

October 7, 2022

Ambassador Susan Rice  
Domestic Policy Council  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Ambassador Rice:

We applaud your work and the work of President Biden's administration in focusing attention and resources on areas of opportunity across rural America. As the leaders of State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) who make up Partners for Rural America (PRA), created in the U.S. Farm Bill, we believe there is a significant opportunity to leverage your team's good work creating the [Rural Partners Network](#) in two concrete ways:

1. First, by focusing a future Phase 3 of that effort around the infrastructure and networks of relationships the SRDCs have carefully, collectively built over the preceding three decades to galvanize new, impactful investment in rural America.
2. By investing directly in SRDC capacity to hire coordinating staff at the national level and directly supporting these effective entities to advance the goals of the Rural Partners Network.

In addition to the potential of partnering to support and accelerate the role out of the Biden administration's Rural Partnership Network, we seek a renewed partnership with USDA and the federal government to better serve rural America. This is a moment of tremendous opportunity – thanks in part to President Biden's leadership, broadband access is expanding, new Federal grant programs are helping get stuck or stalled projects in rural communities moving, and we see an unprecedented opportunity to engage communities across our country effectively, inclusively, and productively.

The existing network of SRDCs offers an effective and non-partisan way to convene leadership, state by state, to bring the people of rural America together. Rural America is vital to the heart and soul of this nation. Stitching together the civic fabric that binds all parts of our country and building a shared narrative will be critical to helping reduce economic disparities between rural and urban areas. In turn, this will also help mitigate some of the unhealthy political polarization stifling national discussions.

The following background section provides information on the history of the SRDCs and their effectiveness. These organizations are well-suited to support a future build out of the Rural Partners Network – so much so that recreating them in these 13 states would be redundant. We look forward with optimism to working with the Biden Administration to bring hope, opportunity, and unity to improve the quality of life in rural America.

Sincerely,

Bill Menner, Board President, Partners for Rural America  
Executive Director, Iowa Rural Development Council

For Partners for Rural America Board of Directors: Kimber Lanning, Arizona; Lael Duncan, Washington; Jerry Miller, Idaho; Marie Barry, Wisconsin; Jessica AcMoody, Michigan; Charlotte Davis, Maryland  
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## **Background**

More than 25 years ago, eight pilot State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) were established under the first Bush Administration (at the request of the National Governors Association); many others were founded and supported under the Clinton Administration. The 1990 Presidential Initiative on Rural Development called for the establishment of SRDCs as a means of promoting collaboration among federal, state, and local governments and tribal communities, and connecting public policy with both the private and non-profit sectors within each state. The 1992 Report of the President's Commission on Rural America established SRDCs as a vital component to better coordinate rural development policies and programs and make them more responsive to the actual needs of rural communities.

The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (the Farm Bill) formally authorized the crossagency National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP) to work with SRDCs under federal statute, and Congress called for SRDCs to be established in all 50 states. Unfortunately, shortly after the passage of the 2002 Farm Bill, discretionary funding for the 40 SRDCs that had been formed was phase out, and in 2004 the NRDP which had been located within USDA, was disbanded.

The NRDP had been designed as an earlier version of President Obama's White House Rural Council, but had the additional muscle of state-level intermediaries providing unifying leadership in states throughout the country through the SRDCs.

Since the 1990s, SRDCs across America have helped leverage hundreds of millions of dollars to meet the economic, agricultural, health care and other needs of rural communities. At the state level, SRDCs bring together all levels of government, business and agricultural groups and nonprofit partners to identify barriers, shortcomings, duplication, and lack of resources in policies and programs that serve rural communities. They set priorities for action with rural communities directly, with regions within states, and add up findings as lead conveners of state-level policy development and interagency collaboration. In short, the State Councils establish a neutral and respected venue for program and policy collaboration across jurisdictions at both the local, regional, and state levels to work cooperatively with the USDA offices and other federal agencies to help deliver effective programs to rural communities.

This work has been especially appreciated by state USDA Rural Development offices where the SRDCs remain active today. Unfortunately, the number of State Councils across the nation has dwindled due to lack of funding. Today, the 13 existing State Rural Development Councils are still working to fulfill their mission and provide leadership, knowledge, coordination, and technical assistance to rural communities. They are building policies and partnerships to meet their challenging economic and social needs and capitalize on opportunities that exist. It is time to systematically advance economic opportunity, community hope and momentum, and renewed leadership for a vital future for the nation's rural communities.

The renewal of rural progress will require hard infrastructural investments—for roads, broadband and wastewater—but just as importantly, America needs rural leadership infrastructure that supports collaborative work in each state through SRDCs, connected to a coordinating center point, like the now-dormant White House Rural Council.

Partners for Rural America is asking the Biden Administration to renew the partnership between the SRDCs and the federal government, to re-invest in an effective network of State Councils in every state, and to work collaboratively to rebuild a federal coordinative centerpoint for rural renewal. State Rural

Development Councils can bridge party lines and cultural differences to advance unity and collective purpose within rural communities by working together with state, federal and non-profit organizations.

We are positioned to leverage strong positive connections between the Biden Administration and rural leadership throughout the country. As neutral facilitators of public process, locally and at the state level, SRDCs can be the intermediary that brings people together and listens to their needs while supporting the advancement of community and economic development projects.

Our on-the-ground community relationships, together with our connections in the state capitols, enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of federal agency programs in service to rural development throughout the country.

To capitalize on the opportunity at hand, Partners for Rural America requests a modest initial investment from USDA. The Farm Bill currently authorizes funding for the NRDP and State Rural Development Councils at up to \$10 million annually. SRDCs have not received any funding from the federal government to support their work since 2004. Those SRDCs that have survived have been entrepreneurial; partnering with their state governments, competing for federal and philanthropic grant funds, developing memberships and business partnerships to manage services ranging from community organizing to producing state rural summits and rural policy council initiatives.

Today the State Councils are uniquely positioned to address critical problems facing rural America. To strengthen the work of SRDC's in the short term, Partners for Rural America proposes to engage in an immediate partnership with USDA, and requests your consideration of the development of a cooperative agreement providing \$700,000 for the following objectives:

- \$350,000 for the PRA to hire 2.5 professional and support staff to help build PRA's capacity at the national level to coordinate and bridge the research and rural policy findings between states, report to various federal agencies (and the White House Rural Council if re-established), assist the 13 existing SRDCs with their rural program and policy coordination efforts, and help to grow the number of operational SRDCs.
- \$300,000 to provide direct financial support to the 13 existing SRDCs, as well as provide start-up funding to two new (or re-establishing) SRDCs.
- \$50,000 to permit the PRA to hold a broadly inclusive nationwide rural summit in the fall of 2021 (to include an intensive program of training for the SRDC staff and volunteer leaders).

The recently published Brookings Institution study of "Reimagining Rural Policy" concludes that, "A national rural strategy should promote collaboration with a wide range of partners and intermediaries with a regional purview, from EDA-funded local development districts to regional councils, community foundations, CDFIs, and rural development "hubs" that bring together expertise and leverage public, private, and philanthropic funding."

Partners for Rural America is ready to work with the Biden Administration as a strategic intermediary connecting federal agencies to entities in each state to build unity and effectiveness in public sector policies and programs. We are ready to reach out to additional states, to seed their ability to convene and coordinate the rural development leadership needed to advance both good public policy and rural community development initiatives.