



Items of Interest

Registration Open for the Rural Grocery Transition Specialist Program

The [Rural Grocery Initiative](#), housed within K-State Extension, sees the need to support rural grocers in business transition planning as essential to keeping the benefits of hometown grocery stores in rural communities. The [Rural Grocery Transition Specialist](#) program trains and deploys resource professionals across the country to better serve rural grocers through these business transitions.



This course is designed for Extension professionals, economic developers, and other resource providers who support rural grocers and rural community vitality across the country. This 13-week course contains seven online modules which include homework assessments and interactive discussion boards paired with guided learning through four synchronous 1.5 to 2-hour virtual sessions. The course runs September 1 through November 30, 2025, and the deadline to register is August 25, 2025.

Registration available at <https://ruralgrocery.org/specialist/registration.html> Questions? Email rgi-learn@ksu.edu.

The Rural Investment Collaborative Seeks Applicants for the 2026 Cohort of the Community Investment Training Program

This Community Investment Training program is for those who work in community development, nonprofit or faith-based organization or a local government entity in the Fifth District (Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia). It is also open to those who have an existing or new community project idea in need of development assistance.



The Community Investment Training program, a 16-week opportunity, is offered through the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond's Rural Investment Collaborative. The program aims to help community leaders develop investment-ready project proposals for initiatives that seek to fulfill a need in their local communities. The collaborative convenes community leaders with funding organizations to improve access to capital needed to advance economic and community development efforts for small towns and rural communities.

Applications for the training program are being accepted through August 20. Visit the Rural Investment Collaborative site to learn more about the program and to apply. <https://bit.ly/3Lj3vP6>

Protecting Local Economies Through Arts Preparedness

Across the South, festivals and arts events are more than celebrations. They are critical to local economies, tourism, and community identity, however many of these events, especially in rural areas, remain underprepared for emergencies like severe weather, infrastructure failures, and public safety threats. Through a unique partnership with UK College of Fine Arts, Kentucky leaders saw the gap and built a cross-sector initiative to strengthen cultural readiness from the ground up.

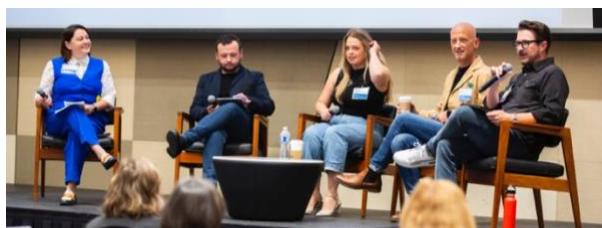


Credit: Performing Arts Readiness Director, Tom Claeson (fourth from left), leads Boone County Arts and Culture Disaster Planning Workshop participants through an on-site risk assessment (Arden Barnes 2024)

Through a multi-year effort, [Blueprint Kentucky](#) assisted in securing \$112,500 to launch a statewide response focused on education, planning, and community partnerships. A new Arts Administration experiential course, *AEM 588: Event Safety and Security*, paired UK students with a County Extension Office to assess the county's Earth Day Festival. Students created communication protocols, signage strategies, and a full emergency operations plan—producing a model now being adapted in other counties.

Extension offices also led regional workshops in Boone and McCracken Counties, reaching 51 participants from 25 cultural organizations. In McCracken, 25% of attendees were first-time visitors to the Extension office, sparking new partnerships around a 30,000-person festival. Post-training surveys showed that 100% of McCracken attendees and 82% of Boone attendees were *“very likely” to apply what they learned*.

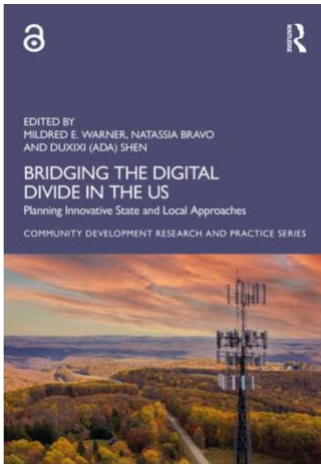
In September 2024, UK hosted the first national [Arts Crisis and Disaster Preparedness Conference](#), drawing 126 attendees and representatives from the National Endowment of the Arts, Smithsonian, and emergency management sectors. The event launched the Kentucky Heritage Emergency Response Network (KHERN), a 13-organization initiative supporting statewide cultural disaster planning, and helped launch UK's new [Arts Emergency Management](#) certificates.



Credit: Morning Keynote Session Panel “Place-Making and Social Infrastructure: The Hazard Story” at the Arts Disaster and Crisis Preparedness Conference, September 2024 (Arden Barnes 2024)

If you're looking to integrate the arts and cultural sectors into your state's disaster preparedness and response work, visit <https://www.khern.org/resources> for toolkits and templates you can add to your own resource lists. Proactively building partnerships between emergency management, tourism, and arts leaders—before a disaster occurs—can strengthen your state's capacity to respond. Arts preparedness supports local economies by protecting the events that bring people together and by reinforcing community safety and long-term resilience.

Now Available: Bridging the Digital Divide Book



Now available [for free online](#) as a PDF or eBook! This open access volume examines how local leaders across the U.S.—especially in rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities—are working to close the digital divide. It highlights innovative state and local approaches to broadband access and explores the policy tools, funding mechanisms, and community strategies that make a difference.

The book includes a chapter from **Dr. John Green, Dr. Roseanne Scammahorn, and Dr. Roberto Gallardo**, whose expertise enriches the discussion. They give particular attention to Extension efforts to address digital access and skill gaps.

Whether you're a planner, policymaker, researcher, or community advocate, this book offers valuable insights into one of today's most pressing equity challenges. Also available through [Taylor & Francis](#) under a Creative Commons (CC-BY-NC 4.0) license. Feel free to download, read, and share!

Congratulations to the NACDEP Southern Region Award Winners

SRDC is proud to celebrate the outstanding achievements of Extension professionals across the South who are making a meaningful impact in their communities. Award recipients were honored at the 2025 National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) Conference held June 8-9, in Charleston, West Virginia. All winners are pictured with Natriez "Nate" Peterson, Southern Region Representative, NACDEP.

Southern Region Awards:

- Distinguished Career: Susan Jakes, North Carolina A&T State University
- Innovation and Creativity Individual: Erin Small, Cut Flower Discussion Group, Virginia Tech
- Diversity Team: Crystal Tyler-Mackey, James Mason, Jeanell Smith, Katie Tennant, Bill Worrill, and Thomas Bolles; VCE Equips Community-Based Personnel to Make Space for Neurodiversity, Virginia Cooperative Extension
- Educational Technology Team: Prudence Caskey, Chris DeCubellis, Noelle Guay, Evie Hunter, and Marnie Ward; Florida 4-H Virtual Poultry Club, University of Florida (**not pictured**)



Distinguished Career:
Susan Jakes (left), North Carolina
A&T State University



**Innovation and Creative
Individual Winner:**
Erin Small, Virginia Tech



Diversity Team Winners:
Virginia Cooperative Extension Team
representatives (left and center)

Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) Staff Participate in Delta Regional Forum

Held annually in June, the Delta Regional Forum is hosted by the Delta Directions Consortium and the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi at the Coahoma County Higher Education Center in Clarksdale, Mississippi. It is intended to engage community and regional development practitioners and scholars working in and with partners in the multistate Delta Region to learn from each other in pursuit of population health and wellbeing, economic renewal, and community resilience. This year, the forum was organized by partners with the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, Community First Research Center for Wellbeing and Creative Achievement at the University of Mississippi, and the Southern Rural Development Center (housed at Mississippi State University).

During this year's forum, 99 participants from 49 different institutions engaged in presentations, discussion, and a networking/resource fair where attendees could learn about other organizations and available resources, as well as build new partnerships. Knowledge sharing and networking crossed community and university boundaries, growing the capacity of all. This year's format included presentations from both the eighth cohort of the Delta Scholars Program and from the inaugural cohort of ten Next Generation Leaders. Presentations covered various topics including public policy, food security, public health, and community development, among others.

The Delta Scholars Program is an undergraduate leadership, community development, and public service program. It is led through the Mississippi State University Shackouls Honors College, with additional partners through the Delta Directions Consortium, an interdisciplinary network of individuals, academic institutions, non-profit organizations, and foundations which work together to inform and advance community and regional development in the Multi-State Delta Region. These partners include the Southern Rural Development Center, Brandeis University, the University of Mississippi, Rutgers University, and Harvard University (including Harvard College, Harvard Law School, and the T.H. Chan School of Public Health). To learn more about the Delta Scholars Program, please visit <https://www.honors.msstate.edu/initiatives/delta-scholars>

Thanks to support from the Walton Family Foundation, the DRF also launched the Next Generation Leaders track, spotlighting ten early-career professionals already working with nonprofits, foundations, and local governments throughout the Delta. Facilitated by Delta Fellow Sophie Hathaway, these presenters shared real-world perspectives and actionable strategies from their work on the ground.



2024 Delta Scholar Payton Davis (left), and Anna Kleiner, Consultant, Community-Based Research and Evaluation



Delta Scholar Zayd Elhedoudy (standing) from Rutgers University.



Delta Legal Fellow, Sophie Hathaway and SRDC Director, John Green

Community Development: Concepts and Applications Pre-Conference Workshop

While community development needs will vary by situation and location, the core of the definition of community development adopted by the Community Development Society, the international Association for Community Development, and the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals states that CD happens “Through the organization, education, and empowerment of people within communities.” This workshop offered at the 2025 CDS Conference in Geneva, New York, was an exploration of the context and frameworks often used in community capacity building including ways of engaging residents in developing engaged and economically thriving communities.



Patti Schmitt (standing), Colorado State University Extension

This workshop was developed and presented by collaborators from across the nation working with the Southern Rural Development Center, who has funding as part of [the Serving Rural America Through Land-Grant Colleges & Universities: Unlocking the Workforce Development Potential of Extension Services](#) project. Participants engaged in exploring the nexus of collaborative community development concepts and practice. The 3-hour workshop had 22 participants, representing community development work across 6 different countries. Topics covered included historical context of community development within the land-grant system, community development defined, community engagement and co-learning,

tools and demographic analysis, assessing relationships and power dynamics, workforce and economic development, Asset-based Community Development, and sustainability and long-term vision.

Authors & Presenters: Daniel Kahl, John Green, David Kay, Grace Langford, Natriez Peterson, Patti Schmitt, and Sreedhar Upendram
Additional authors: Rachael Carter, Charlie French, Hunter Goodman, Stacey McCullough, Kara Salazar, and Jamie Rae Walker



SRDC Repository Readership Snapshot Update

In June 2025, the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) Repository collection had a total of **590 downloads**, a 76 percent increase from June’s total downloads. The publications were downloaded from **58 institutions** in **61 different countries**.

The repository is hosted on Mississippi State University Library’s platform, Scholars Junction, which allows users to explore published content from the SRDC and its partners. [Access the SRDC’s repository.](#)

Job Opportunity

Director, Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Auburn University invites nominations and applications for the position of Director of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, who serves as Alabama Extension's chief academic and administrative officer, providing vision and leadership to enhance the system's tradition of excellence in education, research, service, and educational outreach. The director reports directly to the presidents of Auburn University and Alabama A&M University.

View more information and access the application for the director's position at

<https://ssl.acesag.auburn.edu/posannc/files/Alabama-Extension-Director-20250604.pdf>

Conferences, Workshops, Trainings

2025 Epsilon Sigma Phi (ESP) National Conference

In-person: October 6-9, 2025, Sheraton Fort Worth Downtown, Fort Worth, Texas

[ACCESS CONFERENCE INFORMATION](#)

2025 NETtra Conference

In-person: October 7-10, 2025, Mill Falls at the Lake Resort, Meredith, New Hampshire

[ACCESS CONFERENCE INFORMATION](#)

2025 Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) Annual Meeting

In-person: November 9-11, 2025, Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

[VIEW ANNUAL MEETING INFORMATION](#)

2025 Professional Agricultural Workers Conference (PAWC)

In-person: November 16-18, 2025, Renaissance Montgomery Hotel and Spa, Montgomery, Alabama

[ACCESS CONFERENCE INFORMATION](#)

2026 Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) Conference

In-person: February 1-2, 2026, Omni Louisville Hotel, Louisville, Kentucky

Abstract submissions for the 2026 annual meeting open October 2025.

[VIEW ANNUAL MEETING INFORMATION](#)

2026 Extension Leadership Conference (ELC)

In-Person: February 4-5, 2026, Savannah, Georgia

[ACCESS CONFERENCE INFORMATION](#)

2026 Public Issues Leadership Development (PILD) Conference

In-person: April 20-21, 2026, in Bethesda, Maryland

[ACCESS CONFERENCE INFORMATION](#)

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