

PREVIEW: CORI Heartland Rural Innovators Initiative: Application Form

Funded by the Patterson Family Foundation, the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) is launching the Heartland Rural Innovators Initiative, an 18-month program supporting rural communities in Kansas and western Missouri as they grow their tech and innovation economies.

Five communities, represented by core teams of local leaders, will be invited to join the cohort. Participating teams will receive:

- A custom tech economy assessment and strategy
- Implementation and funding readiness support
- Peer learning opportunities across the Heartland region
- Participation in a regional Summit for the Heartland Rural Innovators cohort

We are looking for rural regions or population centers with committed leadership and some early momentum around innovation economy building, such as successful broadband deployment or the construction of a coworking space. You do not need to have an established innovation ecosystem in place – this process is designed to help you build or grow one.

The outputs of this program are designed to help rural residents access good jobs, grow local businesses, and stay in their communities through technology and entrepreneurship. Across the country, rural communities are already demonstrating what's possible when local leaders commit to building innovation economies. Here are a few examples of how community leaders are already demonstrating how this is possible from CORI's Rural Innovation Network:

- [Aberdeen, South Dakota](#) – Aberdeen has leveraged its strong agricultural base, Northern State University, and active local leadership to build a culture of entrepreneurship and expand higher education partnerships that drive community growth.
- [Norfolk, Nebraska](#) – As northeast Nebraska's economic hub, Norfolk is revitalizing its downtown and cultivating a growing tech economy through manufacturing strength, collaborative leadership, and new coworking and incubator initiatives.
- [Taos, New Mexico](#) – Taos is harnessing its creative and cultural heritage to fuel digital and entrepreneurial opportunities, led by the UNM-Taos HIVE and its focus on workforce training, entrepreneurship, and community engagement.

- [Waterville, Maine](#) – Waterville has activated a vibrant innovation hub through partnerships with Colby College, Thomas College, and the Central Maine Growth Council, supporting entrepreneurs, accelerating startups, and growing tech talent.

CORI will host an informational webinar and office hours sessions during the application window. Communities will be able to ask questions, hear more about participation requirements, and connect directly with our team.

- **Application Window:** September 22, 2025 - October 31, 2025
- **Informational Webinar:** September 30, 2025, 12:00–1:30 pm CST
- **Office Hours:** October 6 and October 27, 2025, 11:30 am–12:30 pm CST

Registration links can be found on the landing page here: [insert placeholder for link].

Please keep answers short. Bullet points and rough estimates are welcome.

Section 1: Who is applying

This section asks for basic information about the lead applicant and the core team of partners. It helps us understand who will guide your community through the program.

Lead organization

Who is submitting this application? Please include:

- Organization name
- Contact person
- Email
- Phone

Local partners

We define the core team as a small group of local leaders and partners who will guide your community through this program. It should include people with decision-making authority and a shared commitment to building your region's innovation economy.

List any other organizations or individuals (e.g. chamber of commerce, economic development organization, local entrepreneurs and/or entrepreneur/small business support organizations, coworking space leaders, educational institutions, local government) who would be on your core team. While not all partners need to be identified now, we are looking for communities with a core group of decision-making stakeholders who will participate in the process.

Section 2: Your region's context

In this section we want to understand the geographic, demographic, and economic context of your community.

Regional overview

- For this initiative, how will you define your service area (e.g. city/town, county, multi-county region)? Please list the specific geographic boundaries (county names, etc.).
- What is the population of the community/region you described above?

Economic history and culture

- What have been the historic economic drivers in your region?
- What are the main industries and employers in your region today?
- What economic challenges are most pressing right now? Select all that apply.
 - Job loss
 - Low wages
 - Youth outmigration
 - Business closures
 - Housing shortage
 - Other (please specify)

Section 3: Current ecosystem assets

Now we'd like to understand your community's existing assets for entrepreneurship, workforce, and innovation.

Entrepreneurship and business support

- Who helps people start or grow businesses in your community? Check all that apply
 - Chamber of commerce
 - SBDC (Small Business Development Center)
 - Incubator/accelerator program
 - Main Street program
 - Library
 - Business association
 - Other (please specify)

Workforce and training programs

- What training or education programs exist in your region?
 - K-12 programming
 - Youth programs outside of school
 - Community college

- Adult education programs
 - Tech skilling bootcamps
 - Industry certifications
 - Apprenticeships
 - Other (please specify)
- Do schools, employers, nonprofits, or others collaborate on or support these efforts?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
- If you answered yes above, please list the most relevant examples.

Spaces and events

- What spaces or events support entrepreneurship and innovation in your community? Check all that apply
 - Coworking spaces
 - Maker spaces
 - Pitch events
 - Digital literacy workshops
 - Hackathons
 - Other (please specify)

Regional planning

- Do you have a local or regional CEDS or economic development strategy?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not sure
- If you answered yes above, does it include goals related to tech, digital skills, or entrepreneurship?
- (Optional) Upload or link to the plan.

Section 4: Commitment and leadership

Here we are looking for evidence of local leadership and readiness to engage. Share examples that show why now is the right time for your community to participate.

Local leadership and momentum

- Please share a short story or example that shows your community's readiness. Why is now the right time, and what momentum or energy do you see locally?
- Why does your community want to be part of this program, and what do you hope to gain?

- What does the small business and startup community look like in your region? Please share any examples of entrepreneurs, small business networks, or organizations that are contributing to local momentum.

Section 5: Readiness checklist

This section aligns with the program's eligibility requirements. Please check all that apply to your community.

Check all that apply; rough estimates are fine

- We are a rural community/region (population <50k)
- We are located in the [Patterson Family Foundation catchment area](#)
- Our region has reliable high-speed broadband (100/20 mbps), at least in the downtown area
- Our region has a (2 or 4 year) college or university, or workforce training partner
- We have dedicated leadership capacity from multiple regional entities and/or institutions
- We are committed to advancing innovation-based economic development

Section 6: Additional information

Use this space to share a big idea, describe something unique about your region, or provide additional context. (Optional)

Uploads:

- Letter(s) of support from at least one partner organization (required) – link to template
- CEDS or other relevant economic development strategy documents (if applicable)