

BY KARTIK ATHREYA

## Our Work on Rural Economies

**R**ural areas and small towns come in many varieties. Some are affluent; some are poor. Some are home to major universities and hospitals; some are isolated. About a quarter of the population of the Fifth District lives in rural counties. And on average, across many measures, rural America has been having a harder time than the cities — in terms of employment, educational attainment, and health. As a regional Fed, it is in our mission to help wherever we can to promote economic vitality in our District. So, starting in early 2018, the Richmond Fed stepped up its efforts to learn about rural and small-town economies and to seek ways in which outcomes could be improved and potential unleashed. I'd like to give you an update on what we're doing.

As you might expect, much of this work takes us into the field. The Bank's president, Tom Barkin, has made over 70 trips to rural areas and small towns to meet with leaders in both the public and private sectors to hear their points of view. Also spending a lot of time on the road are members of the Bank's research department, especially our regional executives and community development field managers, who engage local governments, businesses, and nonprofits. Many of these trips are part of our Community Conversations series, which takes Tom and our research staff on the road to communities across the Fifth District to gather input from local leaders and residents. The team meets on a regular basis (usually monthly) to talk about what they've been hearing and what issues seem to be emerging. That discussion, in turn, helps us figure out what we can do to lend a hand through research, events that highlight issues and foster discussions, and other programs.

Several events anchor our rural and small-town efforts. In October 2021, we held our second annual Rural America Week, in which we brought together community leaders, representatives of financial institutions and foundations, and Richmond Fed leaders and staff. We hosted a series of sessions to discuss development projects that are potentially eligible for Community Reinvestment Act funding, highlighted success stories of small-town and rural social and economic progress, and heard the perspectives of educators. (Last year's was virtual; we hope this year's will include in-person events.) On March 30, soon after this issue comes out, we will present our third Investing in Rural America conference, this time in Greensboro, N.C., where experts from nonprofits and academia, community leaders, and

others will discuss economic development issues.

To try to make progress on more specific areas of concern, our District Dialogues series brings experts and leaders together either in person or virtually for discussions of topics such as K-12 education and adult workforce training. For instance, a program in March 2021 on digital access brought together Richmond Fed economists, policymakers, and funders to consider ways of making broadband more available in rural communities; teachers shared their perspectives on virtual learning during a pandemic.

Another Richmond Fed program, Investment Connection, gives community and economic development organizations a venue where they can pitch project ideas to funders, along the lines of the television show "Shark Tank." Launched in 2019, the program includes an advance review of project ideas by the Richmond Fed's Supervision, Regulation, and Credit staff to determine whether the proposals would likely qualify their funders for positive recognition in their Community Reinvestment Act records — possibly giving those projects a boost in the eyes of potential funders. (The idea for Investment Connection came to us from one of our fellow Reserve Banks; it was originated by the Kansas City Fed in 2011.)

The information we bring back from all of these activities then feeds back into our research and publications — and the cycle starts again.

If you'd like to learn more, many of our past programs are available for viewing on our website. We also detail some of the success stories that we learn about in our Rural Spotlight publication series, which is part of our Regional Matters blog. For example, a recent Rural Spotlight looked at the experiences of the Goodwill Industries of the Valleys GoodCare Program, which seeks to mitigate the shortage of health care workers in its mostly rural and small-town service areas in Virginia by offering free education and supports to individuals who aspire to enter the field.

And you can keep up with what we're doing on rural and small towns through the pages of this magazine — not just in this special issue, but in all of its issues. It's also a great place to keep up with the Fed's activities on topics like inflation, employment, and financial stability. If you aren't already a regular reader, I hope you'll join us as a subscriber. **EF**

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