

WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY



From Belonging To Thriving: A Case Study Of Rural Communities Welcoming Newcomers

VISION: EACH AND EVERY PERSON BELONGS, LIVES WITH DIGNITY, AND THRIVES

Thriving communities are built on connection and shared purpose. Achieving this requires authentic welcoming—the kind that fosters true agency, as outlined in the first building block of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#), [Welcome All to the Community](#). This approach ensures that each person is genuinely welcomed, feels a sense of connection, and can influence decision-making. When this type of welcoming takes root, it leads to a deeper sense of belonging: when residents truly feel they belong to a community, the community, in turn, belongs to them—empowering them to join with others in shaping their shared future.

While welcoming and belonging are important from the perspective of the individuals affected, they are also essential for the success of the community as a whole. Rural communities need all residents' full participation in economic and civic life. With a limited number of people to contribute their talents and energy, a rural place cannot afford to exclude anyone if the community is to thrive.

Many rural communities have suffered the negative impacts of population decline for decades. But in some places, recent influxes of new residents—sometimes migration from outside of the US with different languages, cultures, and traditions from longtime residents, sometimes migrations from other regions within the country whose culture and traditions may also be different—have brought new opportunities for growth, as well as challenges related to belonging. Who is welcome in these rural places, or more importantly, who is welcome to belong? Who does the community belong to? How can these communities move forward together toward equitable rural prosperity?



Benito Lubazibwa, ReMix Ideas:

"Each rural place is different, but in the Mississippi Delta, we have a demographic shift—residents are getting older, and we have a brain drain with young people moving out. Immigrants can be an asset, bringing new energy and making our communities more vibrant."



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DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are foundational terms and concepts used in this case study. These definitions are intended to serve as a baseline for understanding and are not exhaustive or final.

Belonging: More than just being seen or feeling included, belonging entails having a voice and the opportunity to use it to make demands upon society and political institutions. Belonging is more than having access; it is about the power to co-create the structures that shape a community. ([Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley](#))

Equitable rural prosperity: communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives. ([Aspen CSG's Thrive Rural Framework](#))

Welcoming: Many people think of 'welcoming' as encouraging in-migration or recruiting people to offset population stagnation or decline and provide economic growth. When Aspen CSG talks about 'welcoming,' we mean that people are both welcomed and feel like they belong by having real agency in their region in terms of representation and civic participation.

VOICES

To better understand how rural communities and Native nations are working to advance equitable rural prosperity through welcoming and belonging, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG) collaborated with Welcoming America to identify groups working on these issues and convene them to discuss their work. Aspen CSG's continuing work on welcoming and belonging will include a focus on welcoming and belonging in an Indigenous context.

[Welcoming America](#) is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that leads a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by ensuring everyone belongs.

[ReMix Ideas](#)' mission is to build a supportive ecosystem for Black entrepreneurs and elevate ideas that transform lives and Arkansas communities through business ownership.

[The Hispanic Affairs Project \(HAP\)](#) is a grassroots organization dedicated to supporting the social and economic development of immigrant communities in Western Colorado.

HOW RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE CHANGING

Between 2010 and 2020, rural America [lost population due to outmigration](#)—people moving to more densely populated areas. Immigrants from both within and from outside of the US have helped stem the tide of rural population loss, balancing outmigration and driving population growth in many communities across the country. These changes have made rural communities [more racially and ethnically diverse](#)—in 2020, nearly a quarter of rural residents were people of color, up from a fifth in 2010. This trend is even more pronounced for [rural children](#), nearly a third of whom were people of color in 2020.



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STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES: NAVIGATING GROWTH AND CHANGE

All types of change can be challenging for communities, from industry loss and population decline to growth from retirees, second homes, in-migration, or new industries. Aspen CSG often hears from communities that residents want to maintain the identity of their place, to preserve “how things have always been.” For these reasons, community change can bring fear and grief. However, it can also bring transformative opportunities, especially if all residents are able to participate in and shape the process, rather than simply reacting to it.



Molly Hilligoss, Welcoming America:

“It’s important to allow space for communities to acknowledge their sense of loss and grief. Newcomer populations are also often feeling a sense of loss of their culture, their place. We can learn lessons from the field of grief about what that looks like and how folks can move on. Leadership, connection, and communication strategy can acknowledge that it’s hard and things are going to be different.”

For rural communities seeing significant growth from in-migration from those who lived outside of the US, political rhetoric and misinformation can add to the usual challenges of change. Outside parties may promote fear and resentment, taking advantage of grief around change for political gain. Anti-immigrant rhetoric is not new or specific to rural America, but it can have an outsized impact in small communities attempting to navigate sensitive transitions, causing extra tension and hampering attempts to integrate new residents.

Latent conflicts and power imbalances in communities may also become more pronounced in times of change. Existing structural racism, as well as geographic and economic inequity, may be revealed or emphasized, providing an opportunity to address these issues and find new ways to move forward as a community.



Benito Lubazibwa, Remix Ideas:

“People may not feel a sense of belonging even if they have been living in a community a long time. Systemic racism affects Black communities in rural areas. People can say everyone is welcome, but if the policies— access to knowledge, access to capital and opportunities—don’t allow economic mobility, then you don’t feel it. How can we be more intentional about creating a community with a sense of belonging? You have to build that trust—and not with amnesia about what happened in the last 300-400 years. You have to correct what happened to build a more possible community where people can be themselves and feel their value.”



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WHAT IT WILL TAKE: RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST, AND TIME

New residents bring talent, energy, and opportunity to rural communities, especially those that have seen their populations decline in recent decades. However, as case study participants emphasized, channeling this energy into thriving for the whole community takes intentional work. To thrive, communities must ensure all residents belong, including newcomers and established groups.

Participants made it clear that the work of belonging goes beyond stating that all are welcome and providing equal access to resources. Fostering belonging requires building trust and relationships between people and communities, which takes time. In participants' experience, informal but frequent conversations between people in rural communities work best to build trust and relationships. This is represented in the [Build Momentum](#) building block in the Thrive Rural Framework. Building momentum is an important strategy to overcome a lack of hope and build trust. One of the best ways to do that is to take on and celebrate small wins in community efforts. For example, regular community meals and informal discussions can help neighbors get to know each other across cultural groups. Communities can also leverage trusted infrastructure—churches, schools, community organizations—to promote understanding and build relationships.



Ricardo Perez, Hispanic Affairs Project:

"We've found we get a higher impact when we work on the small, human level. When we have big celebrations, everyone is happy to come to eat, and then they're gone and nothing has changed in the community. But small groups exchanging experience, understanding, learning from each other—that has an impact."

The need to keep the work authentic and focused on connection was a consistent theme.

Participants expressed concern that welcoming and belonging could end up like some diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives—a box organizations must check to receive funding rather than a locally-driven process that strengthens the community. Along the same lines, participants stressed the importance of finding locally appropriate language to talk about belonging: language that builds connections, bridging rather than dividing along political lines. (For more resources on effective communication in polarized times, see Aspen CSG's case study [Communicating for Connection: West Virginia Community Development Hub](#).)

Strong community relationships can overcome divisive rhetoric. One participant shared the story of a Salvadoran immigrant who worked in a restaurant in a small community. When he was threatened with deportation, the entire community—including elected officials who would usually oppose immigration—came together to defend him as "one of us." Other participants noted that communities can take advantage of such moments of attention and urgency to have vital conversations and advance belonging.

To create a community where everyone truly belongs, local leaders can lead by example, modeling reasoned and patient responses to conflict and difference. Resources from organizations like those who participated in this case study can help local governments and community groups navigate these challenges and move forward.

Philanthropy can help provide resources for local communities to do this work and support broader efforts to counter misinformation and improve the information ecosystem around differences and commonalities in rural communities. Narratives and stories of growth, belonging, and thriving can help rural residents envision a future of positive change.



Karen Sherman Perez, Hispanic Affairs Project:

"American society and discourse has not been very civil in recent years. There's so much misinformation circulating, increasing division. Philanthropy can play a role, as well as the nonprofit sector. We all have our eye on our own prize, but don't have a shared vision for collective change and what that looks like in the world. Communications work can be really powerful, but it's not happening very well."



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Rural nonprofit organizations can play a critical role in advancing belonging, including moving from a scarcity mindset focused on competing for limited funds to a focus on growth and abundance, aligning around common goals, and working collectively for the good of the community.



Molly Hilligoss, Welcoming America:

"It's so hard for local governments and nonprofits to get out of the scarcity mentality. It feels like there's a finite amount of resources, so instead of being able to work together to tackle the big issues, everyone feels like they have to fight for their piece of the pie. We need to do something to change that for rural areas that don't feel like they have the resources to meet their communities' needs and provide the services in an equitable way."



Community 
Strategies Group

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About the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

Since 1985, the [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#) (Aspen CSG) has worked to advance equitable rural prosperity. We envision a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We bring together rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers to share ideas, learn from one another, and take action. By building networks, fostering collaboration, and sharing best practices, we aim to spark meaningful change.

Our work is guided by the [Thrive Rural Framework](#), a tool designed to take stock, target action, and measure progress toward equitable rural prosperity.

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