

## **Learn About Best Practices for Rural Economic Development Corporations**

***In your economic development work experience, can you think of a specific economic development project of program that you worked on that stood out as making an impact? Can you tell me a little bit about it and when it started?***

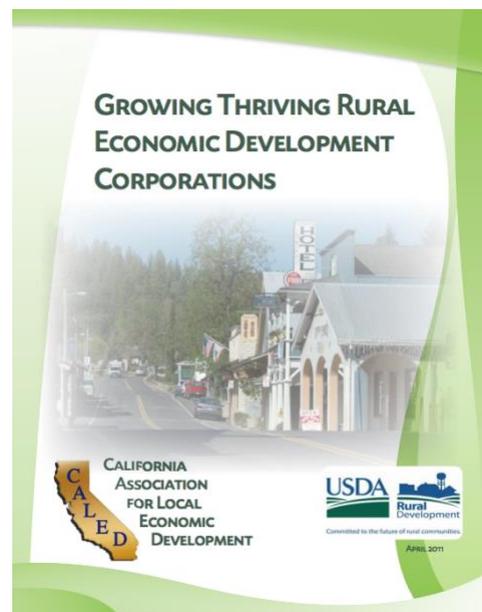
In 2009, CALED received a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD) to identify a model for a successful & sustainable Rural Economic Development Corporation (EDC) in California. This grant culminated in a report on the best practices for Rural EDCs in California. Published in April 2011, Growing Thriving Rural Economic Development Corporations, became a resource for EDCs throughout the state

The characteristics of rural communities in California are diverse due to the widely varied landscape, geography, demographics, and natural resources. Rural communities provide uncompromised economic support to the massively productive urban regions of the State. It was therefore essential that the EDCs supporting California's rural communities adopt sustainable business models. The ultimate goal of the report was to present policy recommendations for EDCs to help them thrive and identify a suite of services that they could use to reduce costs.

During this grant, we reached out EDCs throughout the state as well as other non-profit organizations to learn what worked well and what did not work in their organizations. CALED worked with consultants to help with outreach and research but the project would not have moved forward without our EDC Advisory Council. This group of nine individuals representing EDCs, private consultants, and Federal partners helped CALED ground truth the findings to make sure that they were applicable and useful for rural EDCs.

A key finding from the report included that strong leadership was essential for success of sustainable EDCs. When an EDC had a strong leader in place, the following four essential elements for success were more easily achieved:

- Effective operations resulting in improved EDC efficiency and effectiveness;
- Diversified funding streams that helped stabilize and broaden the EDCs financial base to insulate it from economic downturns and political changes;



- Regional collaboration that positioned EDCs for partnership opportunities to leverage resources; and
- Advocacy for the State's role in economic development that addressed the unique needs of smaller communities and rural areas.

***A lot of projects/programs have ups and downs. Were there challenges you had to overcome to be successful and rewards working on this project/program?***

It is challenging to do the level of outreach needed to write a definitive report on a subject. In order to do this, CALED worked with consultants that had a broad range of experience as well as the aforementioned EDC Advisory Committee. By bringing many experts to the table, we minimized the risk of leaving key elements out of the report.

***Can you share any impacts the project/program has had or will have on employment, expansion of local tax base & diversification of the area's economy?***

Though it was published in 2011, the report is still available and regularly accessed by economic developers throughout the state because the key findings are attributes that withstand time and political and economic changes. People can download the full report or Executive Summary here: <https://edacademy.org/innovation-research>

***What advice would you give to other economic development professionals when working on a similar project/program?***

Reach out to a broad array of people and organizations to learn the best possible ways forward. While this report focused on EDCs, many best practices came from organizations not involved with economic development, but their underlying goal was the same, to efficiently serve its mission and achieve success. By casting a wide net, CALED and its consultants were able to find the best practices for non-profit organizations regardless of mission.

Don't forget to tell us your social media usernames and websites so that other members can connect with you if you'd like us to tag, like, etc. you on your story.

*By Michelle Stephens, [michelle@caled.org](mailto:michelle@caled.org), Program Director, CALED*