

## Building Back a Better Rural America

Julie Lassa, State Director for Wisconsin, USDA Rural Development

### Who We Are

USDA Rural Development is committed to improving the economy and quality of life in rural communities by partnering with rural residents, leaders, and organizations to build prosperity and resilience.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, Rural Development partners and advocates to help expand economic opportunity, create and save jobs and improve the quality of life for people living in rural areas. With more than 50 loan and grant programs, this assistance supports housing; infrastructure improvements; business development; community facilities such as schools, public safety and health care and high-speed internet access in rural, Tribal, and high-poverty areas.

### How We Can Help

USDA Community Facilities Programs offer several grants, in addition to direct loans and loan guarantees, to develop or improve essential public services and facilities in communities across rural Wisconsin. These amenities help improve the quality of life of residents and increase the competitiveness of rural communities in attracting and retaining businesses.

Public bodies, non-profit organizations and federally recognized American Indian Tribes can use the funds to construct, expand or improve facilities that provide health care, education, public safety, and public services. Projects may include fire and rescue stations, village and town halls, health care clinics, hospitals, adult and childcare centers, assisted living facilities, rehabilitation centers, public buildings, schools, libraries and many other community-based initiatives. Financing may also cover the costs for land acquisition, professional fees and equipment purchases. These facilities not only improve the basic quality of life but help rural Wisconsin build back better, stronger, and more equitably than ever before.

The [Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program) provides affordable funding to develop essential community facilities in rural areas. Grant applicants are graded on a scale of eligibility; communities with lower median household incomes are eligible for a higher proportion of grant funds (up to 75 percent) towards the total project cost. Project funds can be used for everything from a new fire truck to replacing a leaking roof on city hall.

For example, the Town of Beaver received a \$110,000 Community Facilities Direct Grant to renovate the town hall and purchase equipment for the public works department, including a new 4-wheel drive tractor.

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<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program>

**Community Facilities Disaster Grants** are an extension of the Direct Loan and Grant program and provide relief for communities recovering from the effects of natural disasters. Please check the [FEMA website](#) for regular updates and names of eligible counties.

**Commented [GS2]:** <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2019/09/10/usda-provide-150-million-help-rural-communities-affected-natural>

**Commented [GS3]:** <https://www.fema.gov/disaster>

For example, the Village of Viola received \$655,000 in Community Facilities Disaster Grants to relocate streets and utilities in a portion of the community that is in a flood plain.

The **Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training Grant Program** makes grants available to public bodies and private nonprofit corporations for technical assistance and/or training with respect to essential community facilities programs. Applications are accepted on an annual basis through a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) in the Federal Register.

**Commented [GS4]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-technical-assistance-and-training-grant> Closed for now but announced annually.

**Commented [GS5]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-technical-assistance-and-training-grant/wi>

**Commented [GS6]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/erhc>

The **Emergency Rural Health Care Grant Program** was established by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to help expand access to COVID-19 testing and vaccines, rural health care services and food assistance through food banks and food distribution facilities. There are two tracks that eligible applicants can apply for: Recovery Grants provide immediate relief to address the economic conditions arising from the COVID-19 emergency and Impact Grants advance ideas and solutions to solve regional rural health care problems to support the long-term sustainability of rural health care. Look for an announcement on the first round of investments in the near future.

**Economic Impact Initiative Grants** assist in the development of essential community facilities in rural communities with extreme unemployment and severe economic depression.

**Commented [GS7]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/economic-impact-initiative-grants/wi>

Check out the latest investments made across Wisconsin through USDA's Community Facilities Programs: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/newsroom/news-release/usda-invests-18-million-improve-community-infrastructure-residents-wisconsin-rural-towns>.

The City of Park Falls will use a \$93,300 Community Facilities Direct Grant to purchase a fire truck and replace a 1991 vehicle that is no longer compliant with the National Fire Protection Association. The new truck will seat six, host its own generator, contain a 20-gallon water foam cell, and provide LED emergency lighting. This new vehicle will allow emergency responders to serve the 4,220 residents more efficiently in the City of Park Falls and the towns of Eisenstein and Lake.

The Village of White Lake received a \$146,000 Community Facilities Disaster Grant to purchase a loader tractor equipped with a mower, bucket and broom attachments and safety features to provide essential street maintenance and prevent potential work hazards.

In addition to essential community facility infrastructure, Rural Development provides funding for the construction of water and waste facilities in rural communities and is the only Federal program exclusively focused on water and waste infrastructure needs of rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less.

Through the Rural Utilities Service Water and Environmental Programs (WEP), rural communities obtain the technical assistance and financing necessary to provide their residents with safe drinking water and waste disposal systems. WEP also provides funding to organizations that provide technical assistance and training to rural communities in relation to their water and waste activities. Safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems are vital not only to public health but also to the economic vitality of rural Wisconsin.

The most popular of the WEP programs is by far the [Water & Waste Disposal Loan and Grant Program](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/water-waste-disposal-loan-grant-program/wi), which provides funding for clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage disposal, sanitary solid waste disposal and storm water drainage to households and businesses in eligible rural areas. Funds may be used for anything from building a new water tower or wastewater treatment plant to rehabilitating a storm water collection infrastructure.

**Commented [GS8]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/water-waste-disposal-loan-grant-program/wi>

A great example of the WEP program is the City of Bloomer receiving over \$27 million in loans and grants to replace sanitary sewer mains and all lead service lines and lead-jointed water main pipes. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack recently visited Bloomer to announce this investment, among others, and how these improvements will help the city to reduce lead limits in their water distribution system for 3,539 people in Chippewa County. Funding will also help correct inflow and infiltration issues from cracked piping.

There are a couple grants that aid in the application process of larger Water & Waste Disposal projects:

- [Special Evaluation Assistance for Rural Communities and Households \(SEARCH\) Grants](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/search-special-evaluation-assistance-rural-communities-and-households) help very small, financially distressed rural communities with predevelopment feasibility studies, design and technical assistance on proposed water and waste disposal projects.
- [Water & Waste Disposal Predevelopment Planning Grants](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/water-waste-disposal-predevelopment-planning-grants/wi) assist low-income communities with initial planning and development of applications for USDA Rural Development Water and Waste Disposal direct loan/grant and loan guarantee programs.

**Commented [GS9]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/search-special-evaluation-assistance-rural-communities-and-households>

**Commented [GS10]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/water-waste-disposal-predevelopment-planning-grants/wi>

[Emergency Community Water Assistance Grants \(ECWAG\)](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/emergency-community-water-assistance-grants/wi) help eligible communities prepare or recover from an emergency that threatens the availability of safe, reliable drinking water. Much like Community Facilities Disaster Grants, ECWAG grants help to address water supply issues resulting from the negative effects of natural and other disasters. The major difference is that this program accepts applications year-round and no federal disaster declaration is required.

**Commented [GS11]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/emergency-community-water-assistance-grants/wi>

[Solid Waste Management Grants](https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/solid-waste-management-grants) reduce or eliminate pollution of water resources by providing funding for organizations that provide technical assistance or training to improve the planning and management of solid waste sites.

**Commented [GS12]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/solid-waste-management-grants>

For a complete listing of Rural Development’s Water and Environmental Programs, visit <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs>.

#### *What You Should Know*

USDA Rural Development is incorporating key Biden-Harris Administration priorities into program scoring and associated funding announcements beginning with the fiscal year 2022 funding announcements.

These priorities build upon RD’s continuing commitment to serve traditionally underserved and economically challenged rural areas, such as Persistent Poverty Counties. Many RD programs will have a funding set-aside for areas of persistent poverty. These programs will be identified on the [Priority Points Program Chart](#).

**Commented [GS13]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/priority-points/program-chart>

USDA Rural Development has identified three key priorities that will provide a pathway to facilitate economic growth for all rural Americans and is encouraging Applicants to consider projects that will:

1. Assist rural communities recover economically from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly disadvantaged communities.
2. Ensuring all rural residents have equitable access to RD programs and benefits from RD funded projects.
3. Reduce climate pollution and increase resilience to the impacts of climate change through economic support to rural communities.

We will be incorporating these priorities into the work we do across the Agency and with our partners to incentivize strategic engagement and investment.

Applications are accepted either online through [RD Apply](#) or by working with the staff in your [local Rural Development area office](#). We encourage you to read more about all our programs by visiting [www.rd.usda.gov/wi](http://www.rd.usda.gov/wi).

**Commented [GS14]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rd-apply>

**Commented [GS15]:** <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contactpage/wisconsin-contacts>

We look forward to partnering with you to build back better!

#### **Additional USDA Rural Development Resources**

**Telecom Programs** including the ReConnect Program to fund broadband connectivity as well as other Telecommunications Loan and Grant Programs. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs>

**Business Programs** provide financial backing and technical assistance to stimulate business creation and growth. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs>

Julie Lassa grew up on her parents' small dairy farm in northern Portage County and most recently worked for a Wisconsin-based property and casualty insurance company. She represented a district in central Wisconsin in the state legislature for 18 years, both in the Assembly and Senate. In addition, Lassa served on the Board of Directors for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation where she focused on enhancing private-sector job creation and promoting small business. Julie authored the Green to Gold Fund to assist small and mid-sized businesses improve their energy efficiency and create new green energy products and services. She also served as a Supervisor for the Town of Dewey and as Executive Director for the Plover Area Business Association. Contact the USDA Rural Development at 715-345-7600 or [wi-rd-stateoffice@usda.gov](mailto:wi-rd-stateoffice@usda.gov)