

## News Release

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### **Southern Rural Development Center Secures Walmart Grant to Expand CREATE BRIDGES Initiative**

**STARKVILLE, Miss.** – The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) has secured funding from Walmart to expand CREATE BRIDGES, a pilot program centered on strengthening retail, accommodations, tourism, and entertainment industries which have been notably impacted by COVID-19 and often make up a large portion of the jobs and businesses that drive rural economies. The SRDC will collaborate on Phase II of this initiative with three Land-Grant University (LGU) partners: New Mexico State University, North Carolina State University, and University of Illinois. Community and Economic Development specialists from each university, Dr. Michael Patrick (NM), Becky Bowen (NC), and Susan Odom (IL), will lead the project team in their respective states to pilot a process to help rural communities strengthen their retail sector. Current state partners for Phase I of CREATE BRIDGES include Dr. Stacey McCullough (AR), Dr. Alison Davis (KY), and Sara Siems (OK), and these individuals will continue leading the project teams in their respective states as well as develop, refine, and pilot Phase II.

Each state selected a multi-county region to participate in CREATE BRIDGES, *Celebrating REtail, Accommodations, Tourism, and Entertainment by Building Rural Innovations and Developing Growth Economies*. In Illinois, the region includes the Southern Five region (Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties). New Mexico's region includes the NEEDO-NM region (Union, Colfax, Harding, Mora, San Miguel, Quay, and De Baca counties). In North Carolina, the region includes the Mountain West NC region (Jackson, Swain, Macon, and

Graham counties and the Qualla Boundary). Each state project team will lead their state's respective regions through the CREATE BRIDGES process.

*CREATE BRIDGES* is built upon the SRDC-led Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative, a collaborative effort across 32 states that helps rural counties work together to develop and implement an economic development plan for their multi-county region. Built in partnership with USDA Rural Development, the nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers, and LGU partners, SET serves as a building block for this initiative.

CREATE BRIDGES adapts several components of SET for this initiative while adding new components unique to the retail sector and provides opportunities to customize implementation according to community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within each region, key community and economic development stakeholders have been recruited to form a Regional Steering Committee. To launch the project, state teams and Regional Steering Committee members will raise awareness of the role retail, tourism, accommodations, and entertainment businesses play in the local economy and build capacity for the project. Throughout CREATE BRIDGES the regions will explore relevant data, explore opportunities and barriers of existing businesses, streamline existing workforce initiative efforts, and implement new strategies and actions.

The Southern Rural Development Center's mission is to strengthen the capacity of the region's 30 LGUs to address critical rural development issues impacting the well-being of people and communities in the rural South. As one of four Regional Rural Development Centers, SRDC is a hub to coordinate rural community development outreach and research in concert with the LGUs in the 13 southeast states.

For more information about the Southern Rural Development Center or this project, please contact Rachel Welborn, SRDC Associate Director and project lead, at 662.325.5885, or visit the project website: <http://srdc.msstate.edu/createbridges/index.html>

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