



Photo credit: USDA Flickr



Call to Action #3: Supporting a Rural Workforce

To grow and prosper, every rural community needs job opportunities for its residents, and employers need qualified individuals to fill those needs. This requires identifying employment needs, attracting available workers from urban and rural centers alike, and providing the workforce with training and education to best fill the available needs. There are many opportunities to partner with local businesses and organizations to identify gaps, to work with all levels of educational institutions to provide career training and development, to fine-tune existing training programs, and to grow apprenticeship opportunities to develop the required workforce. Providing rural communities, organizations, and businesses a skilled workforce with an environment where people can thrive will grow prosperous communities.

Since 1970, rural employment has grown slower than in urban areas (60 percent compared with 120 percent in urban areas), according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Rural employment recovery was especially slow after the Great Recession (2007-09), a fact concerning to future rural prosperity. Notwithstanding, there were 19 million workers in Rural America in 2016, which was approximately 13 percent of the U.S. total.

Certain industries, such as agriculture, forestry, mining, and manufacturing, are especially important to rural America and all account for larger shares of employment and earnings in rural compared to urban



areas. The Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates that farm employment (both self-employed farm operators and their hired workers) accounted for about 6 percent of all nonmetro employment in 2015, compared to less than 1 percent in metro areas. Additionally, farm employment leads to downstream jobs, which can lead to rural economic growth. While production agriculture hires 1.2 million workers annually according to the U.S. Census Bureau, farmers face instability due to the lack of available American citizens and lawful permanent resident workers to fill these jobs. This has led some farmers to hire illegal foreign labor and the underutilization of the H-2A visa program to hire legal foreign workers. When farmers face this instability, they

often elect to downsize their operations or plant more mechanized commodities, which negatively impacts the local labor market.

Turning to manufacturing, the Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that the industry employs a larger share of the nonmetro workforce compared to the metro workforce (11 percent versus 6 percent in metro areas). Additionally, other more consumer-oriented services have similar shares of jobs and earnings in both nonmetro and metro areas, as does the recreation sector.

Lastly, healthcare and the ability to recruit and retain healthcare providers and facilities is also critically important to rural prosperity and unfortunately the slower overall population growth has historically detracted from an overall growth in total healthcare employment.



Within these sectors and others, there is much opportunity for growth in rural America. This is shown by evaluating occupations employing 150,000 or more people in rural counties in 2015. Seven of these 33 occupations were projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to grow by 10 percent or more nationally between 2014 and 2024 (see table). The top four occupations are all healthcare-related: personal care aides; nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides; licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses; and registered nurses. Their educational requirements range from no formal credential (for personal care aides, who earned a median

salary of \$21,920 per year in 2016, and whose employment is projected to grow by 26% nationally over ten years) to a four-year college degree (for registered nurses, who earned a median salary of \$68,450 per year in 2016, and whose employment is projected to grow by 16% nationally over ten years). By contrast, rural occupations serving a national or international market may more nearly mirror the national growth rate. For example, customer service representatives, an occupation projected to grow by 10% in ten years, may be employed in rural call centers serving broader markets. Business accountant and auditor employment is projected to grow by 11% over ten years at the national level, including rural businesses that are tied to national product markets.

Occupations with 150,000 or more rural workers and with projected national growth rates of 10 percent or higher, 2014-2024.

Occupation	National Job Growth, 2014-24	National Median Wage, 2016	Education Required	Experience Required	On-The-Job Training Required
Personal care aides	26%	\$21,920	No formal credential	None	Short-term
Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	24%	\$25,159	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Short-term
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	16%	\$44,090	Post-secondary non-degree award	None	None
Registered nurses	16%	\$68,450	Bachelor's degree	None	None
Construction laborers	13%	\$33,430	No formal credential	None	Short-term
Accountants and auditors	11%	\$68,150	Bachelor's degree	None	None
Customer service representatives	10%	\$32,300	High school diploma or equivalent	None	Short-term

Sources: BLS Employment Projections (<https://www.bls.gov/emp/>); Occupational Employment Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/oes/>); and the 2015 and 2016 American Community Surveys.

Moreover, it is necessary to look globally as a means for job creation. U.S. agricultural exports support output, employment, income, and purchasing power in both the farm and nonfarm sectors. The Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service estimates that in 2015 each dollar of agricultural exports stimulated another \$1.27 in business activity. Additionally, every \$1 billion of U.S. agricultural exports in 2015 supported approximately 8,000 American jobs throughout the economy. Total agricultural exports in 2015 supported 1,067,000 full-time civilian jobs, which included 751,000 jobs in the nonfarm sector, according to the Department of Agriculture.



There are significant opportunities for the rural workforce to prosper and grow, but reviewing available data and identifying gaps to match curricula and training programs are required to best serve employer needs. Successful workforce development strategies strive to create well-educated and skilled individuals whose qualifications meet the requirements of the contemporary economy. Career mapping within educational systems – beginning at K-12 and continuing through higher education – is necessary to help prepare the workforce of the future to fit rural economies. Many rural communities perform

well relative to urban areas in many measures of school quality and in the rate of college attendance among their young adults, which is more difficult to achieve for the most remote rural areas and for those with relatively large shares of low-income residents. Ultimately, strong primary and secondary schools that focus curricula and offer strong career guidance are fundamental to generating a robust and ready workforce needed in rural America.

As we develop the workforce of the future, it is also important to prepare current, available workers to fill both existing and newly created jobs. Higher education is becoming increasingly unaffordable and many colleges and universities fail to help students graduate with the skills necessary to secure high paying jobs in today's workforce. Along with fine tuning available public and private training programs, expanding apprenticeships may enable more Americans to obtain relevant skills and high-paying jobs. Apprenticeships provide paid, relevant workplace experiences and opportunities to develop skills that are valued by employers.

Objectives & Recommended Actions

1. **Connect Rural Skillsets to Jobs of the Future** – Before we can provide suitable resources, we must identify existing job demands, skillset gaps, and community needs. A robust interagency effort is needed to study current gaps and job demands in all sectors to better specialize our educational and training efforts. We recommend that interested agencies complete a study which clearly identifies these gaps. That survey will then be used to promote curricula rationalization methods in K-12 education, secondary educational institutions, and technical training programs. This effort will better link educational and career guidance given at an early age to local economic needs. We must also focus on developing universally adaptable skills that provide flexibility in a rapidly changing environment. This research is the integral first step to best serve rural communities and ensure we are training for jobs that are needed, but also provide an adaptable workforce as new skillset are needed.
2. **Promote and Expand Apprenticeship Programs** – The Task Force identified clear needs in the healthcare and trade industry sectors while rural businesses and communities struggle to find talent

to fill jobs in these sectors. The Task Force recommends that federal agencies promote and assist local businesses in the expansion of apprenticeship programs. In the near term, we support creating an interagency workgroup to identify priorities and develop apprenticeship programs for rural America.

3. Connect Veterans to Underutilized Training Programs –

Despite a clear effort to reach these available and talented individuals that are ready and willing to work, programs are not easily accessible and often siloed within the federal agencies; therefore, not maximizing the potential talent lying within this population. The federal government must do better to connect, streamline, and eliminate duplication across the agencies to better reach and serve veterans. We recommend an interagency inventory of available veterans' programs, a focused effort to eliminate duplication by creating a one stop shop for better customer service, and implementing metrics to measure veterans' access and use of training programs.



4. Improve Rural Access to Education and Training – Job opportunities, training programs and educational materials are not easily accessible by businesses and jobseekers. As we work to eliminate interagency silos, there are ways to better market the resources already available to rural populations using existing resources.

- a. **Improve Interagency Collaboration –** The Department of Education and the Department of Agriculture should strengthen the collaboration between the two departments, their stakeholders and partners to improve access to quality education in rural communities and create opportunity for children in rural America. The interagency coordination will (1) increase investment within existing resources for a wide range of daycare, primary, elementary, and secondary education facilities, including traditional public and charter schools, (2) improve the access of rural communities to resources provided by both Departments, (3) make capital available through USDA for strengthening existing or constructing new educational facilities, and (4) provide capacity building and technical assistance.
- b. **Catalog Federal Training Programs –** Federal government training programs should be catalogued on a single online platform to improve access to these materials and programs.
- c. **Encourage Interagency Use of Federal Infrastructure –** The Department of Agriculture has a broad physical network with local and regional offices across America. We encourage all federal agencies to partner with the Department of Agriculture to house certain educational materials or host periodic training programs in those local offices.

5. Ensure Access to Lawful, Agricultural Workforce – Production agriculture is often a key economic driver in rural communities. Many on-farm jobs are seasonal and very physically demanding. Farmers often have difficulty finding American citizen and lawful permanent resident workers to fill these jobs. This can lead some farmers to scramble to find workers to plant, prune, and harvest fruits and vegetables or to tend to livestock. As labor instability grows, seasonal farmers are increasingly turning to H-2A visa program to ensure that their foreign-born workers are working legally in the United States. The inefficiencies and administrative burden of the H-2A program are well-communicated by farmers. The White House is addressing farmers' concerns through an interagency effort to implement policy and regulatory changes to improve the program H-2A program. The goal of this initiative is to ensure that farmers have access to the lawful workforce that is needed.