



Program Overview

Entrepreneur's role in community economic development

Research has shown the importance of entrepreneurship for sustained economic growth and improved wellbeing. Entrepreneurs of all kinds – social, civic, and business – are foundational to sustained community vitality and prosperity. Rural communities must continue to innovate, compete, and work to survive and thrive. And economic development work never ends. Our world is dynamic and everchanging, requiring our continuous engagement in community economic development work. - e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

What an entrepreneurial ecosystem is

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a community-based system that allows for the fast flow of talent, information, and resources that supports entrepreneurs at each stage of their business and personal growth. A culture of trust and collaboration allows entrepreneurs to access the supports and resources they need and successfully interact with them [state and local agencies, other businesses, networks, etc.].

The approach supports residents to sustainably mobilize and build assets to improve their quality of life. It is a more balanced approach than traditional economic development, using connections between local institutions and residents to identify community priorities, opportunities, and issues.

Because of the ongoing, iterative, and phased nature of this work, to effectively implement an entrepreneurial ecosystem framework and deploy resources, business owners, entrepreneurs, residents, foundations, government officials and economic development organizations must be involved. A long-term commitment to and investment in the approach from local entrepreneurs, municipalities, residents, key community leaders, organizations and institutions is necessary to make positive changes in the community.

The Ford Family Foundation realizes the importance of supporting entrepreneurial ecosystem building as an economic development strategy with the goal of increasing rural prosperity and resiliency. We have partnered with Oregon Economic Development Districts, Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC) and e2: Entrepreneurial Ecosystems ([e2](#)) to launch a program called GRO (**G**rowing **R**ural **O**regon) that is based on the e2 framework, which has a proven track record of accelerating entrepreneurial activity in rural communities. Under this program, selected communities will undergo an intensive journey to jumpstart their entrepreneurial behavior. This work goes beyond a focus on entrepreneurs and business owners themselves and engages the broader community in strengthening and growing its entrepreneurial ecosystem, which, over time, will increase prosperity.

Communities across the country have demonstrated success and economic growth by using this “grow your own” approach to entrepreneur development. However, as it is a resource- and time-intensive process, communities must demonstrate a baseline readiness and deep commitment to this work.

In the pilot round of the GRO program, four rural Oregon communities will participate. Each one will be matched with a trained community coach, work through the [entrepreneurial ecosystem building framework](#), participate in cohort learning with other communities, and track and monitor progress against program metrics.

Community Benefits

- Assigned a trained community coach that will work with the community champions team for up to 5 years
- Gain a greater understanding of its entrepreneurial opportunities and create a long-term sustainable strategy to support the needs of business growth
- Identify and expand leadership base to champion entrepreneurial activity now and into the future
- Financial assistance to support local coordination, meeting expenses, training, technical assistance, and evaluation tools
- After phase 1, qualified communities will be well-positioned to apply for and raise additional dollars from multiple resources for implementation projects

Long-term Impact

Communities which fully engage in the GRO program, **long-term**, can expect to see the following impacts:

- Increased prosperity, such as tax revenue and increased school enrollment
- Increased entrepreneurial behavior as indicated by new businesses, entrepreneurial support process improvements, new or enhanced training opportunities
- Increased competitiveness illustrated through increased number of ventures selling outside of the community and increased wages
- Broader diversification in leadership and community activity
- Increased resilience demonstrated through economic diversity
- Overall, the community will be able to attract new dollars from the private sector and increase venture deal flow