

An aerial photograph of a vibrant street festival in a town. The street is filled with people, many of whom are gathered under various colored tents (blue, purple, white). Buildings line the street, some with signs like 'EMPIRE' and 'DE WINE BOUTIQUE'. The scene is captured from a high angle, showing the layout of the street and the surrounding urban environment.

Strengthening Regional Capacity in Rural Places

Exploring regional collaboration and what it takes to sustain it over time.

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Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

- 40 years working alongside practitioners & decision-makers on rural prosperity, equity, and well-being.
- Our expertise is to surface patterns, support learning across places, and strengthen the rural development field.
- We're known for peer learning, field building, and practitioner-informed research.
- Aspen CSG works in partnership with regional organizations doing work on the ground.



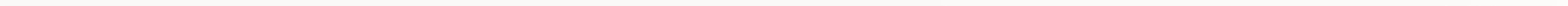
40 years 



Aspen CSG staff live and work in the unceded homeland of the Nacotchtank, Piscataway Conoy, and Pamunkey peoples and their descendants.

These sovereign nations have called the Washington, DC region home for tens of thousands of years. They have endured generations of genocide, enslavement, and displacement. And still they endure.

We hope that, in gathering to advance rural prosperity, we are doing so responsibly, with respect and recognition of the Indigenous peoples who have long stewarded this region and regions across the United States.



Why Regional Approaches Matter



- Many rural sectors operate at a regional scale, including workforce, housing, health care, infrastructure, and outdoor recreation.
- Individual communities often lack the scale to attract investment or sustain specialized capacity on their own.
- Regional approaches allow communities to pool assets, share risk, and coordinate across boundaries that are already porous in practice.
- Regionalism reflects how people live and work, not a new governance structure imposed from outside.

What We Mean by Rural Development Hubs

- Rural Development Hubs are organizations that support holistic development across a rural region.
- A Hub is defined by function, not form. Hubs may be nonprofits, public-private partnerships, or intermediaries.
- Hubs don't replace local organizations; they support and strengthen local efforts.



Coordinate Across Place and Sector

Convenes partners across communities, sectors, and issue areas.



Build Shared Capacity

Provides technical assistance, staffing support, and shared infrastructure.



Align Capital With Regional Priorities

Connects public, private, and philanthropic funding to locally defined goals.



Sustain Locally-Driven Work Over Time

Supports local strategies and maintains continuity across funding cycles and leadership change.



How Hubs Model Differs From Traditional Economic Development

- Longer time horizon focused on capacity and resilience, not quick wins.
- Emphasis on collaboration and shared benefit rather than competition between places.
- Uses a broader definition of success, including wealth creation, participation, and well-being.



What's Still Emerging in the Rural Development Hubs model?



- Sustainable funding models for long-term regional capacity.
- Governance structures that balance accountability with flexibility.
- How the model adapts across different rural and Indigenous contexts.





Discussion Questions



What conditions help Rural Development Hubs build and sustain regional capacity over time?



How can Rural Development Hubs support inclusive, locally-driven wealth creation as funding norms and expectations change?