of climate change were all front and center on the agendas for rural leaders. COVID-19 and the related economic shutdown has superseded these crises without doing anything to help solve them.

Action Imperatives:

- **Strengthen capacity** by offering flexible grants to rural-serving organizations, while working with them to realize lasting change in the communities where they work.
- **Plan for change** through technical assistance, strategic planning, leadership succession planning and staff education.

The Community Strategies Group

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) has helped connect, inspire and equip local leaders as they build more prosperous regions and advance those living on the economic margins. More than 75% of CSG's work in those years has focused on rural America. We have worked with rural doers from nearly every state, both developing strategy on the ground and convening them to learn from each other. In turn, we have learned from the people doing the best work of building and rebuilding strong, inclusive rural communities and economies.

The Housing Assistance Council

Founded in 1971, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) is a nonprofit organization that supports affordable housing efforts in rural areas of the United States. HAC provides technical housing services, financial products, policy assistance, trainings, and research and information services. HAC is an equal opportunity lender.

Support for this project was provided by the Ford Foundation.

We thank them and extend our gratitude to the many organizations working in rural and native American communities across the country for participating in this project and for the work they do every day.

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| www.aspenicg.org

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