The Center for Rural AI

Building Rural Capacity in the AI Economy

Philanthropic Partnership

60M+	10%+	$5M	24 Mo
Rural Americans	Share of U.S. GDP	Partnership Ask	Timeline

The Center for Rural AI (CRAI) is a newly formed 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on a structural economic disparity in the United States: the lagging participation of rural communities in artificial intelligence.

ruralai.org

About CRAI

Rural America comprises a significant portion of the nation's population and economy, yet it has historically lagged in access to digital infrastructure, tech jobs, and innovation networks. The rise of AI has exacerbated these challenges.

Over 60 million citizens live in rural areas. Rural ecosystems contribute over 10% of U.S. GDP but are underrepresented in high-growth tech sectors compared with urban regions.

CRAI exists to shift this trajectory by building the institutional capacity rural regions need to adopt, deploy, and influence AI systems in ways that create economic opportunities and enhance community outcomes. Global economic analyses project that AI and related technologies will generate tens of trillions of dollars in value across industries by 2030 — we want to enable rural communities to capture their share.

Founding Team

Andrew Aitken, Executive Director — Has advised institutions including the U.S. White House, Microsoft, and Capital One, and has served on the boards of numerous technology foundations.

Adam Markham, Technology Adviser — Has directed AI research and systems engineering in government and critical infrastructure contexts.

Marc Nager, Adviser — Co-founded Startup Weekend and led community programs at Techstars; partner at one of the only VCs focused on rural ecosystems.

Strategic Partnerships

CRAI and the AI Institute at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado — a rural public institution advancing comprehensive AI education and engagement — have initiated discussions on collaborative pathways. This provides direct insight into the opportunities and constraints rural institutions face. In parallel, CRAI is engaging with frontier AI companies so that rural use cases inform product design while the technology is still evolving.

The Investment Thesis

Rural regions possess underutilized competitive advantages, including lower operating costs, stronger long-term community retention, and rich real-world data environments in agriculture, healthcare, and logistics that are relevant to AI use cases. While rural communities have these strengths, persistent training, infrastructure, and digital adoption gaps curtail their ability to participate at scale in the emerging AI economy.

Federal Policy Alignment

Federal policy is increasingly aligned with addressing regional disparities. The CHIPS and Science Act and related place-based programs authorized under it are designed to build technology capacity and innovation ecosystems outside of traditional tech centers. The Regional Technology and Innovation Hubs (Tech Hubs) program, for example, directs up to ~$10 billion over five years to support distributed technology innovation networks across the U.S., with appropriated funding already underway. Such federal initiatives provide structural support for innovation ecosystems that include rural and underserved communities.

Our Programs

AI 101 — Artificial Intelligence for Rural Communities (Q1/26)

A plain-language, hands-on half-day workshop designed for small business owners, municipal staff, nonprofit leaders, farmers, and anyone serving a rural community — no technical background required. Participants leave with:

- A working understanding of what AI is and where it falls short
- Hands-on practice using real tools on tasks they actually face
- A personal 30-day action plan tailored to their specific context

AI Ignition (Q2/26)

A capacity-building initiative for rural higher education institutions and nonprofits. It begins with AI readiness assessments to identify high-impact, low-risk opportunities, and then advances to focused 90-day pilots that deliver measurable outcomes in student engagement, operational performance, and service delivery.

Rural AI Innovation & Training Lab (Q3/26)

The first program of its kind in the United States — a physical lab and structured training infrastructure hosted at the Fort Lewis College Innovation Center. Each 90-day cohort trains approximately 15 faculty, staff, and institutional leaders from rural colleges, tribal institutions, and mission-aligned nonprofits to serve as internal AI evangelists at their home organizations.

The program structure blends an intensive in-person launch week, a remote applied-pilot phase, and an in-person capstone week to finalize deployments, document outcomes, and produce repeatable playbooks. Each cohort indirectly influences more than 5,000 students annually through the institutional multiplier effect.

The Lab also convenes AI builders for time-bound, structured field engagements that produce jointly published use cases and generate rural deployment insights that directly inform model development and tooling priorities.

Peer Council (Q2/26)

A shared network and knowledge library where participating institutions exchange tested use cases, tools, and insights from deployments. This collective repository cultivates durable institutional knowledge within the rural ecosystem.

AI in the Mountains Summit (Q4/26)

An annual convening hosted in rotating rural mountain towns, bringing together AI researchers, policymakers, corporate partners, and rural stakeholders to ensure rural perspectives shape national and regional AI strategies.

The AI Fluency Platform (Q2/26)

Role-specific AI education tailored to rural institutional contexts. Built around an agentic content orchestration platform that contextualizes learning for real operational environments, this curriculum will generate usable intellectual property and scalable implementation beyond pilot phases.

Why Philanthropic Capital Matters

Federal and corporate investment tends to follow demonstrated results; it rarely initiates them. Early philanthropic capital is essential to fund assessments, pilots, resources, technology infrastructure, and baseline operating capacity that generate the evidence of impact required to unlock scalable public and private funding streams. Without this initial support, promising rural AI adoption efforts may fail to reach the proof points needed to secure continued investment.

Our Invitation

CRAI seeks **$5,000,000 in philanthropic partnership over 24 months** to launch core programs, demonstrate impact across 8–12 partner institutions, build foundational infrastructure, and position for access to federal funding beginning in 2027.

This investment will support:

- AI Ignition pilots at 8–10 rural higher education institutions
- Launch of the AI Innovation and Training Lab
- Development and deployment of the AI Fluency agentic curriculum platform
- Launch of the 2026 AI in the Mountains Summit
- Core operations and strategic partnerships

If this opportunity resonates, we welcome a conversation about how your partnership can help ensure rural communities lead, not follow, in the AI economy.

Andrew Aitken — Executive Director, The Center for Rural AI

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Appendix — Source Citations

Rural population and economic context

- USDA reports ~46 million rural residents (~14% of U.S. population).
- McKinsey estimates rural areas are about one-seventh of population and ~10% of GDP.

Digital and technological divide evidence

- Rural broadband and device ownership lag compared with urban and suburban areas.
- Digital divide in rural communities affects access to tech resources and economic participation.

Federal policy and innovation ecosystems

- CHIPS and Science Act authorized significant investment in R&D and regional innovation, incl. Tech Hubs.
- Brookings and related research highlight rural opportunities via CHIPS programs.

Rural economic dynamics

- Structural employment and economic composition differences between rural and urban areas persist.
- Service and retail industries now dominate rural job growth; traditional sectors remain relevant but not dominant.

Appendix — Independent Grant Review

This document was independently reviewed through the lens of a major philanthropic foundation grant evaluator. The feedback below is included for transparency and to guide future conversations with prospective partners.

Strengths Identified

- **Federal Policy Alignment & Sustainability Path** — The connection to CHIPS Act funding, Tech Hubs, and federal place-based initiatives suggests CRAI is building toward programmatic sustainability rather than perpetual foundation dependence.
- **Proof-Before-Scaling Methodology** — The 90-day MVP approach with focused initial investments shows fiscal discipline. CRAI is asking funders to support evidence generation that unlocks larger capital — exactly what early-stage philanthropic capital should do.
- **Anchor Institution Partnership** — Fort Lewis College provides real operational grounding. This is not theoretical — CRAI has a concrete partner where it can test, learn, and iterate, which significantly de-risks the model.

Concerns Raised

- **Scale of Ask vs. Organizational Track Record** — $5M over the initial period is substantial for a newly formed 501(c)(3) without demonstrated programmatic outcomes. Evaluators typically want to see organizations prove their model at smaller scale before this level of investment.
- **Measurable Outcomes** — Specific, quantifiable success metrics and clear definitions of impact will strengthen the case. Detailed targets for faculty trained, AI implementations deployed, student outcomes improved, and cost savings generated would add rigor.

Key Questions for Partner Conversations

1. What is CRAI's current organizational capacity, and what operational infrastructure exists today?

2. Can CRAI provide a detailed budget breakdown showing program delivery, platform development, and overhead ratios?

3. What specific, quantifiable success metrics will demonstrate impact at the 18-month mark?

4. What is the 36-month sustainability model, and what revenue mix sustains operations after the initial investment?

5. How is CRAI differentiated from existing rural development or digital equity programs (USDA Rural Development, EDA, extension services)?