

## **1 – Executive summary:**

With unprecedented amounts of money being allocated to energy transition and economic development across the country, local leaders are increasingly exploring the most effective ways to create compelling grant proposals and secure federal funding. In seeking to answer the questions of what makes some counties more successful in winning grants than others, and whether there are qualities of these counties that can be replicated elsewhere, we have conducted 13 county-level surveys in five states, held numerous conversations with local and regional leaders, and engaged in secondary research and analysis of data sourced from federal databases. Several key aspects of counties successfully securing funding have emerged thus far, including 1) the presence of an economic development director or similar in-house leader dedicated to federal grants processes and/or energy transition programs; 2) a robust financial foundation from which to draw for sufficient staffing, proposal costs, and matching funds; and 3) working relationships with federal officers and other relevant networks. Using these findings, we further illustrate the barriers preventing underserved counties in particular from finding sustained success in securing funding. We then present recommendations on ways that county leaders can strengthen economic development and energy transition efforts and on ways that federal agencies can make grant processes and funding mechanisms more inclusive and accessible.

## **2 – Introduction:**

### *Problem statement & purpose:*

Local governments at the county and city levels seeking to develop and implement just transition and economic diversification initiatives are often unable to access key federal funding. Some of the most common challenges and barriers include insufficient staffing, lack of experience with grant processes, inability to meet matching fund requirements, and lack of capacity to implement programs once funding is secured. With that in mind, there are two key questions that arise:

1. What makes some counties more successful in securing funding from federal sources?
2. And do those qualities of success translate to other areas?

By surveying and researching approaches taken by counties and cities that have secured federal funding, we hope to understand the frameworks that enable certain communities to succeed and highlight ways that those approaches can be put in place elsewhere. This combination of surveys, interviews, and secondary data analysis will allow us to assess whether we can 1) increase understanding of the prevalence and influence of these and other key challenges preventing access to federal funding, 2) develop a blueprint for how to help previously unsuccessful and underserved communities develop successful proposals, and 3) provide feedback and advocate on behalf of these communities to key governmental bodies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Energy, and others.

### *Background context:*

Local governments are crucial stakeholders in addressing the climate crisis, ensuring progress towards net-zero goals, strengthening and diversifying economies, and securing livelihoods. While federal initiatives and agencies are necessary pieces of the larger puzzle as they set greenhouse gas targets and broader national energy plans and help facilitate and guide programs across the country, local leaders are tasked with developing and implementing projects specific to their local contexts and economies and with the needs of their constituents in mind.

Furthermore, with the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in 2022, federal funding for renewable energy projects and programs is more readily available and, theoretically, more accessible than ever for counties and local governments. The IIJA authorized \$79 billion and the IRA authorized a further \$369 billion, providing the financial foundation for local and regional energy transitions across the country. These funds are available for a wide range of initiatives including energy efficiency and electric grid improvements, reduction of greenhouse gasses, clean energy technologies, environmental remediation and other key areas from agencies from the Departments of Energy (DOE), Agriculture and Rural Development (USDA), the Economic Development Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). While these Acts have also allocated funding through other agencies as well, we are focusing primarily on these four as the primary sources of grants for economic development projects with components of renewable energy transition.

Unfortunately, while increased and sustained climate and energy funding is critical to achieving emissions reductions and preventing warming from rising above the targets of 1.5 or even 2 degrees Celsius, the reality is that certain areas and populations are at greater risk and bear the greatest burden of the effects of climate change. And the systems and processes required to secure and utilize significant funding awards favor communities that already have greater foundations of human and financial capital. Underserved communities, therefore, will typically have a much harder time securing funding for crucial initiatives that will bolster their economies and mitigate the economic and social impacts of climate change on their communities. Issues of staffing capacity, lack of knowledge and experience on grant application processes and creating a compelling proposal, requirements for matching funds, and further capacity to implement programs if and when funding is secured are some of the common barriers that prevent local leaders from successfully implementing just transition initiatives that would improve the health of their economies, environments, and communities.

With that said, there are valuable lessons that local leaders – in both underserved and more well-established areas – can learn about putting together a successful proposal and program roadmap and that officers from federal agencies can learn about what revisions can be made to the grant processes to ensure that the entirety of the system becomes as justice-focused as the funding allocations should be going forward. Through these surveys and research, we are seeking to provide a data-driven foundation for these lessons and improvements going forward.

### **3 – Research approach**

In order to create an actionable understanding of the challenges communities face regarding federal funding, and to inform potential changes to the related systems and processes, our approach involves:

- Surveying leaders overseeing county-level energy transition and economic diversification efforts
  - 13 counties surveyed thus far for this initial draft
  - 20 counties targeted in total for final research paper
- Analysis of secondary data on the profile of counties, including:
  - Demographic information
  - Types of energy transition and economic diversification projects being implemented
  - Sources and amounts of federal funding secured

For this secondary data, we used a range of sources from the federal government, including (among others):

- Department of Energy State and Community Energy Programs Project Map
- Economic Development Administration Grant History List

- Department of Agriculture Rural Investment Database and Map
- Funding database provided by USAspending.gov

By combining these two areas of research, we are seeking to recognize and analyze trends, commonalities, and contrasts between communities that are successfully implementing energy transition and economic diversification programs funded by federal grants and those that have not yet found that same success.

It may be important first to clarify our terms and definitions of “successfully” or “unsuccessfully” transitioning and accessing funding. Though we are placing them under the same umbrella of having successful transition programs, many of these communities are at different stages of that process. Some have only just secured grant funding but have not yet begun to implement programs, whereas others have won multiple grants and have made substantial progress through their transition roadmaps. The common criteria is that they have won at least one grant thus far from a recognized federal agency.

On the other hand, for those communities that have not yet had success, we are not necessarily speaking only of those that have submitted one or more proposals and been rejected, but we are also looking at those that, despite recognizing the need and having the desire to develop and implement transition roadmaps and programs, have not yet been able to determine the best course of action to do so, including how to create and submit a proposal. We will also include insights on unsuccessful grant applications from communities that were able to revise and resubmit their proposal, winning the grant based on their subsequent submission, or that have had a combination of successful and unsuccessful applications. In doing so, we should be able to gain valuable insight into how these communities adjusted their approaches and what some of the key differences were between their successful and unsuccessful applications.

### *County survey & data collection*

Our primary approach to gathering data on key aspects of successful grant proposals and barriers preventing access to funding has been to develop and administer a survey to county-level officials. It is important to note that this survey was not a formal academic exercise but rather an attempt to gather and analyze actionable data by practitioners for practitioners.

Where available, we approached Economic Development Directors (or similarly-titled individuals) for individual counties or in some cases regional groups of counties. If there was not an Economic Development Director in place, the first alternative was to seek out a regional economic development corporation. While economic development corporations are not government agencies with elected or appointed staff, they work closely with local governments with the aim of driving economic growth and diversification by attracting new businesses to the area. Part of this approach to attracting new business could be in the form of grants and loans disbursed by the economic development corporation, including those given from funding it has itself secured through the IRA. The third option was to approach County Commissioners or County Managers. The surveys were then administered on an individual basis through virtual meetings or by phone.

In the survey, we began by gathering information on the demographic makeup of the county in order to understand if and how approaches and success differed between coal-dependent communities and underserved communities, the latter of which includes Indigenous, other majority minority counties, counties in persistent poverty status, or those in a combination of the above. To further categorize counties into similar cohorts, we developed a set of energy transition stages; these ranged from counties that recognized the need for energy transition but had not yet developed a clear roadmap to those that have set up renewable energy infrastructure,

won federal grants, and are attracting new businesses. The heart of the survey then focused on the grants application experience, including information on initial preparation for the grant application process; the impact of previous working relationships and experiences with state and federal officers and funding; the resources that most impacted successful applications; and how failed applications changed subsequent approaches to federal funding or attitudes towards the process overall. The next section of this paper provides an overview of the survey findings and key data points.

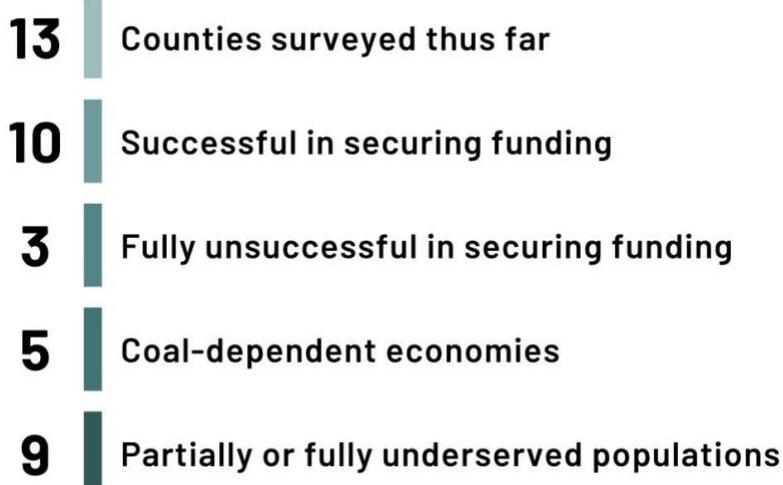
### *Secondary research and data analysis*

We have further engaged in in-depth background research utilizing government databases, reports, and other resources on renewable energy transition programs and projects funded by DOE, EPA, USDA's Rural Development office, and others. This research has been a valuable supplement to our survey data, as it has allowed us to understand the range of projects and programs that have been funded, which agencies are funding different approaches to renewable energy, and where funding has been directed geographically.

## **4 – Findings**

### *Survey details, definitions, and demographics*

While this paper is only an initial draft of a larger project that remains ongoing, we have thus far surveyed **13 counties in five states**; for the final results, we are aiming to survey 20 counties in total from eight to ten states. We have kept a wide scope in targeting counties to this point, as it should be useful to gather experiences and insights from across the country, and have spoken to economic development directors and county commissioners and other key stakeholders from Utah and Colorado to Pennsylvania and West Virginia, among others.



In categorizing counties, we include as “successful” counties any that have won federal grants on energy programs or programs that include energy transition aspects within economic development or diversification efforts. We included any counties with rejected proposals in the data related to unsuccessful counties, regardless of whether they were able to successfully revise and resubmit an initially rejected proposal or successfully submit a proposal for a different project. While this might mean some data would add up to greater than 100%, it is important to analyze all failed attempts to secure funding because the revision and resubmission process and any changes to staffing or capacity made between unsuccessful and successful submissions will be key to understanding best practices for securing funding.

Additionally, to define a county as underserved, we initially used the EPA's [Disadvantaged Communities Map](#), also referred to as the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, which “uses datasets that are indicators of burdens in eight categories: climate change, energy, health, housing, legacy pollution, transportation, water and wastewater, and workforce development.” However, one issue with this tool is that it does not include racial

demographics in its methodology. This has drawn criticism because minority communities often face the worst effects of climate change; Black Americans in particular are impacted more severely than other groups according to a report issued by the EPA in 2021. With that in mind, we have further included under the definition of underserved as any counties with a majority minority population.

Lastly, we define a “coal-dependent” county as one that derives 50% or more of its economic base – total revenue and/or assessed value – from the coal sector, whether that is mining, electrical power generation, or a combination of the two.

Using these criteria, the demographic makeup of the counties surveyed include:

- 10 that had successfully secured federal funding related to energy transition and economic development in the last three years
- 10 that were counted towards those that had unsuccessful grant proposals
  - 3 counties were fully unsuccessful, i.e. had yet to secure federal funding related to energy transition and economic development in the last three years
- 5 coal-dependent counties, and
- 9 underserved counties
  - 6 qualified as underserved in all of their census tracts
  - 3 had at least one census tract that qualified as underserved.

### ***Key factors influencing success in securing federal funding***

Several important factors quickly emerged as common themes among counties that had successfully secured federal funding, which can provide important guiding lessons for other counties just beginning their energy transition journeys.

#### *Presence and experience of key internal leaders*

The first aspect of successful counties is regarding the capacity and availability of key personnel dedicated specifically to these types of programs. Having an engaged official or resource person specifically dedicated to and responsible for leading efforts in renewable energy transition, economic development and diversification, and proposals may arguably be the most important factor impacting the success of a county’s efforts at securing federal funding.

Among the counties we surveyed, this was true whether that individual worked directly for an individual county, for a regional association providing support for multiple counties, or a regional economic development corporation. In fact, **85% of counties surveyed had a dedicated economic development director** in place. Eight of the ten counties that had successfully secured funding had such an individual on board whether in the county itself or through a regional association and one of the remaining two counties had a dedicated grant writer on staff. Thus, just **one county that had successfully secured funding did so without someone leading these efforts** as a whole or leading the grant



process on a full time basis. Most importantly, 80% of the counties with an economic development director or grant writer were successful in securing funding.

These economic development leaders themselves come from a variety of backgrounds prior to taking on their current role. Interestingly, just **25% came from previous roles working directly with federal grants** for nonprofit organizations and as a consultant for local government offices, while **50% transitioned into this role from another role in local or county government**. The remaining **25% came directly from the private sector**.

None of these leaders had a background in energy transition, however, which speaks to the importance of business operations or government experience over renewable energy expertise. Likewise, whether or not this individual leader had experience in the grant processes and mechanisms specific to key federal agencies like the EPA prior to taking on this role is less important than ensuring they have the time to build their own capacity in this area, potentially including access to training and education programs. While some of these programs may require an upfront cost, it is also possible to access free resources from government agencies themselves or other nonprofit organizations. Several county leaders we surveyed noted that gaining this experience goes an extremely long way towards streamlining the application process for all grant proposals going forward. While different agencies have different templates and requirements, these leaders noted that once they or their staff had a firm understanding of the general proposal process and the experience of creating proposals, regardless of the success of those proposals, they were able to put together more applications more quickly going forward. Thus, there is an argument to be made that a county looking to improve its success in securing funding should not be overly concerned with waiting to find an individual who has the exact right type and level of experience. Rather, it may be more beneficial to move more quickly to put someone in place and ensure they have the time and resources to build their capacity and experience in this area.

Additionally, knowledge and understanding of the local contexts within a county or surrounding region can be important qualities in an economic development officer or the head of an economic development corporation. Of the counties surveyed that had one of these officials in place, **100% of them were originally from or had lived in the area for a significant length of time**. This helps them understand the resources present in the area and the community dynamics, needs, and desires; in turn, this can help them more effectively find the right kind of funding opportunities for the right kind of project for the area. It can also be a great benefit to have already existing relationships with other county or city leaders, and with members of the community at large, to help build buy-in for new renewable energy and economic diversification projects that will likely direct the community away from industries like coal that have given it a sense of identity for decades or more.

On the other hand, for many counties in more rural and less populated areas in particular, it may be necessary to look at bringing in talent from outside the community, but this also raises the question of whether or how to make that an attractive opportunity. Indeed, in speaking with leaders from several counties in West Virginia, for example, we found that there were several instances where they had created and submitted grant proposals compelling enough for them to move to the final round of selections only to be dropped from the running when officials visited the area in person.

Communities that appear to be struggling – downtown areas with shuttered businesses or areas that appear to be lacking in the sense of vitality and community that is perceived to be associated with the ability to successfully implement an economic diversification plan and overall resurgence – have a much harder time securing funding than more “vibrant” communities. Those communities will also have a harder time attracting outside talent for key positions like an economic development director; thus downtown revitalization initiatives can play a key part in successful federal funding. When speaking with officials from Lincoln County, Wyoming, it was made clear

that efforts to revitalize the downtown core of the city of Kemmerer, the county seat, had gone a long way toward attracting individuals, families, and entrepreneurs to move to the area. Businesses like a new coffee shop and hotel, tourism initiatives centered around the area's renowned fossil beds, and plans to bring new life to the park in the city center helped bolster the county's ability to compete for renewable energy projects like the TerraPower Sodium nuclear reactor demonstration site.

Finally, among the counties surveyed, **six were part of a regional government association and three others were part of a regional economic development corporation.** This can be an extremely beneficial approach for a number of reasons. First, it eliminates the need for an individual county to go through the process of hiring new staff or taking existing staff away from their current duties and directing them towards overseeing renewable energy and economic diversification initiatives; it also substantially reduces the cost burden associated with putting an economic development official in place. Second, there is generally a higher likelihood of attracting top talent to a larger association or organization of counties than for an individual county to do the same. This can further bolster the likelihood of having an economic development director from the area who has working relationships with at least some of the local officials and understands many, if not necessarily all, of the local contexts. And lastly, it can allow for helpful collaboration across counties. In our conversations with local leaders, we found that there were many cases in which neighboring counties, without knowing it, were competing against one another for the same grant or the same pool of funds. This meant that each county spent thousands of dollars and person-hours to develop individual project plans and roadmaps and create individual proposals for only one of them to come away with funding. On the other hand, if they had better systems in place to communicate and understand the specific contexts and initiatives they were each pursuing – like a regional association or economic development corporation – they likely would have found significant areas of shared interest and opportunities for collaboration that would have enhanced project plans across the board, reduced the financial and staffing burdens associated with both developing and implementing those plans and with creating the proposal, and come away with a stronger approach benefitting the region as a whole and thus strengthening the prospects of each individual county as well.

#### *Technical assistance and capacity building from external experts*

While having dedicated in-house leadership overseeing energy transition and economic diversification efforts is likely the most beneficial approach in most situations to improving success rates for grant proposals, there are other options available for counties that may not have the time or ability to put such a leader in place. Approaching the question of experience and knowledge in a different way, **four of the counties we surveyed had brought in outside experts** to play that role on a temporary or contract basis though only **half of these counties had successfully secured funding thus far.** There is some overlap with the numbers in the previous section as one county led by the director of an economic development corporation also hired consultants for the grant process.

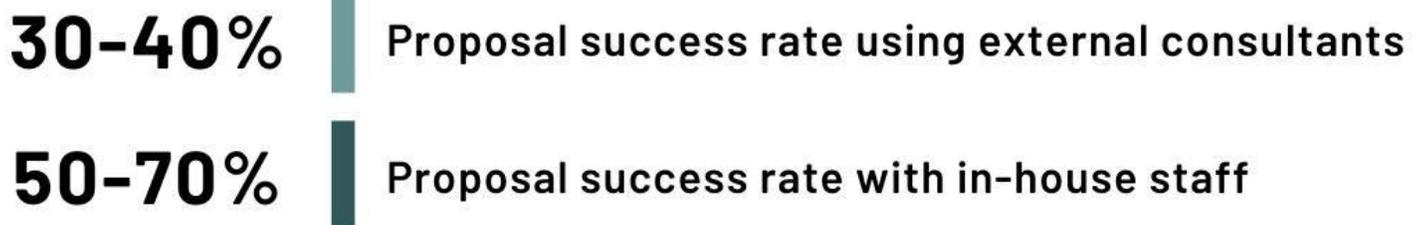
The most common way counties have utilized this approach is by hiring an outside consultant. In our survey findings, this consultant was hired directly by the county to lead the process of creating and submitting a proposal and handling any revisions that may be required before resubmitting. Though there are options available for consulting services or technical assistance



from nonprofit and other donor-funded organizations, each of the counties in our survey that took this approach brought consultants on board from private sector companies specializing in grant proposals and management.

However, the most important thing to note regarding internal staff compared to external consultants is the success rate. The surveyed **counties that hired consultants estimated a roughly 30-40% success rate** for their proposals. In contrast, the **counties with in-house economic development staff estimated an average success rate of 50-70% overall**. One economic development director for a regional association of counties estimated that their success rate was close to 100% when accounting for proposals that failed initially but were revised and resubmitted either to the same or a more appropriate agency.

Considering these differences in success rate, the consultant approach may be most feasible for counties that are only targeting funding for a few specific projects or initiatives. At an **average cost of upwards of \$10,000 for the creation of a complex federal grant proposal**, however, there is a point at which it becomes less cost-effective to bring on a consultant as compared to hiring or promoting a dedicated staff member. Furthermore, the burden is still on the county to have the financial and human resources available to do any initial assessments of local contexts, resources, and both current and future economic drivers and outlooks before developing project plans and roadmaps for implementation. There are of course other consulting approaches that go beyond the proposal process to include grant management, strategic guidance, reporting, and the full range of program management responsibilities, but these can run further into the tens of thousands of dollars which can make them prohibitively expensive for many counties. It is also necessary to consider that a short-term consultant, even one who is preparing a number of proposals for the same county on a repeat basis, will not be able to coordinate different approaches and guide an overarching long-term diversification strategy in the same way that a dedicated official would be. Nevertheless, securing that first successful grant can be pivotal in facilitating future success and this can be an extremely helpful step for counties just starting to move in that direction.



Along those same lines of taking a longer-term view, another approach is to bring in outside experts to train and educate staff on federal funding mechanisms and all aspects of the grant process, from proposal to budgeting and management. Unfortunately, none of the counties that we surveyed had taken this approach, so we would need to gather additional data in order to be able to understand the impact on securing federal funding this approach has as compared to bringing on a grant-writing consultant. However, there is a compelling case to be made that this approach will provide a greater return on the investment over time as in-house staff become more experienced and comfortable with federal funding mechanisms.

#### *Financial capacity for creating proposals and implementing programs*

Following from this, it may be unsurprising then that having a greater base level of financial capacity overall was identified as another key indicator of a county's ability to successfully secure federal funding. This baseline funding, necessary for consultants or trainers or for ensuring counties are able to hire the right staff, in terms of numbers and areas of expertise, is also critical once the proposal process is underway.

Indeed, while the successful counties we surveyed on the whole won **grants that typically ranged from \$50,000 to \$300,000**, the two counties with the highest assessed values – results of extremely lucrative coal industries – won grants that ranged from **\$2.8 million to \$4.6 million**. This illustrates not only the benefits of having a strong financial foundation, even if it is one that has taken and will continue to take significant hits as the coal sector declines, but also the sheer amount of money that is being dedicated to economic development in relation to energy transition.

Many grant processes require local governments to provide matching funds up to a certain percentage of the overall cost of the project as a means of vetting their commitment to and capability of implementing a project once the grant funding has been allocated. While it will vary by agency and funding program, **matching fund requirements are often around 20-25% of the grant total, meaning that they can easily run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars**. As mentioned above, one way of alleviating the burden of matching funds is by collaborating with other counties on joint proposals or within a regional association; this allows counties to share costs rather than having to come up with matching funds alone. Another important approach that has proven extremely useful according to counties surveyed in Utah, for example, is by being able to tap into pools of funding the state government allocates for counties that need matching funds in order to secure federal grants.

Lastly, though none of the counties we surveyed had used this approach, there are philanthropic and nonprofit grant-making organizations that can assist with matching funds, though this can be a competitive process and has no guarantees of success.

#### *Working relationships with key government agencies and officers*

One other common area that helped successful counties win grants, especially on a repeat basis, was the working relationships they were able to establish with federal agencies and key officers. **70% of the counties we surveyed cited this as a very important aspect of what led to their success** in securing funding. In fact, **two of the three counties that had not secured any relevant federal funding in recent years lack sufficient depth in these networks**. It is also important to note that **75% of the counties that did not mention relationships with federal agencies were among the most underserved** of this cohort.

One of the county leaders surveyed detailed how establishing those working relationships proved useful for several different reasons. First, it meant that key officers from the EPA, DOE, and other agencies would always answer the phone when she called and were quick to respond to her questions about a specific proposal. Second, once a proposal was submitted and the review process had started, she was able to more quickly connect with grant officers who could provide feedback on the proposal and give critical insight on any revisions that could increase the chances of success. Lastly, she was able to tap into those relationships and networks to find new funding opportunities and have discussions with her contacts who could direct her to different agencies that might have more relevant open calls for proposals depending on the project. Most tellingly, she noted that in the few cases where their proposals were unsuccessful, it was through those relationships and the feedback



or redirection that was provided by her contacts that they were able to revise and resubmit or redirect the proposal and ultimately secure the funding.

The use of these connections and networks seemed to be most common for regional offices or individual counties that have an economic development director or specific grants specialist in place. Having a dedicated point person with the time, capacity, and experience working with federal partners needed to manage those relationships can be invaluable. That experience is particularly useful: those economic development and energy transition leaders have typically been working in this space for some time, which gives more opportunities to get to know and be known by important officials. Beyond a background in energy transition and economic development, officials we surveyed noted other ways that they were able to develop these important networks and relationships was through attending national and regional conferences on energy transition and participating in ongoing working groups and coalitions of other county leaders working on similar issues. These types of convenings allow for crucial face-to-face meetings through which county leaders can discuss their energy transition and economic diversification plans with key officials and, equally importantly, with other leaders who can provide insights from their own experiences on best practices and ways of increasing success in securing funding.

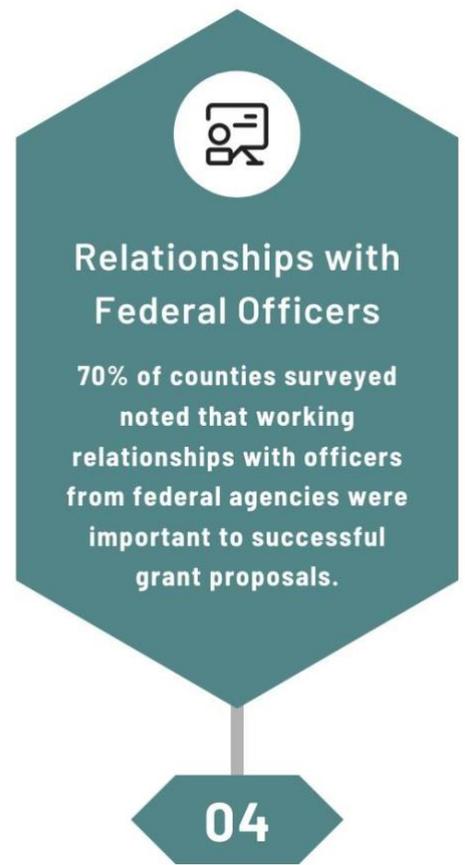
It may also be the case that involvement in industry networks and developing relationships with private sector actors and civil society organizations is also useful in securing funding as bringing in new companies and industries can be incredibly important to diversifying local economies as the demand for coal declines. Only one of the counties we surveyed mentioned these networks, however, so more research would be required to fully understand their impact on funding success.

Ultimately, the impact of these relationships and networks is another reason why having a dedicated transition or development official can be extremely important for funding success. Compared to staff who have other areas of responsibility and demands for their capacity, and compared to external consultants, a full-time economic development leader is more likely to have the bandwidth to attend conferences, participate in working groups, and maintain connections with key government officials.

### ***Barriers to success for underserved and overburdened counties***

On the opposite side of these factors for success are the related barriers that many local officials face in securing funding for energy transition and economic diversification projects. Staffing, experience and expertise, and funding are huge issues for counties that need assistance the most.

There are a number of reasons why an underserved county in particular may not be in a position to bring on board an Economic Development Director or a staff person dedicated to energy transition or grant proposals. Many of these underserved counties have populations with a lower average level of educational attainment which makes it more difficult to even find a qualified individual especially when also factoring in their often more rural geographies and lower or more dispersed populations overall. If they are able to find a qualified candidate, there



are of course the barriers of salaries and other costs, for which the funding simply may not exist. Decreased revenues from declining coal or fossil fuel sectors would further exacerbate challenges around finances. Existing staff may be redirected towards these responsibilities, but they are often already overburdened with their current duties. While it is possible to alleviate this issue by bringing in outside experts, the cost of hiring a consultant or training partner can be prohibitive for underserved areas.

Fortunately, there are some options to alleviate or negate the financial burdens associated with bringing in outside experts or trainers and with matching funds. Counties may have the opportunity to partner with nonprofit or philanthropic organizations that provide grant writing, capacity-building, and technical assistance programs or that can provide grants for hiring staff or consultants. Some states like Utah have also set up state-wide pools of funding that can be allocated for county-level matching fund requirements, which one of the local officials we surveyed noted was one of the most impactful pieces of their success in securing federal grants. These can often be limited resources and competitive processes in and of themselves, however, and may remain challenging for overburdened counties. Overall, the need to have funding in order to secure funding further illustrates the challenges that underserved and especially persistent-poverty communities face.

Lastly, for counties and local officials that have not already gone through a federal grants process or the process of implementing an energy transition program, the question of where to even start can be overwhelming. Determining the best course of action, assessing opportunities for new projects and other initiatives, knowing where to find open calls for proposals, and accessing other resources can all be challenging when starting from square one.

## 5 – Recommendations

While it would be necessary to conduct a full assessment of an individual county's current capacity and contexts in terms of staffing, finances, and economic drivers before providing nuanced and truly actionable recommendations, there are a number of points that can still be drawn from for counties looking to improve their success in securing federal funding.

### *Leadership and capacity-building:*

- **Dedicate leadership to oversee the entire process.**
  - **On-board a dedicated director** to oversee the economic development and diversification process overall, from high-level strategy down to sourcing open calls for funding, if possible,
  - **OR a dedicated grant-writing professional** who can own the proposal process while county commissioners or other government officials guide from a strategic level.
- **Move more quickly but give time to develop:**
  - The leaders we surveyed have shown that **different backgrounds from different sectors – even those that don't involve grant funding – can facilitate success**; it's not necessary to wait for the exact right candidate with the perfect blend of experience.
  - Local knowledge can be helpful, but don't hesitate to bring in someone from outside the area if needed.
  - At the same time, ensure staff have the **time and space to dedicate to building their own capacity** regarding the different proposal processes.
- Consultants and external experts can be extremely helpful in the right circumstances, but it is important to **understand the long-term cost-benefit analysis** compared to internal hiring or capacity building.
  - Make sure to explore any potential pro bono or nonprofit consultants, experts, and trainers.

*Financial requirements:*

- **Know your options.**
  - Explore opportunities for additional funding that can facilitate the proposal process, especially regarding matching funds. It might be possible to access funding from
    - State pooled funds like those in Utah, Illinois, and other states.
    - Philanthropic funders or other nonprofit grant-making organizations.
- Explore the **potential of joint proposals between neighboring counties** that can benefit the region as a whole while sharing the financial burden.

*Networking is key:*

- Knowing who else is working in and around this space is invaluable, including:
  - **Key officers from funding agencies** who can provide feedback and guidance and connect you to other agencies that might have more relevant open funding opportunities.
  - **Other county and local leaders** in areas that are in similar positions in their energy transition, economic development, and even proposal processes. Share knowledge, learn from each other's experiences, and support each other to find success.
  - **Nonprofit leaders and philanthropic funders** can help further expand your networks and potentially provide technical assistance, funding support, or capacity building.
- Building all of these networks will further help you explore networking opportunities through **conferences** on energy transition and economic development, **coalitions and ongoing working groups** of other leaders working together to provide support, or other regional or national convenings.