



What is an 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 is an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem?

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a community-based system that allows for the fast flow of talent, information, and resources which supports entrepreneurs at each stage of their business and personal growth. Strong ecosystems allow entrepreneurs to access the support and resources they need to succeed. The knowledge and resources required by entrepreneurs is diverse. Knowledge may reside with other entrepreneurs, other people (such as mentors or professionals), service providers (such as the Small Business Development Center), or institutions (such as universities or libraries). It is often connections among individuals and institutions that allow knowledge and resources to flow to entrepreneurs quickly. This approach supports rural 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.

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 (OEDD), Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC), e2: Entrepreneurial Ecosystems ([e2](#)), and [Network Kansas](#) to launch GRO (**G**rowing **R**ural **O**regon). GRO is based on the e2 framework, which has a proven track record of accelerating entrepreneurial activity in rural communities.

Under GRO, selected communities will undergo an intensive journey to jumpstart their entrepreneurial behavior and ultimately grow prosperity in the form of leadership, stronger and new organizations, increased tax base and personal wealth. This work goes beyond a focus on entrepreneurs and business owners themselves and engages the broader community in strengthening and growing its entrepreneurial ecosystem. 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.

Four rural Oregon communities have been selected to participate in the pilot round of GRO. Participating communities will be matched with a trained community coach, work through the GRO entrepreneurial ecosystem building framework, participate in cohort learning with other communities, and track and monitor progress against program metrics.

Role of the Community Coach

The GRO Community Coach serves as a community guide and moderator, resource networker and capacity builder, and champions the GRO framework in each of the selected communities. The Community Coach works closely with paid Local Coordinators, Community Champions and other local partners to implement the GRO framework, and with the evaluation team to collect community stories and data to support evidence of achievement of outcome objectives. The Community Coach receives comprehensive training on the GRO framework and shares this knowledge with selected communities through on-the-ground coaching. The Community Coach also brings knowledge and experience of community development and community building practices, as well as experience in economic development and/or other entrepreneur support services.

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 framework, **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