



**RURAL
PHILANTHROPY
INSTITUTE**

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New research initiative to address critical issues in rural America

Announcing the 2026 Rural Philanthropy Institute Research Fellows

The Rural Philanthropy Institute (RPI) today announced its first-ever cohort of Rural Philanthropy Institute Research Fellows. With a goal of enhancing the field of nonprofit and philanthropy research with a focus on rural America, the Rural Philanthropy Research Fellowship is designed to encourage emerging scholars in their study of rural America and the nonprofit sector and support the creation of robust scholarship that can be used to facilitate a deeper understanding of the role of philanthropy in rural areas.

While rural America is home to an estimated 20% of the nation's population, only [6-7% of philanthropic dollars reach rural areas](#). A [recent report by the USDA](#) deepened our understanding of this inequity by highlighting that just 3% of all grants are issued by rural-based grant makers. Despite the increasing need in rural communities and the significant economic impact the nonprofit industry has on rural economies, rural nonprofits continue to go underfunded. Still, they fulfill their missions each day. By supporting additional research into the unique ecosystems in which rural nonprofits exist, the roles they play and challenges they face, and the impact they have on their communities, RPI seeks to broaden knowledge of philanthropy in rural America, creating a stronger and more sustainable nonprofit sector.

The 2026 RPI Research Fellows will study aspects of rural nonprofits and philanthropy through diverse lenses. Whether exploring nonprofit capacity, the role of nonprofits in community collaboration and civic change, or the way perceptions of rural nonprofits affect philanthropic decision-making, each fellow will produce a robust research project that helps move the needle on the understanding of rural philanthropy and nonprofits as well as provide real-world case studies and solutions that can be utilized by those working in rural nonprofits today.

"We believe in the significant impact rural nonprofits have on the health of their communities, and we are committed to investigating the intersection of philanthropy and rural America," says Matt Ehlman, RPI's co-founder. "We are excited to launch this fellowship program to deepen our collective understanding of these vital organizations so that we can provide tools, guidance, and support to those doing this work every day and to those interested in supporting their efforts."

The RPI Research Fellows will begin their work in spring 2026, culminating in a virtual presentation of their research and findings. Proposals for the second round of fellowships will be accepted this summer, with additional fellowships awarded in fall 2026. RPI welcomes inquiries on current fellows, upcoming fellowship opportunities, and recent publications by emailing Nora Leinen at nora@ruralphilanthropyinstitute.org.

The work of the fellows will join other RPI publication initiatives released in the past six months. A scoping review of current research into rural philanthropy was completed in late 2025 by RPI staff and published in the [Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy](#). Additionally, RPI recently published the second volume in its [Rethinking Rural series](#) through North Dakota State University Press. The book series highlights rural voices, shares stories of perseverance and innovation, and refocuses the lens of rural through the eyes of those who live and work in these areas.

RPI's mission is to bring practitioners, academics, and interested people together to develop data, share stories and experiences, and gain insights that offer a greater understanding of what's required to have a healthy nonprofit community in rural areas. To achieve this mission, RPI seeks to gain more knowledge about the role of nonprofits in rural America by funding research centered on the rural experience with the nonprofit sector and the role this sector plays in building and sustaining rural American communities.



2026 RURAL PHILANTHROPY INSTITUTE RESEARCH FELLOWS

Trenton Ellis, Ph.D., Black Hills State University



Dr. Trenton Ellis is a sociologist and educator at Black Hills State University (BHSU). As a faculty member, he specializes in experiential learning, higher education access, and community-engaged research. A lifelong resident of rural America, Dr. Ellis grounds his scholarship in deep personal and professional commitments to rural communities and the diverse people who sustain them. Dr. Ellis values an approach that is empirically grounded, community-responsive, and actionable.

2026 Fellowship Focus:

“Power–Powered Philanthropy: Data–Driven Capacity Building for Rural Trails Nonprofits”

As a 2026 RPI Research Fellow, Dr. Ellis will lead a capacity-building effort and case study of the Spearfish Trails Coalition, a trails nonprofit dedicated to building a healthier and more resilient community through sustainable trail development in rural Spearfish, South Dakota. Bridging his passion for cycling, and community-focused social research, Dr. Ellis’s project will support a stakeholder survey for Spearfish Trails Coalition, engage BHSU students in research, and contribute to our knowledge of capacity–building in rural nonprofits.

Jayne Walters, Ph.D., Utah State University



Dr. Jayme Walters is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and the Executive Director of the Transforming Communities Institute (TCI) at Utah State University. Dr. Walters has nearly 20 years of experience in nonprofit and community practice, with a decade as a researcher and educator. Deeply rooted in social justice, her published and applied scholarship centers on helping communities and nonprofits build capacity and address urgent social issues that affect residents’ dignity and worth.

2026 Fellowship Focus:

“Strengthening Knowledge about Rural Nonprofit Capacity & Philanthropy”

Dr. Walters’s fellowship work will focus on multiple aspects of nonprofit capacity in rural areas. She will explore the use of technology for rural nonprofits and its effect on their fundraising capacity. She will also dive into the perceptions of rural communities and nonprofits investigating how perceptions of rural areas affect grant making and donor behavior through the lens of perceived impact, racism, classism, and other cultural forces.

Leeann Wright, CFRE, PhD, Candidate, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University



Leeann Wright, Executive Director of the Community Foundation of Pulaski County, has over 20 years of experience in nonprofit management and fundraising. She knows that communities transform when people work collaboratively. She believes in the power of philanthropy and has served and collaborated on boards and committees in every community in which she has lived. She is currently pursuing her PhD, the first professional doctorate for philanthropic and nonprofit professionals, at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University.

2026 Fellowship Focus:

“Strengthening Rural Nonprofit Networks in Pulaski County, Indiana Through Strategic Doing”

Leeann’s research will center on rural philanthropy and collaborative problem–solving through the lens of community foundations. Through her RPI Fellowship, Leeann will investigate collaborative efforts in Pulaski County, Indiana and will utilize the method of strategic doing – an action–oriented approach to collaboration focused on identifying shared opportunities, leveraging existing assets, and collectively defining success and how to measure progress.