

## **Project Narrative**

### **Organizational Overview**

Strengthen ND is a dynamic, multi-faceted, and well-connected organization focused on elevating and expanding rural community viability across North Dakota and the Native Nations that share its geography. Created in response to the growing disparities being faced by rural communities, Strengthen ND focuses on building nonprofit and rural community capacity, advancing regional issues, and facilitating community solutions to support and accelerate community development throughout rural North Dakota.

Nonprofit and Rural Community Capacity Building: Strengthen ND's capacity building approach is implemented through three layers of technical assistance and support, including a formal certificate program in conjunction with a local university, small group workshops, and one-on-one organizational engagements. Informal workshops and webinars are provided on topics that supplement or elevate community and economic development efforts. Finally, one-on-one technical assistance is provided to organizations and groups based on their needs, including community planning, fundraising, economic development planning, executive search, budgeting, succession planning, and grant writing.

Advancing Regional Issues: Strengthen ND's work to advance regional issues has shown up in several ways. A specific example of our work to advance regional issues includes supporting the organization and launch of the North Dakota Local Foods Development Alliance, which seeks to elevate the local foods economy (problem solving declining rural grocery stores and small family farms) with local foods stakeholders (farmers and ranchers, federal/state/nonprofit partners, and consumers). This work has further evolved into working directly with the North Dakota Department of Agriculture to support higher quality applications to the Specialty Crops Block Program funding pool.

Facilitating Community Solutions: Facilitating community solutions is Strengthen ND's most diverse portfolio of work, showing up in a myriad of ways, including serving as an intermediary support for foundations, corporations, and family trusts so that they may invest in the most-deserving organizations - rather than those with the best grant writer; working with economic development agencies, municipalities, counties, and state departments to execute equitable and responsive planning processes to improve the quality of life in communities; diving deep within a community to support an emerging local foods-based rural innovation center in Tuttle, ND to support community resiliency, social stability, economic mobility, and collective identity; and taking on a bold initiative to launch a modern rural repopulation movement to support rural North Dakota.

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### Launching Leadership

Because of Strengthen ND's commitment to cultivating the future of rural North Dakota, strategic investments have been made in educating youth about the technology and communications sector and how it is a cornerstone of not only our state's economy but our way of life, including industry innovation and leadership growth.

With this spirit, Strengthen ND developed and piloted Launching Leadership in partnership with Minot State University, North Dakota Department of Commerce, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Dakota in the fall of 2022. Launching Leadership is a youth leadership program which coordinates several regional youth (9-12 grade) leadership institutes throughout the state of North Dakota. The pillars of Launching Leadership include:

- **Civic Education:** citizen participation, grassroots democracy, and other mission priorities;
- **Youth Development:** team building, public speaking, negotiation, goal setting, and project planning;
- **Respect for Diversity:** ethnicity, race, gender, religion, geographic location (rural vs urban), socio-economic status, and disabilities;
- **Community Engagement:** sustainable communities, environmental conservation and industrial growth, disaster preparedness and management, asset-based community development, and volunteerism; and
- **Environmental Education:** impacts of agriculture on communities, ecosystems, energy and sustainability, and biodiversity.

The pilot of Launching Leadership engaged a small cohort of 15 students from across central North Dakota and was a resounding success. As a result, Strengthen ND and its partners will be scaling Launching Leadership to a statewide initiative engaging 45 students; 15 college-age junior leaders; and 45 leaders in key North Dakota sectors to serve as mentors for each student. The full-scale implementation of Launching Leadership's institute will be May 30th – June 3rd, 2023 in Minot at Minot State University.

The overall objectives of Launching Leadership are to:

- Welcome and encourage students from across regions in North Dakota to learn about their local communities.
- Introduce students to the qualities and skills needed for effective leadership.
- Provide an innovative and challenging learning environment through hands-on simulations, workshops, and activities which help facilitate these leadership skills.

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- Prepare youth leaders to become responsible citizens and contributing members of their communities.
- Empower participants to be actively engaged in addressing issues of concern in their schools and communities upon their return home.
- Build mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect through shared culture and values; and present opportunities to examine issues and initiatives which impact their regions.
- Provide opportunities for students to learn and serve in regional leadership capacities after completion of the Regional Leadership Institute.
- Inspire students to continue on in their professional quests and personal growth through continued involvement with the North Dakota Youth Leadership Program.

Each student will be provided the opportunity to work with a skilled leader and mentor to develop a project that will impact their community, with \$8,000 being contributed by the North Dakota Department of Commerce to seed and execute those projects.

### **Project Beneficiaries & Intended Outcomes**

The direct beneficiaries of this program will be the students and junior leaders directly engaged in the content and activities of the day. The investment of knowledge and resources in these 45 high school students from across the state will inform and influence the future of policy and programming across rural North Dakota, which will ideally lead to a more sustainable community development approach and movement.

### **Project Budget**

In the supplemental materials enclosed with this application is an overview of the budget needed to successfully implement Launching Leadership. As Launching Leadership is a mission-driven effort, this budget does not reflect the totality of those expenses. The entire Launching Leadership implementation budget is \$66,500 with the salaries of Strengthen ND's staff (Beth Odahlen - Director of Community Engagement & Solutions) being contributed in-kind.

To date, Strengthen ND raised \$35,000 (\$10,000 Strengthen ND; \$10,000 North Dakota Department of Commerce - event sponsorship; \$8,000 North Dakota Department of Commerce - youth project grants; \$5,000 Blue Cross Blue Shield Caring Foundation; and \$2,000 Minot State University).