



## REQUEST FOR LETTER OF INTEREST

Rural communities well-positioned to move their entrepreneurship development strategy forward are invited to submit a Letter of Interest and supporting documents to participate in the GRO community cohort.

**Due Date for Letters of Interest: 5:00 p.m. on Monday, May 3, 2021**

*Research has shown the importance of entrepreneurship for sustained economic growth and improved wellbeing. Entrepreneurs of all kinds – social, civic, and business – are foundational to sustained community vitality and prosperity. Rural communities must continue to innovate, compete, and work to survive and thrive. Our world is dynamic and everchanging, requiring our continuous engagement in community economic development work.*

- e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

**What is an entrepreneurial ecosystem?** An entrepreneurial ecosystem is a community-based system that allows for the fast flow of talent, information, and resources that supports entrepreneurs at each stage of their business and personal growth. A culture of trust and collaboration allows entrepreneurs to access the supports and resources they need and successfully interact with them (such as state and local agencies, other businesses, networks).

The approach supports residents to sustainably mobilize and build assets to improve their quality of life. It is a more balanced approach than traditional economic development, using connections between local institutions and residents to identify community priorities, opportunities and issues.

The nature of this work is ongoing, iterative and phased. Therefore, business owners, entrepreneurs, residents, foundations, government officials and economic development organizations must be involved for it to be successful. It requires a long-term commitment to and investment in the approach.

The Ford Family Foundation realizes the importance of supporting entrepreneurial ecosystem building as an economic development strategy with the goal of increasing rural prosperity and resiliency. We have partnered with Oregon Economic Development Districts and e2: Entrepreneurial Ecosystems ([e2](#)) to launch a program called **GRO (Growing Rural**

Oregon). GRO is based on the e2 framework, which has a proven track record of accelerating entrepreneurial activity in rural communities. Under this program, selected communities will undergo an intensive journey to jumpstart their entrepreneurial behavior. This work goes beyond a focus on entrepreneurs and business owners and engages the broader community. Together, they will work to strengthen and grow the community's entrepreneurial ecosystem and increase prosperity.

Communities across the country have demonstrated success and economic growth by using this "grow your own" approach to entrepreneur development. However, as it is a resource- and time-intensive process, communities must demonstrate a baseline readiness and deep commitment to this work. In this pilot round of the GRO program, we expect to select up to six communities to participate.

**Community Commitment:** The GRO community cohort is a five-year commitment and requires dedicated staff time for a local community coordinator. Communities are expected to participate in learning with other GRO communities over time, regularly engage with their community coach and reflect on their progress annually through a structured process shared among all GRO communities.

GRO communities must have a willingness to invest in developing and implementing systems and tools for the long term. They should have the ability to track and monitor progress against program metrics, and an eagerness to learn from doing so. A willingness to engage in an asset-based community development approach (maximizing strengths, talents and resources of the community) is a critical component to participating. GRO communities will emphasize the ability to collaborate with other organizations — internal *and* external to the community — in unique and effective ways.

As a community participates in the GRO cohort, it will work to identify diversified funding opportunities, develop a solid sustainability plan, understand community demographics, and includes broad representation in leadership (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic).

### **Community Benefits**

- Assigned a trained community coach who will work one-on-one with the local champions team for up to 5 years.
- Gain a greater understanding of entrepreneurial opportunities and create a long-term sustainable strategy to support the needs of business growth.
- Identify and expand a leadership base to champion entrepreneurial activity now and into the future.
- Financial assistance to support local coordination, meeting expenses, training, technical assistance and evaluation tools.
- After Phase 1, qualified communities will be well-positioned to apply for and raise additional dollars from multiple resources for implementation projects.

**Long-term Impact:** Communities which fully engage in the GRO program, **long term**, can expect to see the following impacts:

- Increased prosperity, such as tax revenue and increased school enrollment.
- Increased entrepreneurial behavior as indicated by new businesses, entrepreneurial support process improvements, new or enhanced training opportunities.
- Increased competitiveness illustrated through increased number of ventures selling outside of the community and increased wages.
- Broader diversification in leadership and community activity.
- Increased resilience demonstrated through economic diversity.
- Overall, the community will be able to attract new dollars from the private sector and increased venture deal flow.

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**Application Process:** Interested rural communities should submit via email a **maximum three-page**, 12 pt. font, **Letter of Interest** accompanied by the **supporting documents** described below **by 5:00 p.m. on Monday, May 3, 2021** to [swylie@tfff.org](mailto:swylie@tfff.org).

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**Letter of Interest** must address the following:

- Describe your community's journey and commitment to exploring entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy.
- Does your city have an economic development plan? If yes, when was it developed and how often is it updated? Is support for entrepreneurship/small business development included in the plan?
- How does your community balance a business attraction approach with a focus on supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs?
- How do you envision your community will organize a local Leadership Team to champion this work and broadly represent the community?
- In today's competitive world, we must collaborate to create enough scale and capacity to support effective economic development strategies. Who are your current partners — local, regional, and statewide? How are you currently working together?
- Share examples of how your community has initiated projects and developed collaborations to support them.
- Explain how your community has effectively worked across sectors (e.g., public, private, government, philanthropic, and other institutions).
- Share examples of how your community strives to diversify resident engagement in leadership roles and economic or community development projects.

**Supporting Documents:**

- A completed Community Readiness Assessment. See directions on form.
- Up to three letters of support from organizations or institutions that include the resources they are willing to contribute (for example: business, education, social organizations or associations) should your community be selected to participate in GRO.
- A letter from local government that includes a commitment to the GRO framework and to collaborating with the Leadership Team and others to strengthen and grow the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

**Evaluation Criteria:** Priority will be given to communities that best demonstrate:

- Evidence of readiness and commitment to the “growing your own” approach to entrepreneurship as demonstrated by completion of the Community Readiness Criteria
- Support of local government(s).
- Willingness to invest in developing and implementing economic development systems and processes for the long term.
- Ability to track and monitor progress against program metrics.
- Established record of engaging in an asset-based community development approach, maximizing strengths, talents and resources of the local community.
- Demonstrated collaboration and/or partnership: communities that work with other organizations in unique and effective ways.
- Funding opportunities: communities that are committed to actively developing a sustainability plan for the GRO framework.
- Understanding of community demographics and need for representative leadership (age, gender, race, income, education level, etc.).
- Demonstrated partnership and success record through previous programming or grants from The Ford Family Foundation.
- Must be prepared to begin work July 2021.

**Next Steps:** Selected communities will be contacted to schedule a site visit during the May 2021. Following site visits, finalist communities will be invited to submit a full application in June 2021.

Any questions regarding eligibility or the application process should be directed to Kathleen Flanagan at: [kflanagan@tfff.org](mailto:kflanagan@tfff.org)