



Statewide Planning Grant Case Study

Ohio:

*Strategically Building Capacity to
Overcome Economic Challenges*

Key Takeaways

- The Governor's Office of Appalachia (GOA) evenly distributed the Statewide Planning Grant to the four Economic Development Districts (EDDs) in the state's Appalachian Region.
- EDDs are central to GOA's decision-making processes, and the organizations engage in biweekly meetings, establishing a close relationship.
- The funding allowed each EDD to take a tailored approach to development, ranging from broadband to workforce development, and will help them be more competitive for federal resources.

Introduction

The Governor's Office of Appalachia (GOA) is a small team of three full-time staff within the Ohio Department of Development. Its primary responsibility is to manage the Appalachian Community Grant Program, a half a billion-dollar program that distributes funding to the 32 Appalachian counties in Ohio.¹ Despite the small size and narrow focus of the office, staff provide essential technical assistance to the four EDDs in the region. GOA not only incorporate EDDs into planning and implementation of the Statewide Planning Grant but also positioned them at the forefront. Customizing each of their own efforts, the EDDs will address immediate and long-term capacity challenges so that they can maintain a competitive edge for state and federal funding.

Project Summary

Ohio's Statewide Planning Grant funding addresses challenges - such as poverty, job loss, and the opioid crisis - exacerbated by the pandemic. GOA tasked EDDs to provide regional technical assistance, drive local revitalization plans, enhance data capacity for disadvantaged communities, identify high-priority economic development projects for future investment, and build local coordination within and between communities. Following approval from the state legislature's Controlling Board, the GOA allocated \$250,000 each to Buckeye Hills Regional Council, Eastgate Council of Governments, Ohio Mid-Eastern Government Association (OMEGA) and Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission (OVRDC) to invest in programs supporting broadband access, downtown revitalization, brownfields, workforce development, and entrepreneurship.

Block grant funding for the four Economic Development Districts (EDDs) in the Appalachian region will empower the 32 designated Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) counties, and one additional county designated by EDA, to make data-driven strategic investments. Each taking a tailored approach, EDDs will have greater organizational capacity to do more long-term planning in the given priority investment area.

¹ The EDDs in the region also function as Local Development Districts (LDDs) for the Appalachian Regional Commission.

The grant is crucial to making the region more competitive for federal resources that help address regional issues:

- Buckeye Hills is creating a planning director and a support role for the Development Director to enhance long-term planning and local access to funding. With the added capacity, they can ensure they are engaging with community stakeholders throughout their processes from planning to funding.
- Eastgate Regional Council of Governments hired local consultants for 3 projects that cover broadband, infrastructure, and general grant services. Eastgate anticipates that their infrastructure consultant, primarily navigating Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding, will remain long-term. With the guidance of experts, Eastgate is more effective at crafting attractive grant applications for different funders.
- OMEGA hired broadband and workforce consultants that will provide community technical assistance, project planning, and help identify recovery-to-work solutions.
- OVRDC hired consultants that can assist with broadband, infrastructure, industry clusters, downtown revitalization, and park/recreation projects.

Over time, the Statewide Planning Grant is intended to build long-lasting capacity in the Ohio Appalachian region. In fact, EDDs have already utilized part of the funding to prepare for the Appalachian Community Grant Program. Ultimately, the strong relationship between GOA and the EDDs in the region and the in-depth knowledge of local needs contributed to the success of the project.

Alignment Spotlight

The GOA has a close relationship with the four EDDs in the Appalachian region due in part to its function of administering ARC funds. In recent history, the legislature opted to match those federal ARC funds with state funds. Functioning much like the federal program, GOA allocates the grants directly to the EDDs. Any project that GOA funds is approved and voted on by EDDs first, instilling a sense of local ownership over economic development.

Meeting biweekly, GOA and the EDDs in the region maintain a strong connection. Often focusing on how to enhance district capacity, GOA promptly brings opportunities like the Statewide Planning Grant to the EDDs attention. Addressing local needs, GOA used information from local CEDS reports and other direct feedback throughout the application process. Passing through 100% of the funding to the four districts, GOA embodies a bottom-up approach to economic development in the region. Putting the responsibility on the EDDs, the GOA supports their planning grant efforts at arm's length, providing technical assistance when needed.

“Whether it is tourism coming from the state down and then energy or food manufacturing coming from the bottom-up, there has to be a healthy blend between the two.”

– Austin Ward, Governor’s Office of Appalachia

On a broader level, GOA acknowledges that the easiest link to government and private sector is through EDDs. Additionally, JobsOhio, the state's public/private economic development corporation, has partners in each region of Ohio that represent businesses and coordinate with the EDDs on business development efforts.

Roadblocks and Areas for Improvement

Because Ohio GOA distributed the funding completely to the EDDs, internal administrative challenges at the state level were minimal. GOA reported turnover in certain roles at the local level that were not eligible for the grant funding. However, discussions with the EDDs revealed a positive aspect to this challenge. For instance, some Eastgate staff retired during the project, introducing implementation hurdles but creating an opportunity to fund an IJJA coordinator. Despite the departure of internal experts, the consultancy work funded by the grant has introduced efficient processes and systems, including the implementation of a Request for Information (RFI) and Request for Proposal (RFP) template. Additions like this have contributed to the enhancement of institutional knowledge within Eastgate.

Federal Linkages

Ohio's Statewide Planning Grant project helped EDDs build capacity to be more competitive across several federal programs, including the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), with a specific focus on the Appalachian Community Grant Program (ACGP), and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

- Buckeye Hills has recently hired an environmental consulting firm to conduct an assessment for the Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Brownfield Grant.
- Eastgate reported that their IJJA coordinator facilitated access to significant major transportation-related programs. Additionally, consultants have assisted in writing grant applications to EDA, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). Another consultant navigated Eastgate through \$65 billion in from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to support their broadband development initiatives.
- OMEGA has revolved its activities around state and local-level programs. Nevertheless, the grant has been instrumental in enabling them to tap into the ACGP.
- OVRDC's federal funding activities have predominantly focused on the ACGP, offering technical assistance support to numerous local communities.

Lessons Learned

Strong collaboration between the State of Ohio and EDDs, coupled with local approaches to economic development has led to the success of numerous projects. Other organizations should consider the following:

“Outside professional services from the grant have bolstered what Eastgate offers by 2 or 3-fold”

– Eastgate Regional Council of Governments

- Many elements of economic development must come from the bottom up to foster meaningful coordination with EDDs.
- EDDs, armed with an in-depth knowledge of their communities, can quickly identify planning gaps and build capacity where it is most needed.
- EDDs often have a diverse set of responsibilities that extend in various directions. Therefore, ensuring that they have customized resources and assistance to meet their specific needs is vital. In the case of Ohio, Eastgate serves as an LDD for ARC, an EDD for EDA, and administrator of the National Resource Assistance Council (NRAC) for the Ohio Public Works Commission. To enhance efficiency, Eastgate engaged stakeholders with relevant experience in their planning and programming activities. Fostering these local connections proves indispensable for effective and sustainable economic development.

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