



ENERGIZING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES

A Pathway to Prosperity



Source: Dan Vorisek, E Communities Coach, [Rural Action](#), Ohio

Building Momentum through Community Investment Grants

When the E-Communities project was launched, stakeholder buy-in varied across the communities where the concept was presented. While the underlying focus on local entrepreneurs and growing small businesses was generally accepted as necessary, there was less enthusiasm for the organizing and implementation process of the E-Community framework. With community leadership committed to existing events, projects, and processes, it was very difficult to move the community teams to action steps that would better connect struggling business owners to needed resources. While some progress was made to implement the survey outreach work, and community members began to gain more interest in the outreach process, the extended time frame of the project was a poor motivator.

As the first year of the project came to an end, Rural Action community coaches began having more conversations with the teams to approach entrepreneurial support activities in more tangible ways. Community teams were more interested in networking socials and basic tools like community websites, promotional materials, increasing the available lodging, and having equipment available for the many community events that took place over the course of the year. One community did want to have a dedicated person to lead the business outreach and follow-up work, and one other community expressed the same idea. With this information in hand and a budget line in the ARC grant for community investment available, Rural Action developed an option for the E-Teams to apply for a mini-grant up to \$10,000 for activities that would further the work to better network their local entrepreneurs to needed resources. As a grant requirement, all communities needed to have a mechanism to gather input from their entrepreneurs and follow up with any resource assistance that was available.

The response to the Community Investment Fund (CIF) grant was very positive. Three communities immediately came forward with proposals to apply for the grants, and two more applied over the course of the next six months. One community that had been reluctant to engage Rural Action and the E-Community project decided to apply as well. Another community identified a school to match their grant funds to make it possible to hire a business outreach coordinator. The Community Investment Fund option made a noticeable difference in the level of focus on entrepreneurs in the participating communities. There remained challenges in two communities with the lowest leadership capacity for project planning, and these communities did not utilize the full amount of the funds. Overall, the Community Investment Fund deployed \$63,000 towards entrepreneurial support through ARC grant and matching dollars. The CIF also provide a valuable tangible goal that was attainable and strengthened the commitment of each community to put more resources towards supporting their entrepreneurs.