

# Rural Access to Financial Services – Request for Project Planning Proposals

## Background

Powered by a network of credit unions, the GoWest Foundation cultivates and delivers resources that strengthen the financial lives of people throughout our region. In cooperation with the GoWest Credit Union Association, we help 300 credit unions across Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming achieve positive impact in their communities.

Our region has diverse landscapes, ranging from urban cities to rural countryside. The challenges between urban and rural communities differ greatly, resulting in a range of needs and approaches to financial health. The difficulties facing rural communities have been compounded in recent years by the exodus of bank branches in rural areas. Rural communities are rich with opportunities for innovative collaboration and unique solutions. When faced with change, these communities are resilient and come together to find unique solutions to challenges using untraditional resources. The rural landscape is a prime environment for credit unions to pilot new products and services to better serve these communities.

Our rural communities are far more diverse — and have far greater potential — than the national dialogue suggests. When credit unions come to the table with the right mix of flexible financial services for rural families and businesses, they play a crucial role in the economic vitality of present and future rural communities. Credit unions are uniquely positioned to think creatively and leverage resources to support the financial health of rural communities.

The GoWest Foundation will serve as a hub for incubating innovative ideas that improve access to financial services across our rural communities. We will partner with credit unions, providing funding and resources, to pilot new solutions to rural challenges and help increase financial well-being across our region. The Foundation will work to connect with other philanthropic organizations and funders interested in supporting this work to further the efforts of credit unions. We invite all GoWest member credit unions interested in applying for financial support to address rural access to financial services in their communities to submit a grant application. Collaborative projects will be prioritized for funding.

## Overview

The long-term goal of the GoWest Foundation's rural access to financial services initiative is to spur innovative approaches to increase the affordability of and access to financial services in our rural areas. Nationally, credit unions that are impactfully serving rural communities are successful because of the partnerships they develop to bolster resources, innovate existing practices, and decrease barriers to products and services for members. Being community-based cooperatives, credit unions have close relationships with their membership base and local partners that big banks, traditional mortgage brokers, and the alternative lending market simply do not have. Those connections to the community make the design and delivery of innovative solutions not only possible, but an incredible opportunity to showcase credit unions as leaders in addressing the lack of adaptability and services for rural regions across the country. We also encourage credit unions to see this grant as an opportunity to increase their membership in underserved markets or connect with additional community partners.

## Funding Availability

The GoWest Foundation awards applicant credit unions up to \$20,000 to fund rural access planning projects. Credit unions are encouraged to apply for the reasonable funding necessary to complete the scope of work detailed in your application.

## Funding Period

Rural access to financial services planning projects should be no longer than 20 weeks in duration. Credit unions who receive planning grant funds will be encouraged to submit an implementation grant application upon completing the planning phase of the project.

## Award Timeline

The GoWest Foundation accepts grant applications throughout the year; there is no application deadline. Applications will be reviewed, and grants will be awarded, on a rolling basis. Applicants are typically notified of a decision within 30 days of receiving a submission.

## Eligibility Requirements

The GoWest Foundation welcomes applications from all GoWest member credit unions. Credit union planning projects must focus on communities in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and/or Wyoming. The Foundation funds grants to credit unions or collaborations of credit union partners interested in exploring viable products and solutions to expand access to financial services in the rural communities they serve. Credit unions are highly unlikely to be awarded more than one project planning grant per 12-month period.

## Serving the Underserved

The GoWest Foundation is committed to promoting and supporting efforts that improve equitable access to financial services in underserved communities across our region. Rural businesses and community members need a different approach than their urban counterparts. With higher levels of underbanked populations and scarce brick-and-mortar institutions, rural communities are often left without high quality options. GoWest believes credit unions are the solution to offering affordable products and services to those who have been traditionally underserved by the financial services industry.

To create relevant and accessible products and services for your membership, the GoWest Foundation encourages including a diverse group of stakeholders in your planning and design process. These varied perspectives will support your credit union's understanding of the needs and challenges facing underserved populations so that you may create relevant and timely solutions to the historical, cultural, and institutional barriers impacting their access to financial services. Through our rural access grantmaking, the Foundation will prioritize funding for credit unions or credit union partnerships that focus on serving the underserved in their grant proposal. For more information, please contact us at [foundation@gowest.org](mailto:foundation@gowest.org).

## Types of Eligible Projects

Rural access to financial services is a complex issue with no single solution that will work for all communities or populations. However, the Foundation is interested in funding grants that identify innovative or unique solutions that are responsive to the needs of local communities. The project should focus on impacting rural populations in the credit union's field of membership. Some credit unions may choose to identify ways they can positively impact small businesses or entrepreneurs, while others may choose to focus on how they can help members build credit or create a unique product to match a local need. With this funding opportunity, the sky is the limit.

The GoWest Foundation is accepting planning grant applications for credit unions interested in expanding access to their services in rural communities or piloting innovative new approaches. Planning grants are an opportunity to explore your membership's specific needs or the role your credit union can play in addressing local issues impacting your rural membership. Priority consideration will be given to proposals exploring a new solution in an existing banking desert. The purpose of a planning grant is to identify a local need or challenge faced by residents in rural communities, then develop an action plan to pilot solutions to address the barrier. The plan should be well-reasoned and specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by your credit union's own communities. We encourage credit unions to utilize grant

funds as an opportunity to pilot new products or initiatives versus a continuation of your credit union's current offerings.

*Examples:*

- Tailoring outreach strategies to connect underserved rural communities with relevant financial services through research – Connections CU
- Assessing Interactive Teller Machine (ITM) and/or branch viability – Central Willamette CU
- Employer-sponsored small dollar lending
- Energy loans (agriculture, small business, or personal)
- Home improvement or rehabilitation loans (wildfire resiliency upgrades, work-from-home investments, adding an ADU, increasing ADA compliance, etc.)
- Small business or entrepreneur loans
- Childcare provider loans
- Rural cooperative loans (housing, farming, land trust, etc.)
- Infrastructure assessments (broadband needs, financial deserts, etc.)
- Community financial health collaboratives

## Defining Rural

An urban community is defined as having a population of 50,000 or more. Rural has a variety of definitions, but for purposes of this GoWest Foundation grant opportunity, the Foundation considers rural areas as the following:

Towns, villages, cities, territories, sovereign nations, or tribal lands with populations under 35,000 that are not within close proximity or adjacent to urban/metropolitan areas according to the latest [U.S. Census data](#).

Credit unions do not need to have headquarters in rural areas to be eligible, but should have a branch location, or otherwise be significantly engaged in a rural community, to be awarded a rural access grant. The GoWest Foundation will give priority to communities that are banking deserts, and special consideration for rural communities with limited infrastructure such as social services, healthcare, public transportation, or economic services, including access to financial services. Remote communities with populations over 35,000 that are geographically isolated would also likely qualify as rural. If you're unsure whether your community qualifies as rural or would like additional rural status resources, please reach out to us at [foundation@gowest.org](mailto:foundation@gowest.org).

## Planning Grant Expenses

Through this grant opportunity, the Foundation will fund a variety of opportunities, including feasibility studies, financial analysis, policy research and development, project management expenses (staff time), focus groups, and any other reasonable expenses necessary to fully develop a product, service, or program to expand rural access to financial services.

## Reporting

Every credit union receiving a GoWest Foundation rural access to financial services planning grant from has a responsibility to report on the use of grant funds. Upon being awarded, the Foundation and the recipient credit union will develop agreed-upon project deliverables, including the development of an implementation project plan.

## Engaging with GoWest Foundation and Other Grantees

Every credit union receiving a planning grant will be expected to participate in regular check-in meetings with the GoWest Foundation program staff. Occasionally, it may be beneficial for all grantees to discuss best practices, barriers, and progress toward project deliverables. For this purpose, the Foundation will coordinate in-person, video, and/or phone meetings and grantees will be strongly encouraged to participate. The GoWest Foundation recognizes that the 20-week planning project grant

period is short and will work to provide technical assistance and additional resources that enable credit unions to complete projects efficiently and effectively.

## Submission Guidelines

To access the grant application form, visit [gowestfoundation.org/grants](http://gowestfoundation.org/grants). All fields must be completed before the form can be submitted. After submitting a grant application, the GoWest Foundation may follow up with questions or request additional information during the decision-making process.

We strongly encourage applicants to draft and save responses in a Word document then paste those responses into the application form. A grant application template is available for your convenience [here](#). Please note that applicants cannot save and return to the online application form. Once an application is submitted, it cannot be edited.

## Questions

The Foundation is committed to ensuring that every interested GoWest member credit union has the support they need to join us in addressing rural access to financial services. If you have questions or are interested in learning more about a grant opportunity, please reach out to us at [foundation@gowest.org](mailto:foundation@gowest.org).