



Rural Road to Recovery

Priorities and Action Plans of the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs

The mission of the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs is to work with local, state and national partners in providing resources and technical assistance to aid communities in shaping and achieving their vision for community and economic development.

PRIORITY 1

ENGAGEMENT: Renew the agency's focus by engaging in regional and local discussions

- Organize Rural Affairs Working Group with key stakeholders to align initiatives and generate new ideas for rural economic recovery.
- Enhance OCRA's role as trusted advisor to communities by assisting them to identifying state and federal resources that align with their economic recovery projects.
- Facilitate and advance equitable policies that support long-term economic growth for businesses and populations disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- Refocus Downtown Development Week efforts to Small Business Saturday to assist with attracting visitors to return to shopping in downtowns.
- Build the capacity of rural communities to address COVID-19 related health challenges in partnership with the IU Center for Rural Engagement.
- In partnership with the Indiana Destination Development Corporation, study the creation of trails to connect historic and cultural sites across Indiana.

PRIORITY 2

INFORMATION: Expand access to information and resources that are vital to local and regional leaders

- Develop toolkits based on best practices that advance the implementation of placemaking strategies, making these resources available through direct engagement, email, social media, and agency websites.
- Launch training series on revolving loan funds in cities, counties and regions to support key sectors impacted by COVID-19.
- Partner with National Main Street Center to deliver training to Indiana Main Street organizations with a focus on creating strategic plans that respond to COVID-19.
- Develop and deliver programs that support small businesses in their recovery efforts.

PRIORITY 3

RECOVERY FUNDING: Repurpose and deploy a portion of existing federally-sourced Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, along with a state resources, to support rural Indiana communities

- Utilize the \$51 million in supplemental CDBG funding under the CARES Act for communities to provide support for economic development, public services, and public facilities to assist residents and business impacted by COVID-19.
- Ready key anchor institutions, such as libraries, theaters, and senior centers, for re-opening by providing essential PPE supplies.
- Offer state and federal grant funding with policies in place for maximum leverage and impact by removing match requirements for COVID-19 Response Program.
- Include economic recovery plan as an eligible activity for the existing planning grant program.
- Develop Wi-Fi hot-spots that help expand access to education, health and public safety, and other quality of life amenities.
- Provide communities with capital to help small businesses remain open and retain employees.

Background Information

The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) is a unique state agency focused on assisting local and regional governments and organizations with achieving their own visions for community economic development. It does this by investing in human and organizational capacity as much as in physical infrastructure to help communities to succeed in the 21st Century economy.

OCRA operates with two guiding principles: Retain, attract, and develop talent in rural communities and incite and encourage collaboration in rural planning processes. From these, its strategic framework includes providing opportunities and programs focused on people and place investments, being a center of excellence, building leadership capacity, rural broadband infrastructure deployment, and supporting economic growth in downtown districts. In response to the unprecedented challenges COVID-19 has placed upon all Hoosiers, OCRA's plan for economic rural recovery is laser focused on three fundamentals -- engagement, information, and recovery funding.

Over the course of six weeks, OCRA secured the input of a variety of stakeholders, including OCRA staff, elected officials, non-profits, visitor bureaus, economic development organizations, rural health representatives, Main Street leaders and state universities. Invaluable information was received from all corners of Indiana, providing a snapshot of the current adaptations and challenges impacting communities, and the needs these places were seeking to address, with support from their state government. Insights were gained through weekly phone and video calls with community leaders, surveys, focus groups conducted by university partners, and virtual meetings. Through this effort, OCRA and Ball State confirmed that many pre-COVID-19 strategies already in place, necessitated only minor modifications.

The current strategic plan was founded on research-based economic principles and guided by intense collaboration with local, regional, and statewide partners. The direction from these constituencies points to OCRA strengthening certain core functions in support of the rural recovery.

For more information visit www.in.gov/ocra.

The Rural Road to Recovery Project Team

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor appointed a team from Purdue University and Ball State University to provide technical assistance and support to the five agencies and offices that have a direct report to Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch. The Project Team members include Bo Beaulieu, Roberto Gallardo and Melinda Grismer with the Purdue Center for Regional Development, as well as David Terrell, Geoff Schomacker and Brian Blackford with Ball State University's Indiana Communities Institute.

