



Appalachian  
Regional  
Commission

# Appalachia Envisioned

A New Era of Opportunity | ARC Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022-2026



Effective January 20, 2025, any statements outlined in *Appalachia Envisioned: ARC's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan* that reference "diversity, equity and inclusion" and "green energy" are no longer applicable.









# Appalachian Regional Commission

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States' Co-Chair  
Governor Ralph Northam

October 2021

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## Our Vision

[www.arc.gov](http://www.arc.gov)

**Appalachia is a region of great opportunity that will achieve socioeconomic parity with the nation.**



# About Appalachia

Appalachia, as defined in the legislation from which the Appalachian Regional Commission derives its authority, is a 206,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. The Appalachian Region includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Appalachia is home to 26 million people.

## About the Appalachian Regional Commission

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC, the Commission) is a regional economic development agency representing a unique partnership of federal, state, and local governments. Established by an act of Congress in 1965, the Commission is composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states and a federal co-chair, who is appointed by the president. To align with the Commission's Strategic Investment Plan, the Appalachian governors draw up four- or five-year state Appalachian plans and annual state strategies to signal their state-level investment priorities. Local participation is provided through multi-county local development districts (LDDs) with support from community, business, and civic leaders. Seventy-four LDDs cover all 423 counties in the Appalachian Region (the Region).





## ARC Grantmaking

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### Area Development

Each year, ARC allocates congressionally appropriated area development base funding among its member states. As part of ARC's unique federal-state partnership, all ARC area development grant proposals ("projects") originate at the local and state level in consultation with the ARC state program manager. These grants align with the investment priorities outlined in the Strategic Plan and reflect each state's plans and strategies. Governors make the final selection of grants for recommendation and approval by the federal co-chair. Area development grants constitute a flexible bottom-up approach to economic development, empowering Appalachian communities to work with their local partners and state governments to design impactful investment opportunities supporting ARC's mission and investment priorities.

In addition to area development base funding, ARC supports the following targeted grant opportunities. For each of these, ARC solicits applications annually through a competitive process, and applications are reviewed directly by ARC with state concurrence.

### POWER Initiative

The POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) Initiative targets funding for Appalachian communities disproportionately impacted by job losses in coal mining, coal-fired power plant operations, and coal-related supply chain industries due to the changing economics of America's energy production. POWER supports efforts to create a more vibrant economic future for coal-impacted communities by cultivating economic diversity, enhancing job training and re-employment opportunities, creating jobs in existing or new industries, and attracting new sources of investment. From its launch in 2015 through October 2021, the Commission has invested approximately \$288 million through the POWER Initiative. These investments have included 362 projects across 353 counties in Appalachia.

### INSPIRE Initiative

The INSPIRE (INvestments Supporting Partnerships In Recovery Ecosystems) Initiative is a recently-launched \$10 million annual initiative to address the substance use disorder crisis by creating or expanding a recovery ecosystem that will lead to workforce entry or re-entry. Successful projects support the post-treatment-to-employment continuum, including investments in healthcare networks that support substance use disorder recovery professionals and recovery-focused job training programs, as well as initiatives designed to coordinate or link recovery services and training that support the recovery ecosystem.



# Economic Distress Designations

Every year, ARC uses an index-based classification system to compare each county in the Appalachian Region with national averages to understand how counties are performing economically. After analyzing three-year-average unemployment rates, per-capita market income, and poverty rates, ARC classifies each one of Appalachia's 423 counties by economic status. The five economic designations are distressed, at-risk, transitional, competitive, or attainment. The designations are used to determine the match requirements for ARC grants. The designations also support investment strategies that augment the reach and impact of ARC's area development and other funding, targeting resources to the Region's most distressed communities in order to reduce the disproportionately high rate of economic distress in Appalachia.

## ARC Capacity Building



## ARC Academies and Institutes

In addition to grantmaking activities, ARC hosts several academies and institutes for students and adults in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education, entrepreneurship development, applied research, and community leadership. Through these experiential learning and research opportunities, participants build networks, hone skills, and cultivate an enduring commitment to Appalachia's future. Among these activities is the Appalachian Leadership Institute, a comprehensive leadership and economic development training opportunity for Appalachians who are passionate about helping their communities thrive.



## Our Mission

[www.arc.gov](http://www.arc.gov)

A man with a beard and safety glasses, wearing a grey t-shirt and a baseball cap, is focused on his work in a factory setting. He is holding a blue pen and looking down at a clipboard or a piece of equipment. The background shows industrial machinery and a yellow overhead crane.

**Innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity  
and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia.**



# Appalachian Development Highway System

Highway development has been a critical part of ARC's core mission since 1965, when Congress authorized the construction of the Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS), a 3,090-mile network of highways throughout Appalachia. Because the cost of building highways through Appalachia's mountainous terrain was high, the Region had never been served by adequate roads. The nation's Interstate Highway System had largely bypassed the Region, going through or around the Region's rugged terrain as cost-effectively as possible. For decades, the ADHS has generated economic development in previously isolated areas, connected Appalachia to the Interstate Highway System, and provided access to areas within the Region as well as to markets in the rest of the nation and the world. As of Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, 2,814 miles, or 91.1%, of the ADHS is under construction or open to traffic. By 2040, 100% of eligible miles will be complete and open to traffic, or at least partially complete. ARC remains committed to the completion of the Appalachian Development Highway System.





# Progress and Accomplishments

Since its inception in 1965, ARC has invested in the efforts of its local, regional, and state partners to transform Appalachian communities, create economic opportunities, and advance its mission of helping the Region achieve socioeconomic parity with the nation. Since 1965, ARC has made over 28,000 targeted investments and invested more than \$4.5 billion in the Region. These investments were matched by \$10 billion in other federal, state, and local funding sources. From 1978–2013, for each \$1 in funds invested by ARC in non-highway area development projects, \$6.40 in private-sector funding was leveraged.

The record of progress in the Region over the past few decades includes these accomplishments:

## The Appalachian Region



- The Region's poverty rate has decreased from nearly 31% in 1960 to 15.2% today (over the 2015–2019 period); and the number of high-poverty counties (those with poverty rates one and a half times the national average) has decreased from 295 in 1960 to 110 today.
- Between 1970 and 2012, in counties that received ARC investments, employment increased at a 4.2% faster pace, and per capita income increased at a 5.5% faster pace, than in similar counties outside of Appalachia.
- The percentage of adults in the Region with a high school diploma has nearly tripled since 1960, and students in Appalachia now graduate from high school at nearly the same rate as the national average.
- Between 2000 and 2015, the percent of the population served by community water systems in Appalachia grew from 73.6% to 78.8%.
- The infant mortality rate in the Region has been reduced by two-thirds since 1960, and the rural healthcare infrastructure has been strengthened through the addition of more than 400 primary healthcare facilities.



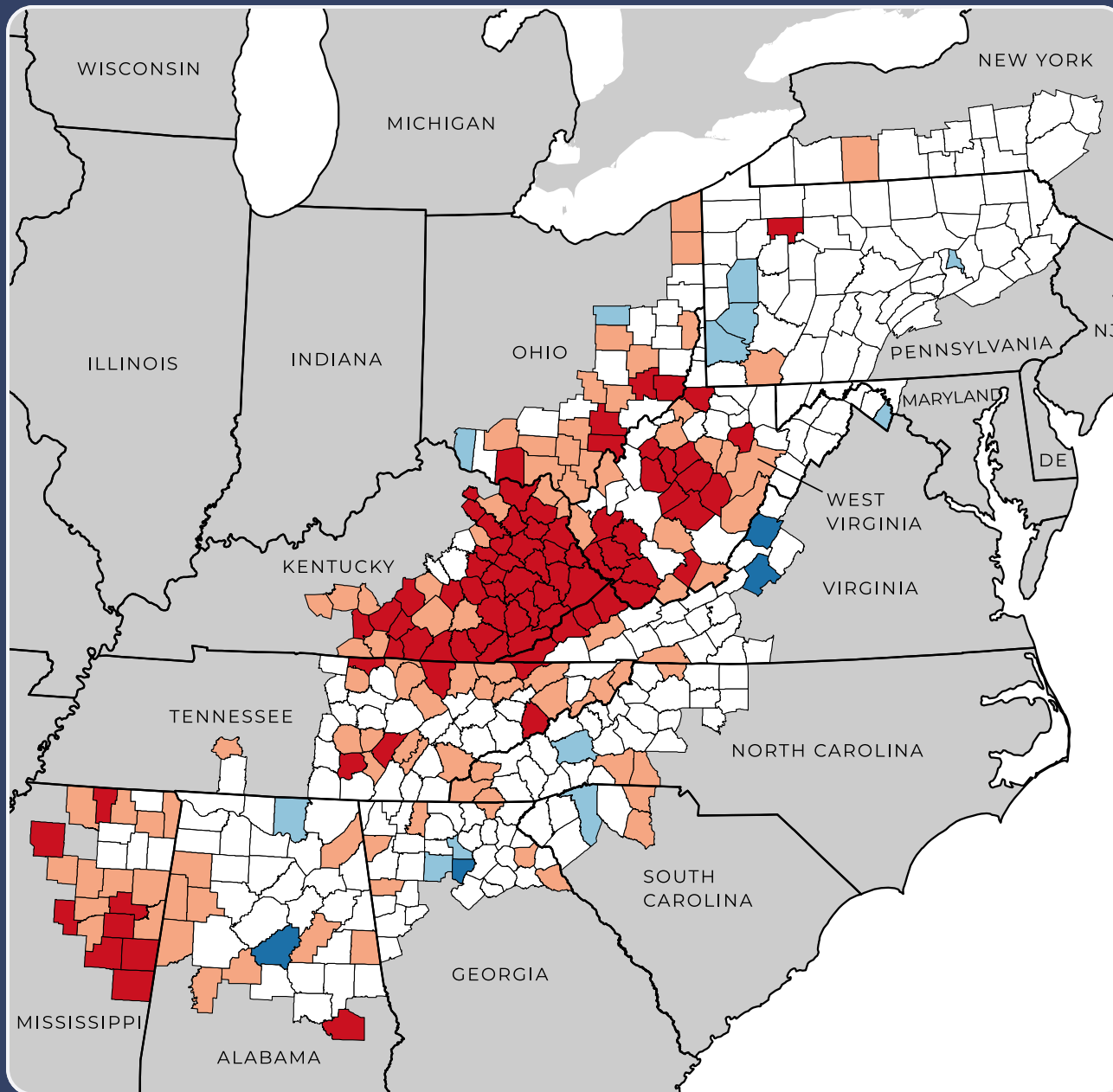
# Challenges and Needs

Despite the progress Appalachia has experienced over time, continued investment is needed to address persistent socioeconomic disparities and ongoing development challenges. The Appalachian Region's economy has historically been dominated by a few industries, including mining, textiles, tobacco, and timber. Dependence on these industries as economic drivers and employers has left many communities, particularly those in the most economically distressed counties, vulnerable to economic fluctuations as local businesses and industries face increasing competition, specialization, and market changes. In part because Appalachia has struggled with single-sector economies in the past, economic downturns hit Appalachia harder and traditionally last longer than in other areas of the nation, pointing to the need for broader economic diversification, entrepreneurial and business support, and human capital improvements in the years ahead.

More acute challenges include the following:

- **Job creation, labor force participation, and incomes.** Job creation is increasing more slowly in the Region than in the nation as a whole. The number of jobs in the nation has jumped 79% since 1980, while the number of jobs in Appalachia has increased only 49% over the same time period. The Region has been disproportionately affected by the loss of relatively high-wage coal mining jobs. Seventy-seven percent of the coal mining jobs lost in the United States between 2011 and 2019 were in the Appalachian Region—a loss of 30,003 jobs. Appalachian counties in Kentucky and West Virginia bore the brunt of these losses. These counties lost 19,698 direct mining jobs—66% of the mining jobs lost in the entire Appalachian Region. Appalachia has also disproportionately been impacted by the loss of its manufacturing base. Between 2000–2019, Appalachia had a net loss of 555,000 manufacturing jobs (a 29% decline), while the U.S. lost around 4.2 million (a 24% decline). In addition, the Region's labor force participation rate remains low (73.3% in the Region among civilians ages 25–64, compared with 77.9% nationally) and per capita market income in Appalachia was over 28% lower than the nation in 2019.
- **Post secondary education attainment rates.** While overall educational attainment rates in the Region have improved over the past several decades, Appalachia continues to fall behind the nation on this measure. Over the 2015–2019 period, the share of adults with a bachelor's degree or more was seven percentage points lower in Appalachia than in the nation as a whole; and in 294 Appalachian counties, fewer than one in five residents aged 25 and over were graduates of a four-year college or university.
- **Substance use disorder rates and health status.** The nation's substance use disorder crisis continues to disproportionately impact Appalachia. By 2018, the overdose-related mortality rate for the Region's 25- to 54-year-old age group – those in their prime working years –





## County Economic Status in Appalachia, Fiscal Year 2022

Effective October 1, 2021  
– September 30, 2022

### County Economic Levels

- Distressed (81)
- At-Risk (95)
- Transitional (231)
- Competitive (12)
- Attainment (4)



was 55% higher than for the same age group in the country's non-Appalachian areas. Similarly, the health status of the Region's residents continues to decline: The all-cause mortality rate is 33% higher in Appalachia than in the rest of the country, and the Region has higher rates of mortality due to many of the leading causes of death in the U.S., including cancer, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), injury, stroke, and diabetes. Rural and economically distressed counties generally report the highest rates in the Region.

- **Basic community infrastructure.** Roughly 20% of the Region's population is not served by a community water system (compared with 12% nationally), and 47% of Appalachian households are not served by a public sewage system (compared with 24% nationally).
- **Access to broadband and telecommunications.** During the 2015–2019 period, just over three-quarters of Appalachian households (78%) had a broadband Internet subscription, compared to more than 83% of households nationwide. Within the Region, there are signs of a rural-urban digital divide: In 18 Appalachian counties, less than 60% of households had a broadband subscription. All but one of these counties were outside metropolitan areas, and more than half were in the Region's most rural

counties. As the COVID-19 pandemic has increased workers' reliance on remote interaction, high-speed Internet access has become even more important. Taken together, these are signs that many communities in the Region may be at risk of being left behind.

- **Access to transportation.** An efficient transportation system, including the completion of the Appalachian Development Highway System, is critical to the Region's future economic success. Reliable transportation systems ensure that people can safely and successfully access opportunities, services, and markets through highways, railways, marine and inland ports, and airports.
- **Persistent and severe economic distress.** Nearly one-fifth of Appalachia's counties continue to face high poverty rates, low per-capita market incomes, and high unemployment rates, hindering economic prosperity.
- **Need for capacity building, planning, and technical assistance.** Many Appalachian communities, particularly those in rural and/or economically distressed counties and areas, lack adequate capacity at the local level to effectively vision, plan, develop, fund, and implement forward-looking economic development projects and investments that drive measurable economic change.

## Stakeholder Engagement Process

In the spring of 2021, ARC launched the process of developing a new strategic plan to guide ARC activities and investments in Appalachia from FY 2022 through FY 2026. The Commission followed guidance from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget for developing agency mission, strategic goals and objectives, and performance goals used to monitor progress. This effort included a series of stakeholder engagement activities to gather input for this new plan. Participants were asked to share their insight into the strengths, challenges, and opportunities facing the Region, along with ideas for strategies and

solutions to advance economic prosperity. These activities were designed to reach a broad and inclusive group representing various perspectives, disciplines, and geographic areas within the Region. Activities included a survey with over 1,200 respondents; six “community conversations” or public input sessions, which included facilitated discussion through small breakout sessions; and 16 focus groups. The focus groups targeted both specific ARC stakeholders as well as groups of subject matter experts in key areas including business development, education, health, infrastructure, tourism, leadership development, and many others. The input provided through the stakeholder engagement process provided significant insight into the current state of the Region and greatly informed the foundation for ARC’s FY 2022–2026 Strategic Plan.

## Appalachia 2021

Appalachia, like most parts of the country, is a dynamic place with ongoing economic, social, and demographic changes. The input gathered through the stakeholder engagement process produced clear takeaways that provided insight into the current landscape of the Region as it continues to respond to and recover from the economic, health, and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; economic growth and decline in key industries; and the impacts of migration both into and out of many communities. These takeaways include the following insights:

- Appalachia is a multifaceted, varied region where place matters. This requires locally-tailored solutions to meet the needs of local communities.
- The pandemic both highlighted and exacerbated the depth and breadth of all of the challenges in the Region.
- Access to reliable, affordable broadband is a cross-cutting theme as well as an equity issue viewed as essential to improving the lives of Appalachians.
- A singular focus on job creation does not fix or address underlying challenges (generational poverty, lack of internet access, etc.) faced by some areas of Appalachia.
- Stakeholders prefer growing their own jobs through entrepreneurship and small business development rather than the traditional approach of business recruitment and new job creation.
- Greater community building and technical assistance are needed to support jurisdictions within the Region as they pursue, receive, and manage federal (and other) funding.
- Stakeholders emphasized leveraging, prioritizing, and scaling ideas and solutions that are developed within the Appalachian Region.
- Stakeholders at all levels of planning (ARC, state, local) see opportunities and interest in applying an equity lens to grantmaking in economic development.

With this in mind, the Appalachian Regional Commission reaffirms and commits to its vision and mission.







# ARC Guiding Principles

ARC is committed to innovating, partnering, and investing in ways that accomplish the following:

- Ensure alignment of ARC investments and activities with the articulated goals of impacted communities.
- Address and alleviate persistent economic distress in the Region.
- Seek transformational outcomes for projects, investments, and other efforts by leveraging resources, capitalizing on assets, and stimulating investment.
- Drive collaboration, including collaboration across boundaries. Collaboration is the core of ARC's work and is reflected in the planning and implementation of ARC projects and investments.
- Remain flexible to ensure responsiveness to evolving regional needs and challenges.
- Seek out, disseminate, and advance regional ideas and solutions for regional challenges.
- Build the capacity of grassroots efforts.
- Actively seek equitable access, participation, and representation for all of ARC's activities and investments.
- Balance the opportunities offered through our unique geography with conservation of our natural and cultural assets and heritage.
- Encourage economic development efforts that consider environmental impacts.
- Ensure that ARC focus, support, and engagement is inclusive of the entire Region.
- Hold itself, partners, and grantees accountable for achieving performance.

In service to the vision, mission, and guiding principles, the Commission and its state and local partners will invest in activities and projects that align with one or more of the following strategic investment goals and objectives.





# ARC Strategic Investment Goals and Objectives

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## 1 Building Appalachian Businesses

**Strengthen and diversify the Region's economy through inclusive economic development strategies and investments in entrepreneurship and business development.**

Collaborative and inclusive approaches to economic development in Appalachia are essential to supporting the Region's businesses and industries and ensuring economic opportunity for its residents. ARC's stakeholders emphasized the importance of investment in economic growth strategies that capitalize on the Region's unique assets and prioritize assistance for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Stakeholders further noted the importance of providing business support and capacity-building assistance to help established businesses and industries expand their reach in national and international markets and help new businesses to establish themselves and grow.

**Objective 1.1: Provide financing, technical assistance, and other support for entrepreneurship and small business development in the Region.**

Entrepreneurship and small business development are cornerstones of the Appalachian economy. It is particularly important to support start-up entrepreneurs and small businesses focused in high-growth industry sectors, such as manufacturing, technology, health, the arts, recreation and tourism, agriculture and food, and energy. Key areas of focus include facilitating access to seed and growth capital and credit; growing small business/entrepreneurial support networks and ecosystems; providing business start-up and development technical assistance and training; and addressing physical infrastructure needs for entrepreneurs and small businesses, such as incubators, makerspaces, and other shared working and production spaces.

**Objective 1.2: Pursue economic and enterprise development strategies that grow existing industries, support economic diversification, and advance economic prosperity at the regional level.** While business attraction is certainly a valuable component of traditional economic development models, there is also a need to strengthen existing industries and businesses and promote economic diversification from within the Region. Place-based economic development and growth strategies that leverage regional assets are central to this approach. This relies on collaborative economic development models that engage diverse partners and leverage partners' various resources and areas of expertise. Areas of focus include helping communities within the Region convene partners around shared economic development and diversification goals, sharing best practices and innovations from across the Region, facilitating access to financing and other industry and business assistance, and supporting economic development-related technical assistance and capacity building.

## Growing Outdoors: Manufacturing and Outdoor Recreation in Western North Carolina



With local food and craft brewing scenes growing fast in Western North Carolina (WNC), collaborative efforts are powering economic development, multi-generational engagement, and outdoor access in the Region. One example of

this is Kitsbow, an outdoor gear manufacturing company bringing high-quality, high-skilled textile jobs back to Old Fort, North Carolina. Thanks to an ARC POWER Initiative grant, business strategies in the area were designed to grow the outdoor recreational gear manufacturing sector, serving 350 businesses and training 275 workers. Western North Carolina has a strong legacy of quality manufacturing, which is why companies like Kitsbow have decided to plant their roots there.

Growing Outdoors has aimed to build a talent pipeline for the region's growing outdoor industry, through new degree programs, certificates, continuing education, a new Outdoor Industry Job Board, and more since 2018. They also help build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development in Appalachia. Through a flagship annual conference, Growing Outdoors helps WNC's outdoor industry connect, share information, and collaborate in order to drive the Region forward.

**Thanks to the ARC POWER grant, 35 new businesses and 150 new jobs have been created in the area, along with \$6 million in new revenue by participating firms.**

In 2020, Triple Aught Designs announced its relocation to Old Fort, meaning an additional 70 manufacturing jobs in the region, and \$1 million in investments. Both Triple Aught Designs and Kitsbow have cited that the supportive community they found both locally and regionwide helped inform their decision to relocate to WNC. As a result of the companies' investments into the area, a new craft brewery and restaurant has also opened up nearby to attract customers and visitors.

Thanks to the ARC POWER grant, 35 new businesses and 150 new jobs have been created in the area, along with \$6 million in new revenue by participating firms. These are great examples of businesses making the most of an area's existing assets. Western North Carolina's legacy with manufacturing and proximity to natural assets works only to its advantage!

<https://www.arc.gov/investment/growing-outdoors-in-western-north-carolina/>

**Read Online**



## 2 Building Appalachia's Workforce Ecosystem

**Expand and strengthen community systems (education, healthcare, housing, childcare, and others) that help Appalachians obtain a job, stay on the job, and advance along a financially sustaining career pathway.**

Developing and sustaining a strong workforce is a critical component of economic development, both in Appalachia and across the country. A strong workforce is one that has the soft and technical skills to meet local industry needs as well as access to fundamental supports to keep workers on the job, such as reliable transportation, appropriate healthcare, safe and affordable housing, and quality childcare. Stakeholders noted that the Appalachian Region cannot achieve its vision for economic prosperity without investment in two key components: talent and skill development AND employment supports to keep people in the labor force and contributing to economic and community development.

**Objective 2.1: Develop and support educational programs and institutions from early childhood through post secondary that provide the building blocks for skills development and long-term employment success.** While progress has been made in some pockets of the Region, there is a great need for more and higher-quality education opportunities from pre-school through K-12 and post secondary and adult education. A focus on work readiness, technical skills, and traditional and digital literacy skills is critical to helping Appalachians, particularly those in underserved communities, successfully navigate and access education and employment opportunities.

**Objective 2.2: Invest in workforce development programs and strategies informed by industry talent needs and designed to allow workers to simultaneously earn, learn, and advance along a career pathway.** A critical component of the workforce ecosystem involves convening education, workforce, economic development, and industry representatives to ensure that training is designed to meet industry needs and leads to employment. Career pathway systems, defined by community and technical colleges, workforce development, and other partners, are essential tools that map out paths for individuals to enter and advance in careers. Career pathway systems include short-term vocational training that leads to credentials, dual high school/college enrollment, credit for prior learning, stackable credentials, work-based learning (on-the-job training, apprenticeships, internships, etc.), and career awareness education for youth to learn about high-growth industries and occupations. Career pathway systems can also incorporate a focus on soft skill development, both in curriculum and work-based learning experiences.

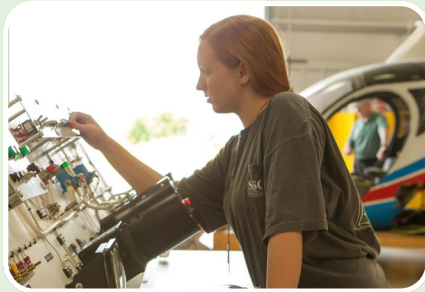
**Objective 2.3: Develop a network of employment supports to help Appalachians enter and remain in the workforce.** In many communities across Appalachia, even if job opportunities are available to residents, a lack of transportation, childcare, eldercare, affordable housing, food, and other key factors can make those jobs inaccessible or unsustainable. An additional critical barrier for a disproportionate number of Appalachians is substance use disorder and opioid misuse, which further undermines the ability of those impacted to access employment and education opportunities; take care of their physical, mental, and financial well-being; and contribute to overall economic growth. Investment in a cohesive system of key services that support access to and retention of employment is vital to economic prosperity in the Region and the economic vitality of residents.

**Objective 2.4:** Expand access to high quality healthcare as well as programs and services that support overall mental and physical health, for workers and their families. Many parts of the Appalachian Region do not have an adequate supply of medical professionals and facilities to meet residents' physical and mental health needs, and telehealth is also not an option for those communities lacking reliable broadband service. Appalachians who face chronic health conditions need access to comprehensive and affordable healthcare as well as investments in innovative public health practices to ensure they are ready for work.





## Alabama Community College System: The Ready to Work Program



Alabama's Ready to Work (RTW) program, operated by the Alabama Community College System in cooperation with Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT), and with support from ARC's POWER Initiative, provides career

opportunities for individuals with limited education and employment experience by providing them with the training needed to secure employment at no cost to participants.

To protect anonymity, we will call this individual A.D. Robbs. Robbs (45) is a father of six, two of whom are in college, has a mortgage, and helps with the expenses and care of his aging mother. After working for almost 20 years with an asphalt company, taking multiple part-time jobs, and working overtime, Robbs was still not meeting the financial needs of his family. That's when he decided to join the Ready to Work program at Shelton State Community College.

"The Ready to Work [program] opened avenues for new employment opportunities. Now, I have a new career working in a manufacturing setting with much better benefits and more than twice the salary... This program has also inspired me to go back to school and finish my degree in Business Administration," said Robbs. "After my wife saw how the RTW program helped elevate me to a better paying job, she decided to enroll in the program too. After she completed the program, she was able to secure a job working in manufacturing with a much higher pay [rate] and much better benefits." Robbs has received a full-time position at Phifer, Inc., which is a manufacturing company in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

To date, 2,614 workers/trainees have been served by Alabama's RTW program, as well as 1,624 students. 1,139 jobs have also been retained or created as a result of this program. Thanks to the RTW program, 976 students have obtained new or enhanced positions as a result of this program, as well as 2,101 workers/trainees, including Robbs.

**To date, 2,614 workers/trainees have been served by Alabama's RTW program, as well as 1,624 students.**

<https://www.arc.gov/investment/alabama-community-college-system/>

**Read Online**

# 3 Building Appalachia's Infrastructure

**Ensure that the residents and businesses of Appalachia have access to reliable, affordable, resilient, and energy efficient utilities and infrastructure in order to successfully live and work in the Region.**

Businesses and residents alike require access to affordable, energy-efficient and reliable utilities as well as safe, connected, and strategic transportation systems. However, residents and leaders within Appalachia cited aging, inadequate, and unavailable infrastructure as a significant and crosscutting barrier to community prosperity which negatively impacts business and talent attraction and retention, workforce development, community and individual prosperity, and access to healthcare and education. Difficult geography, traditionally underfunded infrastructure systems, natural disasters, and declining revenue are just some of the barriers to building and sustaining Appalachia's infrastructure.

**Objective 3.1: Ensure the availability of quality, affordable basic infrastructure to meet the needs of the residents and businesses of Appalachia.** Personal, community, and economic prosperity are dependent upon access to adequate, affordable utilities; however, continued deterioration of these systems has significantly impacted quality of life, public health, livability, and economic growth. Communities within Appalachia often lack sufficient, sustainable funding to make a real impact on their infrastructure challenges. Investments in basic infrastructure and economic development readiness planning offers one of the largest returns on investment for economic and community prosperity in Appalachia. Basic infrastructure includes water, sanitary sewer, and municipal storm wastewater; energy (including electric, heat, oil and gas, and alternative energy sources); and, where necessary, stormwater and emergency management infrastructure to build resilience and protect against natural disasters.

**Objective 3.2: Ensure that all Appalachians have access to quality and affordable telecommunications and broadband services.** The pandemic and resulting need for remote work, school, and telehealth highlighted both the importance of broadband and cellular access and affordability as well as the severe limitations of these services in portions of Appalachia, both rural and urban. Reliable and affordable broadband gives local businesses access to the digital marketplace, facilitates online learning and workforce development, and connects communities. ARC's investments in broadband and data infrastructure help Appalachian communities—especially those in rural and/or distressed counties and areas—compete and participate in the global economy. Ongoing opportunities exist for convening, coordinating, planning, mapping, and funding investments in broadband deployment and smart grids.



**Objective 3.3: Support proactive efforts to adopt alternative energy strategies and bolster energy infrastructure.**

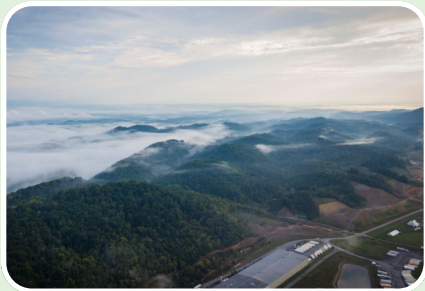
Communities across Appalachia continue to develop sustainable clean energy solutions at a local and regional scale. Encouraging investments in energy resources in Appalachia can increase job opportunities, strengthen energy independence, boost business viability, and bolster long-term climate resilience. Solutions include energy efficiency improvements, strengthening the utility grid, increasing solar and wind energy production, and boosting the green economy.

**Objective 3.4: Complete the Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) and invest in innovative intermodal transportation systems to connect businesses and residents within the Region with global opportunities.**

The completion of the ADHS remains a priority for ARC. Roads, highways, and public and personal transit are critical not only for economic growth and prosperity but also for quality of life and accessing employment opportunities and related employment supports that residents need. The Region continues to struggle with equitable access to reliable, quality transportation systems that can efficiently and conveniently transport goods and people. Increased funding and planning support for transportation infrastructure improvements and innovations in transportation planning are needed for the Region to continue to be an attractive place to live, work, and do business. This includes continued support for the Local Access Roads program and investments in intermodal facilities, rail spurs, inland ports and waterways, freight rail access, and aviation where appropriate to link the Region's businesses, communities, and residents to regional, national, and global markets.

**Objective 3.5: Support construction of business development sites and public facilities and the adaptive reuse of obsolete and/or unsafe properties to stimulate economic and community development.** Communities across Appalachia continue to need investments in development-ready sites for economic and community development projects as well as strategies to redevelop and repurpose unused, underutilized, or neglected sites, brownfields, and mine-scarred lands to fuel economic and community development. Planning and funding enable communities to develop technology centers, commercial and industrial sites, healthcare and educational facilities, makerspaces and incubators, and other venues to promote placemaking and boost economic growth.

## Erwin Utilities: Enhancing Broadband in Unicoi County



The town of Erwin, Tennessee, is nestled in the mountains of Unicoi County and home to just over 6,000 residents. Though the area is abundant in undisturbed natural assets and access to major roadways, Unicoi is considered economically

at-risk and has faced its fair share of challenges. After the coal-industry-related closure of a CSX rail yard in Erwin, around 300 jobs were lost—a devastating impact in a small town. Diversifying into new economic opportunities also was hampered by access, with some areas struggling to access the internet due to speeds below the FCC’s 25/3 Mbps broadband benchmark.

According to The Conservation Fund’s 2010 Sustainable Tourism Initiative Report, Unicoi County aimed to grow their tourism and hospitality sector, leading to more jobs, and increased state and local tax revenue. In order to grow any sector in their economy, Unicoi County would need to attract businesses to locate there – which requires broadband. Another report by the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development stated “broadband is the most important differentiating infrastructure today and is critical to Tennessee’s economic competitiveness, businesses, and the social wellbeing of communities and residents. Moreover, education, healthcare, business operations, workforce training and e-government

**As a result of Erwin Utilities’ efforts, 30 businesses and 680 homes were connected to high-speed broadband service.**

applications all rely upon advanced broadband networks.” Several parts of Unicoi County have been without access to broadband Internet services, while others have access to just one Internet provider.

With support from ARC’s POWER Initiative grant, Erwin Utilities took action to change this situation. Erwin Utilities installed 35 miles of fiber optic cable on an existing pole line so that fiber broadband service could reach business and residential subscribers in Temple Hill and Bumpus Cove, another underserved area. As a result of Erwin Utilities’ efforts, 30 businesses and 680 homes were connected to high-speed broadband service. This construction also put high-speed fiber optic cable within miles of the Flag Pond and Rocky Fork State Park, both of which serve as important draws for tourists.

Unicoi County Hospital was constructed in 2017 and received access to Erwin Utilities’ fiber optic system, which provides access to reliable high-speed broadband that is essential for the multi-hospital network, as well as for telemedicine services, which became even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://www.arc.gov/investment/erwin-utilities-enhancing-broadband-in-unicoi-county/>

**Read Online**



## 4 Building Regional Culture and Tourism

**Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by preserving and investing in the Region's local cultural heritage and natural assets.**

Appalachia is a region with unique downtown communities, a vibrant cultural and arts tradition, and diverse natural spaces. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of preserving and leveraging these regional assets to support quality of life for residents, community development, economic opportunity, and tourism. ARC can support these objectives by investing in the revitalization of Appalachian downtowns, providing support for the maintenance and promotion of the Region's arts and cultural heritage, and assisting communities in preserving and harnessing natural resources and outdoor spaces for recreation and tourism purposes.

**Objective 4.1: Invest in the development of vibrant Appalachian downtowns and provide support for Appalachian placemaking.** Many Appalachian communities have downtowns that need investment and rehabilitation to make them optimally usable by residents and attractive to visitors. These communities need financing, planning, and organizational support, as well as the support of local leaders to advance downtown revitalization efforts. Investment in the physical infrastructure and features of downtown districts can help transform them into attractive spaces that drive economic growth and community development.

**Objective 4.2: Invest in economic and community development initiatives that preserve and promote Appalachian communities' vibrant arts, cultural, and heritage traditions.** Appalachia has a rich history in a range of arts, music, regional foods, and heritage sites. There is a need to preserve these traditions and assets and to ensure their continuation in regional communities. Investments in Appalachian arts, culture, and heritage will support community resilience and development, advance place-based economic development, and expand opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

**Objective 4.3: Preserve and expand Appalachia's natural resources to increase outdoor recreation opportunities for residents and visitors and support sustainable economic growth.** Appalachia's myriad natural assets—mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, parks, waterfalls, and trails—and plentiful outdoor recreation activities were repeatedly mentioned by stakeholders as key strengths for the Region. Continued support for responsible development and expansion of outdoor recreation spaces will help fuel the Region's tourism economy and increase employment opportunities for residents. Investment in activities such as improvement of mine-impacted lands, remediation of waterways, and conversion to sustainable agriculture and forestry will further strengthen recreation, tourism, and economic opportunity for Appalachian communities.

## Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky: Revitalizing, Redeveloping and Reinvesting in Communities



Communities are still recovering from the impacts of COVID-19. When Kentucky had to shut down its economy due to the pandemic, the Appalachian Impact Fund at the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky brought together partners

to launch an effective COVID response to help save small businesses throughout the Region.

In partnership with the Community Economic Development Initiative for Kentucky (CEDIK) and Invest 606, and with support from ARC's POWER Initiative, the Appalachian Impact Fund created the Southeast Kentucky Downtown Business Stimulus Fund to drive the region forward by revitalizing Kentucky's downtown area.

CEDIK and Invest 606 also helped design and implement the Southeast Kentucky Healthy Downtowns Initiative grant program. The program provided support to nonprofit organizations, local businesses, and public partners focused

**"Small projects like this have a huge, meaningful impact for small business owners."**

on downtown revitalization, community economic development, engagement, and public health during the COVID pandemic and Kentucky's reopening.

"Small projects like this have a huge, meaningful impact for small business owners. The feedback we have received from downtown businesses in Harlan and Cumberland has been overwhelmingly positive," said one of the organizers of the Harlan County COVID Safe Shop Hops.

To date, the Stimulus Fund has provided 153 grants totaling \$385,400 to business owners ranging from restaurants, unique retail, amusement, personal services, and others active in the broader downtown and tourism ecosystems in 23 counties. Of the 153 grants, the Stimulus Fund has assisted 347 full-time jobs, 282 part-time jobs, and 88 seasonal jobs. Not only this, but over 60% of businesses funded are women-owned. Eight Eastern Kentucky downtowns were invited to apply, and six received \$30,000 implementation grants in Harlan, Irvine, Pikeville, Prestonsburg, Williamsburg, and Whitesburg Counties.

Revitalizing downtown areas is not only a huge support system to entrepreneurs and local small businesses, but it also helps establish a great place to live for the Region's residents by creating a cool and lively downtown area to bring people together.

<https://www.arc.gov/investment/foundation-for-appalachian-kentucky/>

**Read Online**



## 5 Building Community Leaders and Capacity

**Invest in the capacity of local leaders, organizations, and communities to address local challenges by providing technical assistance and support to access resources, engage partners, identify strategies and tactics, and conduct effective planning and project execution.**

Achieving economic development goals for the Region is dependent upon local ability to prioritize challenges and implement the solutions most impactful to their communities. Stakeholders noted that many areas in the Region, particularly in rural and/or economically distressed areas, lack the capacity at the leadership, organizational, or community level to effectively drive the planning and implementation of strategies, projects, and investments. Out-migration and a lack of focus and investment in leadership and community development has left many communities in the Region without the capacity needed to capitalize on funding opportunities and steer investments to successful outcomes. ARC will use evaluations, performance metrics, and other tools to guide investment strategies and will share outcomes among grantees, beneficiaries, and communities in Appalachia. Stakeholders repeatedly noted that ARC's investment in capacity building and planning support, technical assistance and training, and leadership development and empowerment is equally important as any other funding or program to growing the Region's economic and community prosperity.

**Objective 5.1: Develop, support, and empower community leaders that are representative of local communities, inclusive in their approach, and focused on long-term, innovative strategies and solutions.** There is a critical need and opportunity for ARC to support innovative professional development opportunities for local leaders in communities across the Region. This includes ensuring that leadership development encompasses local resident engagement, outreach to bring all potential partners to the table, and a focus on equity that supports inclusive and sustainable economic development for local communities.

**Objective 5.2: Build capacity of community organizations and local development districts (LDDs) to effectively access and manage funding, administer programs, and execute projects through implementation.** Community organizations and LDDs are the foundational structure for local investment in the Appalachian Region. Many of these organizations need additional support to ensure awareness of relevant funding opportunities at the local, state, and federal level; develop projects that address crucial community needs; successfully access and administer funding; and collaborate with partners to maximize project impact. Strategic organizational planning and technical assistance are essential tools to shore up organizational capacity to drive local economic development.

**Objective 5.3:** Invest in developing the capacity of communities to build ecosystems where government, nonprofits, businesses, and philanthropic partners coalesce around a shared vision for economic and community prosperity and collaborate to implement that vision. Communities are generally composed of private and public entities that share a common overall goal of growing the local economy to improve residents' quality of life. Many places in Appalachia, particularly rural and/or economically distressed communities, lack the capacity to develop a strong partnership network that can establish common objectives and strategies and collectively target resources to ensure success. Investments in technical assistance, research and data analysis, and community planning efforts are essential building blocks for local prosperity.





## Why Whitley: Designing a New Community Narrative



Architect rendering of River Fog Park  
(Image courtesy of Why Whitley)

In 2018 in Whitley County, Kentucky, a group of passionate citizens held a dinner to discuss ways to change the narrative surrounding the community. There were so many things to be proud of within the county, but it seemed like news coverage consistently revolved

around the same, tired stereotype of Southeastern Kentucky. These volunteers wanted to identify ways to spark community pride, encourage community engagement, and spur community and economic development. The group agreed to form a nonprofit entity called Why Whitley, to highlight reasons why Whitley County is special, significant, and valued to residents and visitors alike.

In the same timeframe, Why Whitley volunteers learned about Community Economic Development Initiative for Kentucky (CEDIK) and ARC's Downtown Revitalization in the Promise Zone project and coordinated with CEDIK to learn about opportunities for community development, funding, and revitalization. Through Why Whitley's relationship with CEDIK staff, Why Whitley was able to formalize their structure, focus their efforts on specific areas of downtown, and secure funding to create meaningful change in the community.

Over the past 3 years, Why Whitley has used CEDIK services to conduct several studies and community design plans for

their downtown and successfully rescued an abandoned lot at the entrance of Downtown Williamsburg. Through grant funding made available through the Downtown Revitalization in the Promise Zone sub-grants, Why Whitley transformed the abandoned lot into an active, vibrant greenspace and hosted the River Fog Festival—the first festival in downtown Williamsburg, KY focused on community pride, vibrant space, and local food, drink, and music. The festival had over 1,000 attendees and generated over \$6,000 in sales from participating vendors. This festival was an integral part of generating momentum and excitement for residents around socializing in downtown Williamsburg.

Why Whitley also created an online video highlighting the efforts of former Williamsburg mayor, Marcella Mountjoy, and her emphasis on community design, community pride, and vibrancy. The video received over 10,000 views within the first 3 days and is still shared widely within the community as a way to spark the passion and love for the community that Mrs. Mountjoy held.

Why Whitley would not have been able to grow, develop, and navigate topics such as community economic development, community design, and grant writing if they did not have the support of CEDIK staff through the ARC Downtown Revitalization in the Promise Zone grant. Through this partnership, Why Whitley members believe that downtown Williamsburg has grown and developed in a sustainable, professional, and monumental way and has become a place that residents and visitors alike can celebrate.

<https://www.arc.gov/investment/why-whitley-designing-a-new-community-narrative/>

Read Online

# ARC Roles

To successfully implement its strategic mission, the Commission commits itself to the following critical roles:

- **Catalyst:** ARC seeks to catalyze innovation in the Region by cultivating and supporting new and burgeoning ideas for projects and activities in local communities.
- **Investor:** ARC invests and leverages its resources in projects and activities designed to transform the Region's economy and its communities' well-being.
- **Capacity Builder:** ARC supports the development of community leaders and overall community capacity to successfully plan, propose, and implement innovative projects and initiatives; develops and shares best practices; and conducts outreach and technical assistance to bring new and/or under-resourced groups to the planning table.
- **Advocate:** ARC advocates for Appalachia and develops co-investment partnerships with other organizations at all levels—local, regional, national, and global.
- **Convener:** ARC convenes, or supports convening of, broad and inclusive groups of stakeholders to identify, plan, and implement innovative local solutions for local challenges.
- **Researcher:** ARC conducts research that analyzes key economic, demographic, and quality-of-life factors that affect Appalachia's future development prospects. Research informs best practices, helps ARC leadership and state and local partners target resources effectively, and provides valid data for outside researchers.
- **Evaluator:** ARC evaluates grant implementation and outcomes to assess the extent to which funded projects contribute to ARC's strategic goals, to share and replicate best practices, and to inform ongoing improvements to ARC programming.
- **Equity Driver:** ARC invests in and supports projects and activities that include intentional strategies to create a more equitable Appalachia.
- **Coach:** ARC provides staff resources to support states and grantees with successful project implementation, including technical assistance, coaching, and problem solving to help overcome barriers to success.
- **Navigator:** ARC assists the Region with navigating the complex federal funding landscape to strategically access and leverage funding to support key projects and initiatives.





# Performance Targets

Assuming continued annual funding consistent with the most recent FY 2021 annual appropriations of \$180 million, the Commission is committed to achieving the following performance, leverage, matching, and distressed county/area targets in pursuit of its mission. Future changes in funding levels for the Commission may necessitate corresponding adjustments to performance targets.

Grant Outcomes	1-Year Target	5-Year Target
Jobs created or retained	22,000	110,000
Businesses created or strengthened	4,000	20,000
Students and workers with improvements	35,000	175,000
Businesses and households with access to improved infrastructure	50,000	250,000
Communities with enhanced capacity	400	2,000
Leverage		
Ratio of leveraged private investment to ARC dollars	6 to 1	6 to 1
Matching		
Ratio of matching project funds to ARC dollars	2 to 1	2 to 1
Distressed Counties/Areas		
Percentage of ARC funds directed to benefit economically distressed counties or areas	50%	50%



# Socioeconomic Indicators of Progress

The Commission's continued investments in the Region through this strategic plan aim to create long-lasting positive impacts across Appalachian communities and alleviate the socioeconomic disparities between Appalachia and the nation. ARC will monitor the following set of socioeconomic indicators and regional statistics to determine progress toward this vision and better understand and address the evolving needs of all Appalachian communities.

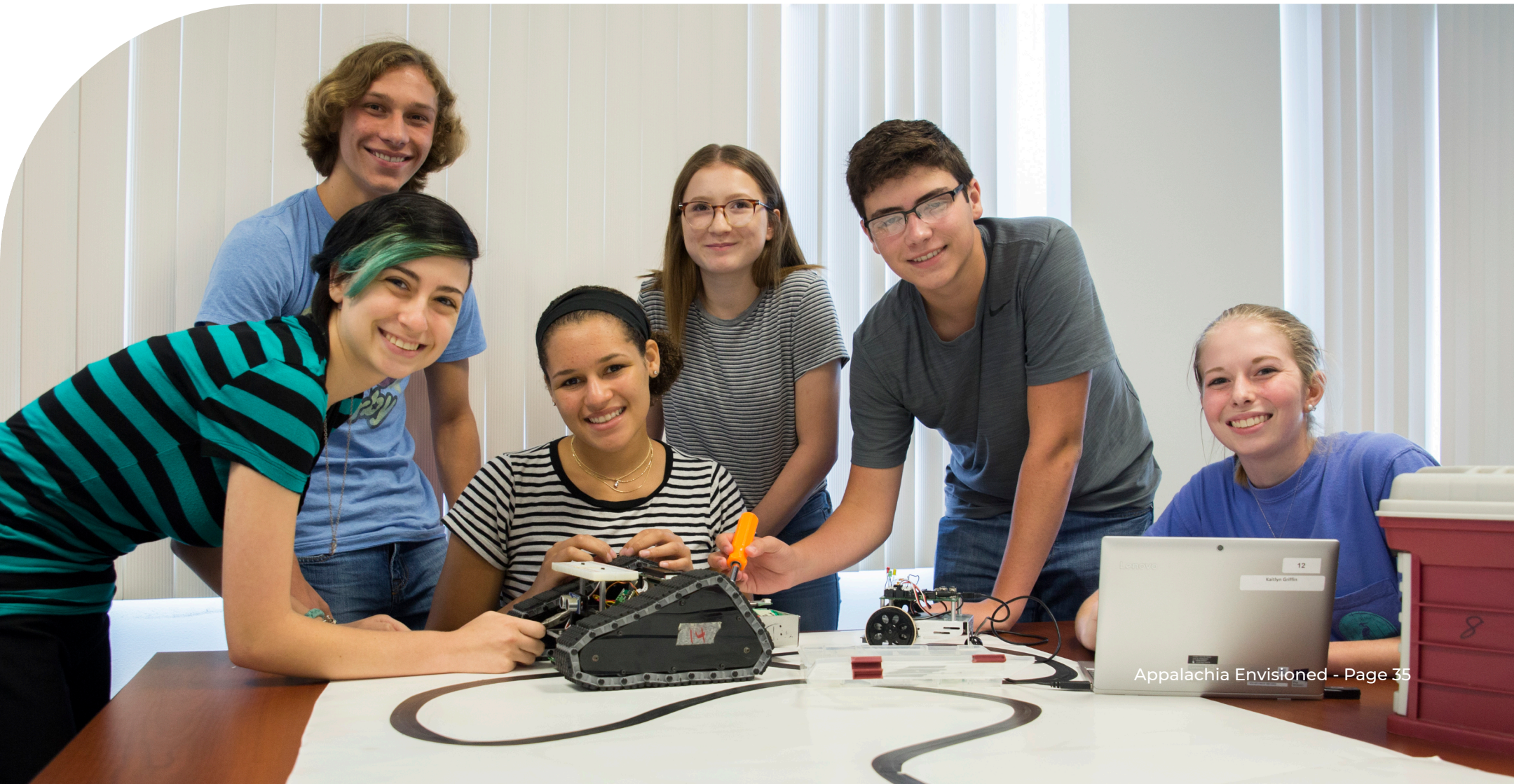
- Population, age, race, and ethnicity
- Rates of employment and unemployment
- Incomes and earnings
- Poverty rates
- County economic status classification
- Labor force participation rates
- Measures of entrepreneurial dynamism, including rates of startups and high-growth companies
- Industrial shares and employment in key sectors, particularly coal and manufacturing
- Educational attainment rates
- Population health, including health status, healthcare systems, risk factors, and social determinants of health
- Rates of substance use disorder and opioid misuse
- Mortality rates
- Access to basic infrastructure, including water and sewer systems
- Device ownership and broadband internet access
- Appalachian Development Highway System progress and miles open to traffic
- Transportation and commuting patterns
- Migration and mobility
- Comparison of rural Appalachia to rural areas outside Appalachia





# Envisioning the Future of Appalachia

We are pleased to present this forward-looking strategic investment plan that will assist ARC and its federal, state, and local partners to take action toward its vision of bringing Appalachia into full socioeconomic parity with the nation. It provides guidance for investment priorities based on considerable research; extensive input from the people of Appalachia; and Commission consensus on guiding principles, goals, objectives, roles, and performance targets. The plan also takes into account current challenges, such as the coronavirus pandemic, as well as opportunities to leverage the Region's key assets, to create a framework that builds on past accomplishments while moving Appalachia forward.







Appalachian  
Regional  
Commission



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