



Rural Road to
Recovery in
Indiana
An Overview

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a pervasive impact throughout the United States, and Indiana has not been spared from this global health crisis. The consequences on the fiscal, economic and health status of people and communities across the state have been extensive. While large metropolitan cities such as New York, Miami, Houston and Chicago have captured the attention of major media channels, the impacts of COVID-19 on rural America have often been overlooked. With more than half of Indiana's 92 counties designated as rural/non-metropolitan areas, Governor Eric Holcomb and Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch understand the value these counties add to Indiana, and their commitment to these counties has not wavered, even while coping with the onset of COVID-19.

Nine of the 15 counties with the highest rates of COVID-19 cases are in the state's rural/nonmetropolitan areas. Leading Indiana with 434 cases per 10,000 in population is Cass County, a county with less than 38,000 residents.



Many of the state's rural counties have strong roots in agriculture/agribusiness, meat processing, and manufacturing, sectors that have emerged as major COVID-19 hotspots in the state.

A parallel challenge has been the consequences of COVID-19 on the economic fabric of Indiana's rural counties and communities. Like many places in the U.S., the unemployment rates have risen dramatically in rural Indiana. Estimates claim nearly one in five rural workers who were gainfully employed in February are now out of work. However, many rural-based jobs in the state are tied to specific sectors (such as manufacturing, retail, restaurants and government) that could be hard-pressed to return to pre-COVID-19 job numbers.

An early signal for gauging the nature and extent of job losses related to COVID-19 can be captured by examining job postings. This year, total job postings in rural Indiana dropped by more than 24,000 from January to mid-June. Especially hard hit were rural-based manufacturing jobs, falling by 44 percent during this same time. Furthermore, the crisis exposed the vulnerability of main street establishments and small businesses: food preparation and serving occupations which suffered a 59 percent drop in job postings between mid-January and mid-June 2020 (Source: EMSI, PCRD calculations). Communities are facing the challenge of reinventing themselves to survive, which is requiring them to reexamine their strategic planning and resiliency efforts for the future.

Several of the state's local government entities, already working on tight budgets, have experienced a steep decline in tax revenues. Indiana's rural counties are expected to lose between \$80 million to \$105 million in tax revenues in 2020 alone (Source: Ball State). Further declines are expected for next year due to delays in tax distributions. Local governments will be tasked with making strategic decisions on cutting public services relating to their budget; and thus the associated impact on residents.

Connectivity in Rural Indiana

The Next Level Connections (NLC) program was announced by the administration in 2018 to provide \$100 million for broadband deployment. Broadband providers are eligible to apply for funding to deploy broadband services to homes, businesses and anchor institutions not being served by actual speeds of 10 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream. The program has successfully granted the first round of funding with a second round to be announced in August 2020. Despite the significant investment, one central dilemma that COVID-19 has caused is the precarious position many rural Indiana counties are facing due to inconsistent accessibility of broadband services. While schools required students to transition to e-learning

strategies virtually overnight, scores of rural-based school districts faced major obstacles. Many students had no access to high-speed internet services in their homes, and combined with combatting digital literacy challenges with guardians to assist with e-learning, made continuing their education a challenge. As a result, schools had to innovate by strategically locating hot spots throughout their counties (such as the parking lot of local libraries) or distributing school buses outfitted with Wi-Fi capability in key locations.

Similarly, public health and medical communities have had to find ways to deliver critical services via telehealth. But, the lack of broadband services has made this a non-starter in several rural parts of the state, a serious obstacle in light of the large segment of residents in rural Indiana aged 65 and over – a COVID-19 high-risk population. Patients who lack high-speed connectivity in their homes, will be unable to utilize the benefits of telehealth.

A third dilemma that residents have had to manage was the move by many businesses, organizations, agencies and educational institutions to require employees to work remotely. For some in the workforce, teleworking from homes located in rural parts of the state proved to be a major challenge. Without access to broadband, rural residents will not be able to fill these positions as employers transition to telework models.

The broadband conundrum for rural Indiana was made especially clear in a recent study conducted by the Purdue Center for Regional Development. Authored by Roberto Gallardo and Richard Florida, the report examined the capacity of counties to embrace telework or e-learning strategies in light of COVID-19. What they discovered is that two-thirds of all counties in the U.S., labeled as highly vulnerable sites (places with limited digital connectivity with jobs that are not remote work-friendly), are located in rural America. In Indiana, nine of the 11 counties with the highest vulnerability scores are in rural/nonmetropolitan counties.

As severe as this crisis has been in both the U.S. and the state, chances are quite good that rural Indiana may fare better than other parts of rural America.



Things are Tough, But Rural Indiana is Not Forgotten

Unlike many states that have focused attention on the economic expansion of urban centers, Indiana has remained committed to its rural residents and places. Case in point is the establishment of the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) by the state legislature 15 years ago, an agency whose mission is to pursue economic and community development policies and programs that invest in the cultural and economic resilience of rural Indiana. To ensure that the challenges and opportunities present in rural Indiana were not marginalized, the agency was to report directly to the state's Lieutenant Governor, who served as the Secretary of Agriculture and Rural Development. This reporting structure remains intact to this day.

Since its inception, OCRA has mobilized its staff, in partnership with the state's higher education institutions and statewide associations, to build the capacity of small communities and rural counties to tackle local issues and to effectively rebound from major economic shocks. Investments made by OCRA in such programs as Hometown Collaboration Initiative, local Stellar and regional Stellar Communities have helped instill in residents a spirit of collaboration, inclusiveness, and proactive planning. Cities such as Huntingburg, Greenfield, Plymouth and Rushville have taken advantage of these programs – and the results have been tangible, not only in a visual sense, but also in the growth of community pride and inter-connectedness.

Also worth noting is that OCRA administers one of the largest state Main Street programs in the country, helping local small businesses build the knowledge and skills needed to survive and thrive. Small rural

businesses received less CARES Act funding than urban ones illustrated by the fact that 45 percent of small business applications in smaller areas were approved, compared with 59 percent in larger ones (Source: National Main Street Center). OCRA has built the Indiana Main Street (IMS) Program to be a strong partnership with the National Main Street Center to provide webinars, best practices and other tools that are designed to support local businesses.



One of the most unique and important aspects of the way Indiana state government is organized is the placement of key agencies under the leadership of the Lieutenant Governor.

The Important Role of Indiana's Lieutenant Governor

Aside from OCRA, the Lieutenant Governor oversees the Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), Indiana Destination Development Corporation (IDDC), Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA), and the Indiana Broadband Office (IBO). As such, the Lieutenant Governor is able to advance a more integrated and cohesive delivery of programs and services that are vital to the well-being of individuals, households, businesses and communities in the state, especially those located in rural Indiana.

The ability of these five agencies to be nimble during times of significant economic disruptions, such as COVID-19, is demonstrated in the timely development of priority goals and strategic actions taken by these agencies. New plans were designed to serve as the framework for the Rural Road to Recovery initiative by Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch. While each of the five agencies has a unique and compelling role to play in response to COVID-19, critical issues have emerged that cannot be addressed in a piecemeal fashion. These are challenges that necessitate coordination among all five agencies, a spirit of collaboration that is embedded in the work of these agencies under the leadership of the Lieutenant Governor.

The state's commitment to rural Indiana is rooted in its history. Rural communities in Indiana had a natural advantage as a result of when the Northwest Territory was formed, and later, when Indiana became a state in 1816. Because of state boundaries, and how towns were formed, almost all of rural Indiana is within proximity to larger nearby cities. In fact, 90 percent of the state's population lives within commuting distance of an urban core. Because of this distinct spatial feature, small towns are able to work on attracting those who wish to live in less densely populated communities, but still be within proximity to urban-based amenities and jobs. So, even though one in every three residents lives in rural Indiana, rural and urban in Indiana do have a mutual interest in seeing each other thrive. A positive and effective urban/rural interface is a high-priority topic for all of the agencies that are linked to the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.

The Engagement of Higher Education Institutions

Indiana is blessed with universities and colleges with centers that are committed to rural areas. These centers have welcomed the opportunity to collaborate, providing their research and outreach expertise to state, regional and local agencies, organizations and leaders. The centers that are nationally recognized for the quality and impact of their work include the Purdue University Center for Regional Development, Ball State's Indiana Communities Institute and Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Center for State Policy, and the Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement. Other colleges and universities across the state are also committed to engagement, and a noticeable number of small liberal arts colleges and universities are in rural areas where town-gown relationships are critical to the vitality of these communities.

Responding to COVID-19: Key Building Blocks are in Place in Indiana

When the COVID-19 crisis hit the state, the elements for

addressing and rebounding from this global crisis were already in place. The strong ties across state agencies, the years of capacity-building work by the family of businesses coordinated via the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, and the research and “on the ground” work of the state’s universities and colleges, have positioned the state to develop and implement aggressive and forward-thinking plans of action. Collectively, these efforts are part of the Lieutenant Governor’s Rural Road to Recovery Initiative.

A sampling of the key efforts that have been launched already by these agencies as a result of the pandemic is as follows:

Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA)

Reopened Indiana’s Hardest Hit Fund, with up to \$30 million available for mortgage payment assistance.

\$40 million provided to the Low Income Housing Emergency Assistance program from the CARES Act.

Launched a \$25 million COVID-19 Indiana Rental Assistance Fund for 91 counties.

Awarded \$25,000 micro-grants from the COVID-19 Emergency Relief Program to 16 Continuum of Care Regions to support individuals experiencing homeless.

Released a Resource Guide to help support Hoosier homeowners and renters.

Indiana Broadband Office (IBO)

Worked with the State GIS Office to develop maps that showcase Wi-Fi hot spots across the state, along with the process for collecting data to update maps

Collaborated with service providers on emergency response and network continuity.

Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA)

The economic development team worked closely with agribusinesses and producers to help them understand the SBA loan and financial resources available to them.

Indiana Grown connected farmers with different channels for selling/distributing their products – such as food banks and pantries.

Partnered with Indiana Grown restaurants and helped them adjust their business models to meet social distancing recommendations.

Indiana Destination Development Corp. (IDDC - Tourism)

Developed the Indiana Destination Recovery Council to provide input on response strategies.

Partnered with Rockport Analytics to research and determine the true economic impact of COVID-19 on this sector.

Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA)

Suspended regular programs to redistribute funding towards the COVID-19 response.

Launched the COVID-19 Response Program for public facilities, economic development business grants/loans, and public services.

Developed the Hometown Business Preservation Initiative, with Purdue University and Ohio State University, to deliver Revolving Loan Fund training.

Coordinated efforts with the Indiana SBDC to help small businesses apply for SBA loans.

Worked with the National Main Street Center to develop training, webinars and toolkits for Indiana Main Street Organizations.

Cross-Cutting Issues and Challenges

The Lieutenant Governor's Family of Business has completed considerable accomplishments in a short time, especially operating with resource constraints. However, this crisis is far from over. As noted earlier, each agency has developed a Rural Recovery Plan that is focused on ways to assist its constituents. But, cross-cutting issues and opportunities have been identified as well, challenges that will require strong and active collaboration from all levels – from state to local.

Without question, the cross-cutting issue that has percolated to the top of all five agencies is the need for comprehensive broadband deployment and adoption. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the vulnerability of several rural places in Indiana. Limited broadband access has hampered e-learning efforts, limited telehealth options for rural households, and affected the ability of residents to meet the telework demands of employers.

But significant advances on the broadband front will require strong public/private partnerships coupled with corresponding investments by internet service providers and federal/state/local governments. The Indiana Broadband Office (IBO) is the logical entity to serve as the linchpin for making digital inclusion a reality across the state's rural landscape.

A second overarching issue is a need for state agencies, especially those who work under the auspices of the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, to work in a synergistic manner to ensure that residents and

communities are receiving the full suite of support from the state. This means building on the unique strengths that each agency brings to the table. For example, OCRA has the organizational infrastructure, through its network of Community Liaisons, to disseminate information from its sister agencies directly to communities. At the same time, these liaisons can be a conduit for informing these agencies of local needs. Similarly, IDDC has an opportunity to work with OCRA to leverage the Indiana Main Street Program for a portion of its capacity building activities. A third example is the Hoosier Hospitality Promise launched by the IDDC. Both efforts focus on safety-related programming and as such, could be co-branded to respective constituents. There are countless other examples, but the point is to take stock of each agency's capabilities and then weave a more integrated set of support and assistance to rural Indiana.

The Rural Road to Recovery: Priorities and Action Plans

In its quest to support the people, families, businesses and communities that represent the heart of rural Indiana, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor has asked its Family of Business to delineate and put into action a list of key priorities in the wake of COVID-19. These important products, undertaken in partnership with the Purdue Center for Regional Development and Ball State's Indiana Communities Institute, are the blueprints for placing Indiana's small cities and towns on the Rural Road to Recovery in the coming months.

Rural Road to Recovery in *Indiana*



Rural Road to Recovery

Priorities and Action Plans of the Indiana Broadband Office

The vision of the Indiana Broadband Office is to become the one-stop-shop for all things broadband and to expand affordable broadband coverage to all Hoosiers.

PRIORITY 1

Identify and share information on broadband solutions for sectors impacted by COVID-19

- Engage with local and state leaders to provide technical support, resources, and partnership opportunities specific to remote learning, e-commerce, agriculture, and telehealth.
- Expand upon current partnership with the Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) to promote the Next Level Connections Broadband Grant Program, while also creating programs that impact the immediate connectivity issues residents are facing.
- Develop an Indiana Broadband Funding Strategy combining Federal, State, and private resources to further leverage funding opportunities.
- Continue to convene Broadband Leadership Roundtable calls to facilitate communication between all stakeholders, share concerns, and together craft solutions with an eye towards availability of affordable broadband.

PRIORITY 2

Build digital inclusion into the economic development strategy of each community

- Draft a comprehensive digital inclusion plan to ensure that broadband investment is fully leveraged and sustainable.
- Expand the Broadband Ready Communities program by encouraging more regions to take the steps necessary to facilitate broadband deployment and improvements.
- Create an Indiana Broadband Heat Map showing areas that lack quality affordable broadband, have lagging adoption rates, and low digital literacy.
- Partner with OCRA's Main Street program to educate each organization's member businesses with broadband connectivity options as well as e-commerce and digital learning resources.

PRIORITY 3

Lead through action as a single point of contact for all things broadband

- Coordinate inter-agency programming involving broadband funding and education.
- Create E-Commerce and Telehealth Toolkits focusing on small business owners and seniors.
- Coordinate a statewide Digital Learning Plan focused on improving basic computer skills and internet usage competencies for a wide variety of business and consumer constituencies.

Background Information

In 2018, affirming the belief that broadband is the enabling infrastructure for Indiana's innovation economy, Lt. Governor Suzanne Crouch appointed Scott Rudd as the State's first Director of Broadband Opportunities. This new cabinet-level position became a key contributor to Governor Holcomb's Next Level Plan. It recognized broadband as a foundational element contributing to the five-pillars of economy, infrastructure, workforce and education, public health and good government.

Initially, the Indiana Broadband Office held numerous Stakeholder Engagement meetings. The 90+ participants represented corporate leaders, providers, public sector officials and non-profit groups. The result of this process was the delivery of an update to the Indiana Statewide Broadband Strategic Plan.

As we entered 2020, the state found itself facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost overnight, the lives of Hoosiers across the state were changed. Due to this health crisis, parents were told they would need to work from home. Schools were closed and E-learning became a necessity. For patient appointments, doctor's offices moved to online video calls instead of in-office visits. Furthermore, increased isolation led to a significant spike in demand for online entertainment. More than ever before, the need for reliable broadband service, at an affordable price along with access to the devices that connect, was a necessity of life.

In response, the Indiana Broadband Office (IBO) began holding weekly Broadband Leadership calls to discuss COVID related Broadband specific needs. These calls allowed the IBO, and its state partners, to address the needs and issues being faced by Broadband providers and their customers.

In May, the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD) was enlisted to assist with the creation of the Lieutenant Governor's Family of Business Road to Recovery Plan. The action items highlighted in this document will aid in the reduction of broadband related issues and challenges that evolved as a result of this COVID pandemic.

The vision of the Indiana Broadband Office is to become the one-stop-shop for all things broadband and to ensure affordable broadband coverage to all Hoosiers. COVID-19 has only further magnified the importance of fulfilling this vision. With all of this in mind, the Indiana Broadband Office proposes to push forward these initiatives and forge a pathway that leads to reliable, affordable broadband connectivity for all Hoosiers.

For more information, visit www.in.gov/indianabroadband.

The Rural Road to Recovery Project Team

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor appointed a team from Purdue University and Ball State University to provide technical assistance and support to the five agencies and offices that have a direct report to Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch. The Project Team members include Bo Beaulieu, Roberto Gallardo and Melinda Grismer with the Purdue Center for Regional Development, as well as David Terrell, Geoff Schomacker and Brian Blackford with Ball State University's Indiana Communities Institute.





Rural Road to Recovery

Priorities and Action Plans of the Indiana Destination Development Corporation

The Indiana Destination Development Corporation is a public-private entity focused on attracting and retaining businesses, talent, students, and visitors through promotion, branding, authentic storytelling, and quality of place investments.

PRIORITY 1

Motivate Consumer Activity

Promote safety; provide reassurances

- Increase the awareness of the Hoosier Hospitality Promise (HHP) in partnership with the Indiana Restaurant and Lodging Association and the Indiana Tourism Association to encourage the resumption of safe leisure activities.
- Expand the HHP to include not only the Leisure and Travel-Related (LT-R) industry, but other businesses and consumers who plan to take the necessary precautions to keep consumers and staff safe throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Work with local/regional Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to implement an exposure plan to enhance the HHP and safety procedures within their local communities.
- Consider creative partnerships to increase use of masks and other precautionary safety measures among businesses and members of the public.

Showcase getaway opportunities

- Promote the Indiana Road Trips campaign and website to highlight various road trips on an interactive map to help residents explore Indiana and "Map out Memories."
- Elevate outdoor recreation, rural amenities, and other "peace and quiet" destinations.

PRIORITY 2

Provide Industry Leadership and Build Statewide Capacity

Keep the industry informed

- Continue conducting timely research to assist partners and policy makers with how best to navigate ongoing COVID-19 challenges.

- Develop, distribute, and maintain a sampling of data points and a collection of best practices related to COVID-19.
- Facilitate consistent stakeholder calls to help inform the industry of best practices, provide updates from state leaders, and educate partners on how to access current available resources.
- Work with the Office of Community and Rural Affairs and the agency's community liaisons to help businesses and communities learn about and sign up for the Hoosier Hospitality Promise, to help gain local and regional support for the program.

PRIORITY 3

Statewide Collaboration

Assist the Leisure and Travel-Related industry in its COVID-19 recovery; provide resources

- Provide \$10 million in CARES Act funding to support arts and cultural organizations, local events, and tourism organizations whose normal operations has been interrupted due COVID-19.
- Encourage and facilitate regional collaboration and resource sharing between businesses and localities who have mutual interests, allowing communities the ability to amplify their recovery efforts.

Lay the groundwork for future regional initiatives

- Develop a statewide asset map to help identify destinations and amenities that enhance resident's quality of life, as well as a tool to help attract new residents and investment to the communities.
- Engage communities to enable self-assessments for tourism and talent vitality.
- Gather feedback on regional paradigms through surveys, focus groups, etc.

Background Information

The current Indiana Office of Tourism Development (IOTD) evolved into the new Indiana Destination Development Corporation (IDDC) effective July 1, 2020, creating a seamless experience for tourism and talent attraction partners. In 2019, the Indiana State Legislature created the IDDC, a public-private entity, to promote, brand, and tell Indiana's authentic story to attract and retain businesses, talent, students, and visitors. The leisure and travel-related industry (LT-R), which encompasses businesses and organizations that encourage visitor attraction, enhance residential experiences, and enable amenity development, is vital to Indiana's economy. Combined, visitor and resident spending at restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues, and other attractions accounts for approximately 10 percent of Indiana's total GDP (\$37.2 of \$367 billion). The LT-R sectors support over 153,000 Hoosier jobs.

In the wake of COVID-19, IDDC's efforts to advance tourism, talent, and business development are both increasingly important and more difficult. The global pandemic hit LT-R businesses and organizations especially hard. An early step IDDC took in response to COVID-19 and related shutdowns was to conduct a rolling study tracking LT-R business and consumer sentiment in five waves between May 5 and June 5, 2020. Key findings from the Rockport Analytics study included the following:

- Businesses within the LT-R sector (accommodations, food/beverage, entertainment/recreation, retail, and other) have seen, on average, a 66 percent decrease in revenue;
- 28 percent of the 234,000 Hoosiers collecting unemployment benefits (as of May 30) were LT-R workers; and
- 45 percent of Indiana households plan to spend less on "leisure travel" following COVID-19.

To help mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on LT-R businesses and organizations, as well as statewide efforts to attract and/or retain visitors and talent, IDDC is pursuing several strategies to deploy over the next six months. These strategies include action items that provide immediate support and/or lay the groundwork for future resiliency. These efforts were grounded in extensive research and input from stakeholders through the Indiana Destination Recovery Council, weekly calls with a broad mix of industry representatives, and feedback gathered in partnership with the Indiana Communities Institute at Ball State University. The insights and data points were gathered, in large part, during May 2020.

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Rural Road to Recovery

Priorities and Action Plans of the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority

The mission of the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCD) is to provide housing opportunities, promote self-sufficiency, and strengthen communities.

PRIORITY 1

Implemented rental assistance for COVID-impacted families

- Launch the \$40 million Indiana COVID-19 Rental Assistance Program, to provide emergency rental assistance, decrease evictions and increase housing stability by helping renters whose income has been adversely affected by COVID-19.
- Develop a centralized intake and referral system for rental assistance, rental counseling and homeownership counseling resources.
- Explore incentives for landlords to participate in voucher programs.
- Pursue additional voucher resources to increase the number of vouchers statewide.
- Explore funding opportunities to provide rental counseling.
- Target the ESG-CV funds to provide emergency rental assistance to households below 50% AMI, and at risk of eviction or homelessness.

PRIORITY 2

Support safe, affordable housing

- Facilitate training and technical assistance for property managers regarding how to assist in meeting the needs of residents while complying with health/safety measures.
- Study the need for youth shelters and additional isolation shelters, as well as barriers for individuals and families who are seeking emergency shelter in rural Indiana.
- Provide regulatory flexibility (when allowable) for affordable housing developers who are experiencing delays in project construction caused by increasing labor/materials costs and/or material shortages.
- Relaunch the Owner Occupied Repair Program to ensure those who are sheltering-in-place can do so safely.
- Seek funding to support additional affordable housing production for families and seniors — and to bolster the permanent supportive housing pipeline.
- Utilize the \$17 million in supplemental LIHEAP funding under the CARES Act to cover utility services for Hoosier households impacted by COVID-19.

PRIORITY 3

Provide resources for homeowners at risk of foreclosure

- Re-launch the Foreclosure Prevention Assistance Program, and track key data metrics, such as volume of need and amount of assistance deployed.
- Seek out additional partnerships to supplement the current funding, while exploring partnerships with lenders on forbearance policies.
- Increase financial empowerment training and resources.
- Utilize the HUD Housing Counseling Program to support additional licensed housing counseling agencies.

PRIORITY 4

Offer assistance to non-profits that provide direct services to Hoosiers

- Develop and support management training on addressing service providers' mental health and best practices for working safely with vulnerable populations.
- Provide guidance on disaster and resiliency planning policy.
- Distribute administration funding (when available) to supplement additional operations' sustainability and technology needs to ensure continuity of services.

PRIORITY 5

Facilitate strategies to address non-housing impacts due to COVID-19

- Direct resources toward food insecurity and lack of access to food when social distancing.
- Support additional broadband infrastructure and ability for partners and their clients to both deliver and receive critical services electronically.
- Reorient placemaking initiatives to sustain projects that propose and meet social distancing guidelines.

Background Information

The Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA) is charged with helping communities build upon their assets to create places with ready access to opportunities, goods, and services. IHCDA also promotes, finances, and supports a broad range of housing solutions, from temporary shelters to homeownership. Currently, the IHCDA is in the midst of executing its 2017-2021 strategic plan with four strategic priorities: (1) Pursue innovation in all programs and services; (2) Provide thought leadership; (3) Emphasize continued quality of services; and (4) Continuously improve program management practices and partnership building.

To ensure compliance with these agency objectives through the COVID-pandemic, the IHCDA held 22 sets of weekly or bi-weekly listening sessions to identify partners' challenges and opportunities. Following the shutdown, IHCDA worked with the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD) to reach out to stakeholders with a detailed survey building upon the six themes that emerged from the listening sessions. These themes are: homelessness; rental assistance; rental construction; homeownership and foreclosure prevention; serving Hoosier families; and partner concerns.

The survey invited IHCDA partner agencies to rank their concerns as "immediate," "within six months," or "in one to two years." More than one hundred partner agencies responded, yielding 26 pages of commentary. Then, PCRD analyzed these rankings and partner suggestions, matching them with agency resources and opportunities. In addition, IHCDA studied information gathered through other channels, including interviews, and public comments submitted on various agency programs.

The combined input from a variety of important stakeholders provided the basis for delineating the priorities and action plans outlined in this document. These recommendations align with IHCDA's strategic plan and add strength to the agency's recovery efforts. In sum, the IHCDA's priorities and action plans highlighted in this document are intended to address the various vulnerabilities along the entire spectrum of housing needs.

For more information visit www.in.gov/ihcda

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Rural Road to Recovery

Priorities and Action Plans of the Indiana State Department of Agriculture

The mission of the Indiana State Department of Agriculture is to support growth in Indiana agriculture by serving as an advocate at the local, state and federal level; defining and nurturing economic opportunity in the food, fuel and fiber sectors; and enhancing the stewardship of natural resources on agricultural land.

PRIORITY 1

Assess and mitigate the impacts of COVID 19 on Indiana's agriculture and food system

Supply Chains: Examine supply chain disruptions associated with COVID 19 on Indiana agriculture, such as the availability of key farm inputs, delivery of farm products to processors, and the marketing of agricultural products to regional, national, and international markets.

Resilience to Economic Shocks: Work with key agencies and organizations to develop and deliver programs targeted to farmers, processors, agribusinesses, and biofuel refiners that seek to strengthen their resilience to economic shocks.

Communicate Supply Chain Resiliency: Engage a broad community of producers and agribusinesses in discussions around what worked and did not work with respect to the supply chain; determine the role that ISDA can play moving forward in assisting every aspect of the food value chain to communicate information about this important topic to larger audiences.

Indiana Food Insecurity Taskforce: Partner with State agencies, grocery retailers and associations, transportation, and volunteer organizations to identify short and long term options for reducing food insecurity.

PRIORITY 3

Expand access to information and programs that support the personal health and financial stability of farmers and agribusiness owners/operators

One-Stop Center: Serve as a one-stop source for information on federal and state financial assistance available to Indiana's agricultural community.

Information and Education: Partner with key agencies, organizations and higher education institutions to deliver information/programs on stress management, financial and business management, workplace sanitation and other related topics.

PRIORITY 2

Increase access and deployment of broadband services needed to support on-farm and farm household activities

Broadband Footprint: Identify farming areas with limited access to broadband services, in partnership with the Indiana Broadband Office.

Broadband Access: Work with appropriate state agencies, local government agencies and relevant state organizations to improve broadband access to farmers and agribusinesses.

Broadband Application: Partner with higher education institutions and other relevant organizations to accelerate deployment of digital applications by farmers, such as the use of digital marketplace platforms.

Online Remote Work Certification: Enhance online remote workforce training opportunities for farm households seeking off-farm income options.

PRIORITY 4

Strengthen the pipeline of individuals seeking careers in agriculture

New Entrants into Farming: Increase awareness of beginning farmer programs, including those targeted to military veterans.

Career Awareness: Collaborate with youth serving organizations and local school systems to increase awareness of agriculture-related career opportunities for a diversity of young people living in urban, suburban and rural areas of Indiana.

Career Pathways: Partner with appropriate state agencies and organizations to inform adults and youth of the exciting career pathways available in agriculture, food, agribusiness, forestry, natural resources and other related occupations.

Background Information

The agriculture industry is vital to the health of Indiana's economy. More than 94,000 individuals are engaged in farming in the state and agriculture's economic contribution exceeds the \$31 billion mark. Furthermore, total agricultural exports number \$4.6 billion, ranking Indiana the tenth largest farming state in the nation.

Given the importance of agriculture to the state, nation and world, the Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), in concert with the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD), reached out to a mix of stakeholders and leaders to seek their input and advice on how ISDA can take steps to respond to the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic. The ISDA and PCRD team developed and distributed a brief survey through a mix of channels. The people and groups targeted included: (1) ISDA advisory board members; (2) full- and part-time farmers and agribusiness owners/operators; (3) Purdue Extension agriculture and natural resources educators; (4) Farm Bureau members; (5) local economic development organizations; and more. The survey resulted in 250 responses to a series of COVID-19 related topics and potential actions strategies.

The **Priorities and Action Plans** outlined in this document align with the Indiana Agriculture strategic plan and helps to further articulate the significant issues and challenges that emerged as a direct and indirect result of the pandemic. Not only do the priorities and plans showcased in this document align with the dominant themes emerging from the survey, they also are in sync with challenges articulated in recent studies and reports released on the impact of COVID-19 on the agricultural community. In addition, they reflect initiatives that are within the mission of ISDA to address, in partnership with relevant state and federal agencies and organizations, higher education institutions, and local and regional constituents.

For more information visit www.in.gov/isda.

The Rural Road to Recovery Project Team

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor appointed a team from Purdue University and Ball State University to provide technical assistance and support to the five agencies and offices that have a direct report to Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch. The Project Team members include Bo Beaulieu, Roberto Gallardo and Melinda Grismer with the Purdue Center for Regional Development, as well as David Terrell, Geoff Schomacker and Brian Blackford with Ball State University's Indiana Communities Institute.





Rural Road to Recovery

Priorities and Action Plans of the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs

The mission of the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs is to work with local, state and national partners in providing resources and technical assistance to aid communities in shaping and achieving their vision for community and economic development.

PRIORITY 1

ENGAGEMENT: Renew the agency's focus by engaging in regional and local discussions

- Organize Rural Affairs Working Group with key stakeholders to align initiatives and generate new ideas for rural economic recovery.
- Enhance OCRA's role as trusted advisor to communities by assisting them to identifying state and federal resources that align with their economic recovery projects.
- Facilitate and advance equitable policies that support long-term economic growth for businesses and populations disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- Refocus Downtown Development Week efforts to Small Business Saturday to assist with attracting visitors to return to shopping in downtowns.
- Build the capacity of rural communities to address COVID-19 related health challenges in partnership with the IU Center for Rural Engagement.
- In partnership with the Indiana Destination Development Corporation, study the creation of trails to connect historic and cultural sites across Indiana.

PRIORITY 2

INFORMATION: Expand access to information and resources that are vital to local and regional leaders

- Develop toolkits based on best practices that advance the implementation of placemaking strategies, making these resources available through direct engagement, email, social media, and agency websites.
- Launch training series on revolving loan funds in cities, counties and regions to support key sectors impacted by COVID-19.
- Partner with National Main Street Center to deliver training to Indiana Main Street organizations with a focus on creating strategic plans that respond to COVID-19.
- Develop and deliver programs that support small businesses in their recovery efforts.

PRIORITY 3

RECOVERY FUNDING: Repurpose and deploy a portion of existing federally-sourced Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, along with a state resources, to support rural Indiana communities

- Utilize the \$38.3 million in supplemental CDBG funding under the CARES Act for communities to provide support for economic development, public services, and public facilities to assist residents and business impacted by COVID-19.
- Ready key anchor institutions, such as libraries, theaters, and senior centers, for re-opening by providing essential PPE supplies.
- Offer state and federal grant funding with policies in place for maximum leverage and impact by removing match requirements for COVID-19 Response Program.
- Include economic recovery plan as an eligible activity for the existing planning grant program.
- Develop Wi-Fi hot-spots that help expand access to education, health and public safety, and other quality of life amenities.
- Provide communities with capital to help small businesses remain open and retain employees.

Background Information

The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) is a unique state agency focused on assisting local and regional governments and organizations with achieving their own visions for community economic development. It does this by investing in human and organizational capacity as much as in physical infrastructure to help communities to succeed in the 21st Century economy.

OCRA operates with two guiding principles: Retain, attract, and develop talent in rural communities and incite and encourage collaboration in rural planning processes. From these, its strategic framework includes providing opportunities and programs focused on people and place investments, being a center of excellence, building leadership capacity, rural broadband infrastructure deployment, and supporting economic growth in downtown districts. In response to the unprecedented challenges COVID-19 has placed upon all Hoosiers, OCRA's plan for economic rural recovery is laser focused on three fundamentals -- engagement, information, and recovery funding.

Over the course of six weeks, OCRA secured the input of a variety of stakeholders, including OCRA staff, elected officials, non-profits, visitor bureaus, economic development organizations, rural health representatives, Main Street leaders and state universities. Invaluable information was received from all corners of Indiana, providing a snapshot of the current adaptations and challenges impacting communities, and the needs these places were seeking to address, with support from their state government. Insights were gained through weekly phone and video calls with community leaders, surveys, focus groups conducted by university partners, and virtual meetings. Through this effort, OCRA and Ball State confirmed that many pre-COVID-19 strategies already in place, necessitated only minor modifications.

The current strategic plan was founded on research-based economic principles and guided by intense collaboration with local, regional, and statewide partners. The direction from these constituencies points to OCRA strengthening certain core functions in support of the rural recovery.

For more information visit www.in.gov/ocra.

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Rural Road to
Recovery in
Indiana
