

**“Getting Ahead, Staying Ahead: A Sustainable Roadmap to End Poverty in the Rural Community of Audrain County, Missouri.”**

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## Abstract

This is a working paper developed to discuss whether the implementation of community sustainable models such as entrepreneurship, financial empowerment, and workforce development in poverty-stricken rural communities can be effective and, if so, what the expected time frame is to see positive outcomes resulting in rural prosperity (Mullen, 2019). The readers should treat this conceptual paper as a working document, as the information in this paper can reflect an effort to provide future evidence. As the research and theory will advance, so will the framework of this paper.

The overall contribution to the working document is to assess and evaluate participants of the Mexico Sustainability Project Inc. (MSP) who engage in the “Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead” model for economic growth. The long-term aspect of the research is to investigate, “*Can the implementation of entrepreneurship programs, workforce development, and financial empowerment be the road map to end poverty in rural communities?*” Our goal is to use the livelihood approach to focus on the impact of economic research on the targeted models and the well-being of socially differentiated groups in the targeted models (Carpenter & McGillivray, 2012).

*Keywords: Rural, Economic Development, Community, Resiliency, Poverty, Financial Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, Revitalization*

## **Introduction**

### **Bright Futures Mexico**

Audrain County, Mexico, Missouri, was recognized as a Bright Futures USA Community in 2014. The Bright Futures Program in Mexico, Missouri, is an initiative to foster community involvement to support students' educational success. This program is part of the broader Bright Futures USA organization, which focuses on bringing together schools, businesses, human service agencies, faith-based organizations, and parent groups to meet the needs of children so they can focus on their education.

Through this program, the City of Mexico, Missouri, encourages the community to get involved in supporting students. Address the immediate needs such as food, clothing, and school supplies to remove barriers that might prevent students from attending school and focusing on their studies. Create a support network around each student, including mentors, tutors, and positive role models, and mobilize volunteers to assist with various programs and initiatives, such as mentoring, tutoring, or helping with school events. Develop holistic approaches to assessing the student's overall well-being and connect families with available resources and services in the community to ensure they receive comprehensive support (Birch et al., D. M. (2015).

Bright Futures, Mexico, Missouri, aims to ensure that all students can succeed in school and beyond by creating a supportive community environment that values education and the well-being of its children (<https://brightfuturesusa.org/>).

### **Economic Recovery Initiative**

In 2023, Under the Biden-Harris Administration, CARES ACT, a \$30 million cooperative agreement was established with the US Secretary of Commerce- Economic Development Administration, under the leadership of Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and Assistant

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

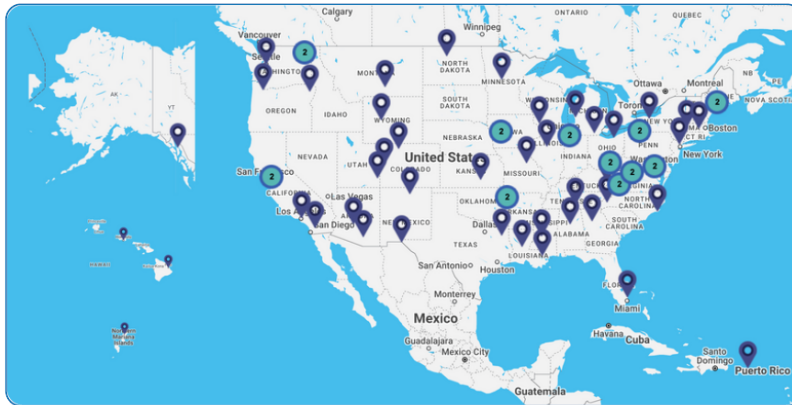
Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development, Alejandro Y. Castillo, implemented an economic recovery fellow program to address economic disparities across the US, in particular, those areas that suffered a brutal hit after COVID19, assist despaired communities across the US to become shovel-ready economic development initiatives and economic development programming for improving the livelihood of families that improve the standard of living in communities (<https://www.eda.gov/news/press-release/2022/11/03/us-department-commerce-launches-first-its-kind-economic-recovery>).

This program would cultivate the following economic development leaders across the US, equipping them with the opportunity to promote a new economic era of prosperity and assist under-resourced communities in developing equitable economic outcomes (<https://www.eda.gov/funding/programs/economic-recovery-corps>).

Executing the initiative through the International Economic Development Council under the leadership of CEO Nathan Ohle, with 6 supporting national organizations within the economic development landscape (Regional Accelerator and Innovation Network, (RAIN), International City/County Management Association (ICMA), National League of Counties (NLC), National Association of Counties (NACO), Center of Rural Innovation (CORI), National Association of Development Research Foundation (NADO).

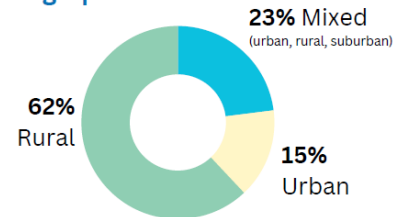
Thousands of applicants flooded the opportunity across the US to host the program (County and City) or become an Economic Recovery Fellow. In the end, 65 Fellows, 65 Projects, 42 States, and 2 Territories were selected for the initiative. The fellows came from extensive backgrounds and can use cross-sector talent and skills to activate regional innovative strategies while providing connectivity and knowledge-sharing among urban, rural, and tribal areas, elevating new practices, and transforming economic development.












## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead



ERC Fellows are working alongside Host Organizations in communities large and small, including nine Tribal Nations, two U.S. territories, and 5 multi-state collaboratives.

### Geographic Mix



| Fellows  | Projects  | Host Organizations  |
|--|---|---|
| <p>65% 10+ years of experience</p> <p>69% Women</p> <p>54% Identify as a person of color</p> <p>40% Come from host community or region</p>  |  Broadband  Housing  Childcare<br> Downtown Revitalization  Technology & Innovation<br> Workforce Development  Tourism & Recreation  Sustainability & Climate Resilience<br> Small business, Entrepreneurship, Access to Capital  Transportation & Infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City and county governments</li> <li>• Regional coalitions and partnerships</li> <li>• Tribal Nations</li> <li>• Economic development organizations (EDOs)</li> <li>• Economic Development Districts (EDDs)</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial support organizations</li> <li>• Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)</li> <li>• Nonprofits and technical assistance providers</li> </ul> |

Source: Economic Recovery Corps (2024).

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

Initiated by Tracy Graham, Commissioner of Audrain County, Missouri, Audrain County-Mexico, Missouri was selected as one of the economic recovery hosts to house an economic recovery fellow to help with their getting out of poverty initiatives, which operates under a

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

nonprofit organization called the Mexico Sustainability Project Inc., founded by the Mexico Chamber of Commerce, Executive Director, Dana Keller.

What is unique about this initiative is that while most chambers focus on the sustainability of businesses, this chamber's members focus on the sustainability of the community, helping individuals and families improve their livelihoods to get out of poverty through the Mexico Sustainability Project Inc. (Dorward et al., R. (2009).

The Mexico Chamber's reason for participating in the Economic Recovery Program was simple: They had been witnessing a drop in employment opportunities and skilled work, as well as a decline in retail and community resources, for over a decade and decided to address the needs of families and individuals to improve their quality of life and standard of living. Therefore, the Mexico Sustainability Project, Inc. was established in 2019.

To help families and individuals understand the essentials of life, the Mexico Sustainability Project developed a 13-week course called “Getting Ahead in a Getting-By World,” with the curriculum-based program developed from “Bridges Out of Poverty” (Payne et al.; M. A., 2012).

To date, 31 individuals have participated in the program. While the program displayed a success rate of graduating participants, data on their outcomes and the need to understand whether they were progressing in escaping “poverty” were lacking.

We must understand what has transformed to move forward in an economic program. Therefore, a survey was conducted to ask past participants about their outcomes. Eight out of 31 participants responded.

The results concluded that 8 out of 31 participants wanted to connect with more resources to help them become sustainable and viable community members. Their areas of interest

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

centered on entrepreneurship, advanced employment skills, and learning more about financial stability.

Based on those results and the approval of the Mexico Sustainability Project Inc. Board of Directors, the program was expanded from “Getting Head” to “Staying Ahead,” implementing the *Entrepreneurship*, *Workforce Development*, and *Financial Empowerment* models.

### **Program Development**

As a nonprofit organization, the Mexico Sustainability Project Inc. (MSP) target area is Audrain County, MO, dedicated to getting families out of poverty through the implementation of small business development, advancing trade skills (workforce), furthering the advancement of financial education (Financial empowerment), emphasizing the sustainability of families and individuals driving conservation, ecotourism, and rural prosperity as critical components to a brighter future in Audrain County, Missouri (Baromey, 2008).

MSP's goals for Mexico and Missouri are also to encourage and provide educational programs and resources to inform the community about sustainable practices (Chambers et al., G. (1992).

- Eco-friendly tourism demonstrates sustainable living through community gardens, recycling programs, or developing renewable energy sources. For example, it addresses landfills by creating solar energy and small-business farming for farmers' market(s).
- Partnerships and collaboration with local businesses, government agencies, schools, and other organizations to promote sustainability initiatives. These partnerships can help leverage resources and expertise to achieve common goals.

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

- Advocate for policies and practices that support sustainability at the local level. This can include influencing city planning decisions, promoting green building standards, and supporting legislation that protects the environment.
- Established a community revitalization plan prioritizing economic development, historic preservation, and community involvement to create a vibrant downtown district.
- The Mexico Missouri Mainstreet initiative will support local businesses and attract new ones to create a bustling downtown economy. It will also provide technical assistance and resources to business owners, facilitate networking opportunities, and organize events that draw visitors to the area.
- Preserve and restore historic buildings and landmarks to maintain downtown Mexico's unique character and heritage.
- Encourage residents to take an active role in the revitalization efforts. This can include volunteer opportunities, public forums, and community events that foster a sense of ownership and pride in the downtown area.
- Improve the physical appearance of downtown through streetscape enhancements, facade improvements, public art installations, and beautification projects.
- Promote Mexico's downtown district as a destination for shopping, dining, entertainment, and cultural activities.
- Build strong partnerships between the city government, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community groups to coordinate efforts and leverage resources for maximum impact.



## Literature Review

In this study, the research question we want to ask is, “*Can the implementation of entrepreneurship programs, workforce development, and financial empowerment be the road map to end poverty?*” “This will begin by studying what other researchers discovered during their findings and mission to end poverty in various categories, the models used in their discovery, and identifying the approach to our methods for outcome and results.

### Workforce Development

Duncan, L. (1994). Compared a poor Appalachian community to a stronger resource community in New England. The Appalachian community had limited access to jobs and a division of social context, while New England had work stability and middle-class families—both experienced socioeconomic contexts.

Holzer, H. J. (2009). The author discusses the book in 4 sections: (1) The current poverty level during the book's publishing relates to economic and demographic changes due to the lack of reducing poverty since the early 1970s in the US. (2) The evolution of poverty mobility relating to childhood poverty for later life outcomes of adult poverty, concluding the chances of escaping poverty. (3) Antipoverty policies involving support, family, education, and workforce development policies. (4) Assessment of the politics of poverty and reconsideration of how we define poverty in the US.

The author then compares the US poverty experience with those of other advanced countries, with some surprising findings: poverty is much higher in the US when our GDP per capita is higher, the unemployment rate is lower, and Americans work longer hours per year than workers in wealthier countries—with a more significant proportion of working Americans poorer than workers in European countries.

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

Choi, J., Yi, & Hwang, D. (2019). Studies have been conducted to determine whether education levels can raise household income and workplace benefits. The empirical evidence to analyze this study was the relationship between education levels and employment status, which was then measured by household income and workplace benefits in Athens Clark County, GA.

The concern was whether high poverty rates and polarized education levels made a difference in getting out of poverty. In 2015, the poverty rate of ACC was 28.4 percent without including the student population (Envision Athens, 2017), while the nationwide poverty rate was 13.5 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

*MSP Key Constructs: Workforce Development to End Poverty*

*Access to Childcare:* Audrain County recognizes that access to affordable early childcare is critical in poverty-stricken communities and inhibits poor families' participation in paid work. (Clark, Kabiru, Laszlo, & Muthuri, 2019). Therefore, implementing affordable childcare programs has become a part of the workforce initiative.

*Childcare Start-ups:* Audrain County recognizes the economic impact of the lack of childcare centers within the county and has designated a goal to help childcare start-ups accessible to the community (Chase et al., 2018).

### Entrepreneurship

Sutter, Bruton, & Chen (2019). Scholars vs. practitioners argue in this study whether entrepreneurship can alleviate poverty. The research is fragmented throughout the study, with many perspectives and assumptions. However, the research assumes that poverty results from scarce resources, and having access to the resources will allow entrepreneurship to grow. The assumption differs because the reform perspective differs from the remediation perspective,

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

saying that poverty is caused by social exclusion and that entrepreneurship can only end poverty by implementing social change. (e.g., Ghani et al., 2014).

Vandenberg & Creation (2006). Explores the connection between developing small business enterprises and poverty reduction. The paper looks at the two interconnectivities and outlines the international initiatives over the past decade that have raised the profile of poverty as the central issue of economic development and social justice. Addressing how private sectors can support poverty reduction, the paper highlights the difficulties in assessing the impact of enterprise development on poor workers, entrepreneurs, and their families.

Grant, A., & Arshed, N. (2019). Explores how government and international organizations have approached reducing poverty, seeing over 2.5 billion people still live in poverty. Explaining that entrepreneurship is a way to reduce poverty and how facilitators play a vital role in providing environments for business activities. The study provides insight into how incubators, financial institutions, and the government help the business environment in all countries, contributing to alleviating poverty. Overall, the countries analyzed were grouped as high-income countries, high-medium-income countries, and medium- and low-income countries.

The study revealed positive and good entrepreneurial facilitators that increased entrepreneurial activity, which reduces poverty. However, its findings suggested that entrepreneurial activity had less impact on poverty alleviation in poor countries.

### *MSP Key constructs: Small Business Development to End Poverty*

*Small Business Development Incubator Program*—Audrain County, Mexico, Missouri, recently became a Mainstreet District. To assist with building the district with retail and restaurants, the City of Mexico, Missouri, was awarded a grant from the USDA Small Business Incubator Grant to help implement a small business incubator. The incubator will allow start-ups to develop and

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

sustain themselves to become viable standalone businesses, creating jobs and revenue (Allen & McCluskey, 1991).

*Small Business Development Access to Capital*—Understanding that having access to capital contributes to small business growth, the Mexico Sustainability Project will provide small business loans by becoming a certified financial institution (Chase et al., 2018).

*Small Business Development Technical Assistance*- offering small business classes for advanced businesses and classes for the socially disadvantaged; MSP will offer small business development courses and technical assistance to help small businesses grow economically (Brown et al., D. (2005).

### Financial Empowerment

Robson, (2017). Presents a conceptual model that when mitigating poverty, paying attention to budgeting and financial information may help guide those learning financial management. The process is thought to be that if the intervention helps reduce consumption, people will better manage their resources. However, the author states that income poverty is not likely to exist in households that budget (Robson & Rothwell, 2016) and may be more likely in wealthier households (Atkinson et al., 2006). Concerning a crisis, it said that financial guidance can minimize transaction costs and increase resources. People in a financial crisis may not be prepared to make decisions about their mid-to-long-term welfare, which includes savings and budgeting.

Hawkins, & Kim, (2012). Argues that while the financial literacy program for low-income people has gained from a short-term activity (Ali et al., 2010; Braunstein & Welch, 2002; Sherraden et al., 2007), over a period, the program does very little to help overcome the structural, racial and long-term economic barriers that affect the actual disadvantages people.

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

They further argued that financial models have a blame-victim stance and assume financial education alone can provide a long-term change in consumer markets. At the same time, private entities are their responsibility (Gross, 2005).

Eberlei, (2007). Explained that meaningful participation in Poverty Reduction Strategies processes is possible and has been strengthened over the last few years. Based on the findings, four core challenges for embedding stakeholder participation in the living political environment of PRS countries are discussed. 1. The principle of country ownership, including domestic accountability, has so far been realized only in a handful of countries. 2. A development orientation of 'the state' — including openness for poverty reduction politics and societal participation — cannot be assumed automatically. 3. The relationship between a society and its political system, as well as the role of civil society in this interplay, is poorly understood in many PRS processes. Civil societies are crucial in translating people's interests into 'communicative power.' 4. 'Powerlessness' is a form of poverty and a significant cause of poverty. Therefore, the distribution of power is a highly relevant topic for poverty reduction debates.

The findings underline the urgent need to start 'empowerment initiatives' and discuss the underlying issues. They conclude with strategic recommendations to strengthen domestic accountability, institutionalized participation, and empowerment. A breakthrough in the fight against poverty needs a coalition of stakeholders in the civil societies and political forces in the legislative bodies of PRS countries, unfolding 'communicative power' to point 'administrative power' in the pro-poor direction.

*MSP Key Constructs: Financial Empowerment to End Poverty*

*Affordable Housing-* Understanding how to resolve housing affordability problems by addressing the housing de-concentration process and making a mixed income of LIHTC

## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

development projects in collaboration with the City of Mexico and Mexico Housing Authority; the organization aims to assist low-income renters in becoming homeowners (McClure, K. (2008).

*Credit Building-* Offering credit building classes and budgeting for individuals and families will help reconstruct the community's economic disadvantages, as poverty is not created by the poor but as a socioeconomic condition by the world (Yunus, 2007).

### **Methodology**

To determine if the transformation of the Mexico Sustainability Project (MSP) program to “Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead” impacts ending poverty, we will evaluate our participants throughout their journey by conducting surveys and providing technical assistance in the program areas to measure their outcomes.

We will then use our evaluation material to conduct a quantitative and qualitative mixed-method research study. Data will be collected using the Human Development Index (HDI) model (Land, 2015) as a surrogate for poverty from our participants who take the getting ahead classes.

Our secondary data is our Entrepreneurship Activities and Facilitation methods (Ahmad et al., R. G. (2008). We will collect this information from our small business development classes and incubator program participants.

We will also conduct a Socio-Economic Empowerment Assessment (SEEA) as our qualitative approach to gather the framework for understanding the psychological impact of poverty and financial insecurity with our participants (Hawkins & Kim, 2012). This information will be gathered from our financial literacy classes and financial management sessions participants engage in.

## **Results**

The results of this study rely solely on future outcomes, how the participants complete the programs offered, and both short-term and long-term success factors of the “Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead” initiative.

## **Implications and Future Research**

The program shared in this document has begun implementation. We seek to have fully operational program data by Fall 2025 and can revisit this study as a complete research study by 2026.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, clients' outcomes participating in the “Getting Ahead” program will be tracked to determine which “Staying Ahead” program they take to advance, and then their outcomes will be assessed. We will evaluate the implementation of small businesses that enter the Mainstreet coordinator as new businesses while monitoring their existence from the start-up phase to stability.

In addition, monitor and manage the clients participating in financial empowerment programming and how they progress to financial freedom.

Using a mixed method of both Qualitative and Quantitative to expose the data of how Mexico Sustainability Project, Inc. clients feel about their journey and quantitative in measuring the number of businesses, employment, and financial growth an individual may have.

Overall, Audrain County and the City of Mexico, Missouri, aim to become vibrant, economically, culturally, and resilient for the future so families and individuals can remain in a sustainable community. Envisioning a “Brighter Future for Audrain County, Mexico, Missouri.”

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## Getting Ahead-Staying Ahead

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