



Cornhusker Economics

Rural Development Hubs, a Possibility for Nebraska?

The Aspen Institute, Community Strategies Group conducted an analysis of 43 Rural Development Hubs from across the country to discover their strategies, organizational structures, regional roles, and practices. Their aim was to learn how rural regions can help investors, policymakers and other local and regional decision-makers better serve their regions. The following provides an overview of their findings detailed in the report: *Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure*. The report provides an opportunity for further discussion on the potential role of Rural Development Hubs in Nebraska.

Rural Development Hubs are defined as a *“place-rooted organization working hand-in-glove with people and organizations across a region to build inclusive wealth, increase local capacity and create opportunities to improve livelihoods, health and well-being.”* Their roles include helping to identify and connect regional assets to market demands. They focus on the broader, regional systems that either contribute to or hinder regional prosperity. Effective Hubs utilize local assets to create and sustain enterprises that retain greater wealth within these regions. This wealth is reinvested in the region to sustain the health and well-being of communities and people. Hubs work within the context of local people building their capacity to make and influence strategies, actions, and investments to improve their regions.

Why focus on regional development, why focus on community capitals? Nebraska, like many other rural areas, has regions of commonality either due to geography, culture, or economics. However, within this region, we also see competition for resources and smaller communities having little or no input due to limited community capitals/assets. The Aspen Institute recognizes the important role of these regional organizations, such as Nebraska's development districts, to address specific needs and serve as critical entry points for national and state funders and policy makers. However, Aspen also recognizes the need for a broader systems approach, which is more likely filled by the non-profit sector.

Through their research, Aspen identified 12 practices, or ways of working that set Rural Development Hubs apart from other organizations.

1. **Think and work “Region”.** Hubs are not limited to jurisdictions or state lines.
2. **Assemble the region for discovery and dialogue.** Hubs bring people together across sectors, economic class, and geographic boundaries when the need arises, and when no other entity is addressing the issue.

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Eight Community Capitals/Assets

- Individual: skills, understanding, physical health and mental wellness of a region's people.
- Intellectual: Knowledge, resourcefulness, creativity and innovation in a region's people, institutions, organizations, and sectors.
- Social: Trust, relationships, and networks.
- Cultural: Traditions, customs, ways of doing things, and world views.
- Natural: Natural resources, e.g., water, land, air, plants, and animals.
- Built: Constructed infrastructure, e.g., buildings, sewer systems, broadband, road.
- Political: Goodwill, influence and power that people, organizations and institutions in the region can exercise in decision-making.
- Financial: Monetary resources available in the region for investment.

Source: Investing in Rural Prosperity, pg. 157 (Topolsky)

3. **Are a part of the Region.** Hubs live where they act. They build relationships critical to good decision-making and work across differences.
4. **Take the long view.** Hubs think long-term and work toward multi-generational outcomes.
5. **Bridge Issues.** Hubs work across silos, looking beyond single-sectors, single-communities, single-issues.
6. **Analyze at the systems level and address gaps.** Hubs delve into issues, working beyond mission, scope, or funding streams, which can be limiting factors.
7. **Collaboration is essential.** Hubs must function in a collaborative framework, working across sectors and spaces.
8. **Create structures, products and tools that foster collaboration.** Hubs create ways to bring partners into joint action, across service areas, sectors, jurisdictions to provide solutions.
9. **Link to national actors.** Hubs bridge the local level to national policies. They connect local people with national trends, actors, and funding.
10. **Adaptable to get the job done.** Hubs adapt their organization and strategies to address shifts and fill gaps.
11. **Take on risk.** Hubs have a high degree of tolerance for taking calculated risks, failure and reset are part of the Hub's mindset.
12. **Are accountable to the whole community.** Hubs are primarily responsible for the people they serve - the whole community. They encourage all to participate in the economy, democracy and decision-making.

Regional Hubs could greatly benefit Nebraska's rural population. Having an organization and staff dedicated to work for people's interests on a regional basis, bringing issues forward and collaborating with existing organizations to fill gaps and needs, is an opportunity. The Aspen Institute suggests a new framework needs to be developed for Regional Hubs to flourish. Suggestions include a change in funding streams that recognize transformational work, versus silo, transactional work. Institute rural training programs that support multi-disciplines, systems thinking. Build strong networks across regions to help combat isolation due to location and geographic distances. Existing organizations support regional perspectives and help communities embrace change and increase a willingness for a shared governance perspective. Funding sources adopt a longer perspective for systematic change rather than short-term solutions that fail to address persistent poverty and unequal opportunities.

As we look across the state, maybe there are elements of a Rural Regional Hub that can be implemented, utilizing the various organizations that currently support rural. A regional, long-term focus building upon assets, people, and culture is an opportunity for greater positive growth and prosperity for all persons.

The Aspen Institute. (2019, November 29). *Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure*. Rural Development Hubs Report. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/rural-development-hubs-report/>

Topolsky, J. (2021). Turning Points: Doing Rural Development Differently. In A. Dumont & D. P. Davis (Eds.), *Investing in Rural Prosperity* (pp. 153–167). essay, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis and Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.

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