



BATON ROUGE, LA

Navigating the Currents of Opportunity:

DRA Regional Development Plan IV

Advancing investments in infrastructure, workforce development, small businesses and entrepreneurship and communities

FEBRUARY 2023



MESSAGE FROM THE FEDERAL CO-CHAIR

Over the last few decades, the United States has recognized the urgent need to address deeply entrenched poverty, resolve longstanding socio-economic challenges, and support people living in rural and distressed areas across the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic more acutely surfaced what we already knew to be true of our region: limited infrastructure that connects us; inequitable access to economic opportunities; health resources are stretched thin; and fragile regional systems that support community capacity.

The currents are shifting. We are now experiencing unprecedented and ripe opportunities to invest in and support rural America and the DRA region. New funding and opportunities are flowing into the Mississippi River Delta, while new seeds of economic growth and development are being sown across the Alabama Black Belt.

Since being confirmed as Federal Co-Chair of the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), I have had the privilege of facilitating robust conversations with a broad range of community members across all eight states of the DRA region. We listened to the voices and views of residents as well as local, state, and regional partners to gain a first-hand understanding of what our communities need.

It is with deep gratitude and appreciation to our DRA community members and partners that I present *Navigating the Currents of Opportunity: DRA Regional Development Plan IV*.

This plan is not just a statement of our priorities, but a driver of the actions we will embark on from 2023 through 2027 to capitalize on tremendous opportunities, focus on rural and distressed communities, and to strengthen regional economic development. The DRA Regional Development Plan IV presents our roadmap for creating jobs, building communities, and improving the lives of the 10 million people who reside in the 252 counties and parishes of the eight-state Mississippi River Delta and Alabama Black Belt regions. Building on our previous successes, the plan establishes ambitious new goals, strategies, action steps, and guiding principles to achieve our vision for the future.

I look forward to continued engagement and to working with communities and partners at all levels. Only together can we navigate the currents of opportunity and strengthen our dynamic, culturally diverse, and economically significant region.

Sincerely,

Corey Wiggins, Ph.D.

Federal Co-Chair, Delta Regional Authority

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Delta Regional Authority would like to thank the many individuals and organizations that contributed to this regional development plan, including the hundreds of residents and community and business leaders that participated in the discovery phase of this project. The valuable expertise and insights shared during listening tour engagements, collaboration sessions, community survey responses, and interviews expanded our understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the DRA region. Developing this community- and research-informed plan would not have been possible without their local knowledge of the region. The DRA would also like to thank its staff for their valuable guidance and support throughout the planning process. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge that in light of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the absence of an appointed Federal Co-Chair, the DRA delayed the development of this Regional Development Plan. Therefore, it reflects a roadmap for the 2023-2027 period.

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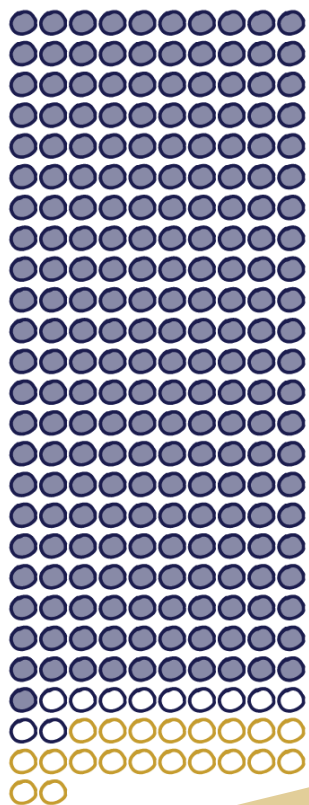
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ABOUT THE DRA REGION

The Delta Regional Authority supports residents across 252 counties and parishes within eight states in and around the Mississippi River Delta and the Alabama Black Belt. Member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee. The Mississippi River Delta, the seventh largest river delta on Earth, drains water from 40% of the states bordering the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico. The term Alabama Black Belt originally referred to the rich, black soil covering the region, which has been and remains well-suited to agriculture, and was recently designated as a National Heritage Area.

While home to 10 million residents, the DRA region is the most economically distressed part of the United States. Among the region's 252 counties and parishes, 232 are characterized as distressed and 221 are characterized by persistent poverty. Even in non-distressed counties, isolated areas of distress exist with high rates of poverty or unemployment.



221/252

DRA counties and parishes are characterized as in *persistent poverty*

232/252

DRA counties and parishes are characterized as *distressed*

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

- A *distressed county* is one with an unemployment rate of at least 1% higher than the national average for the most recent 24-month period and per capita income of 80% or less of the national per capita income during that period.
- A county in *persistent poverty* is one with poverty rates of 20% of the population, or more, for at least 30 years (per the USDA Economic Research Service).

Despite these economic conditions, millions of Americans across the country rely on the DRA region for agriculture, manufacturing, textiles, and supply chain logistics, as well as natural resources. In addition, the Mississippi River continues to serve as a significant transportation artery. The entire area provides abundant opportunities for tourism, with its many cultural heritage sites, natural beauty, and outdoor recreational activities.

UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY

At this time there is an unprecedented opportunity to make a once in a generation impact, especially in distressed and rural communities. An influx of new federal funding, especially for infrastructure, broadband, and workforce development, represents a historic opportunity to reset the

way we support economic development in the DRA region. Tapping into the momentum of new broader federal initiatives like Justice40 and the Presidential Executive Order on Equity (E.O. 13985), state leaders can employ a more equity-centered design approach to new investments and bring underserved communities into the planning

process. The DRA looks forward to continuing to work with local, state, and federal leaders to bolster investments and increase economic opportunities in this region of our country.



ABOUT THE DELTA REGIONAL AUTHORITY

The DRA was established in 2000 as a formal framework for joint Federal-State collaboration to promote and encourage the economic development of the lower Mississippi River and Alabama Black Belt regions. To fulfill that purpose, the DRA invests in projects supporting transportation infrastructure, basic public infrastructure, workforce training, and business development. The DRA works to help create jobs, build communities, and improve the lives of those who reside in the region.

The DRA's enabling legislation dictates that at least 75% of the DRA's funds must be invested in economically distressed counties and parishes. In addition, half of the DRA's funds must support basic public infrastructure and transportation improvements.

VISION

The DRA envisions the region as a place where people and businesses have access to economic opportunities in vibrant, sustainable, and resilient communities.

MISSION

The DRA's mission is to realize that vision through the practical application of innovative ideas and strategies that will foster inclusive communities, strengthen regional collaboration and productive capacity, achieve sustained, long-term economic development, and produce meaningful opportunities for all people in the DRA region.



THE DRA'S REGIONAL IMPACT

Since the release of RDP III in 2016, the DRA has responded effectively to the region's challenges through its programs and investments. The DRA works to enhance the region's economic viability as a convener of invested regional partners, knowledge hub for economic development funding and resources, and financial backer supporting initiatives that empower and connect local communities.

The DRA invests in a broad range of initiatives that support the four overarching goals of the DRA: investing in public infrastructure, developing local workforces, promoting business growth and entrepreneurship, and supporting sustainable communities. From 2021 to 2022, distressed counties saw a \$20 million increase in funding. With the goal of fostering equity, the DRA has started to track the population demographics of communities where funds are invested (in addition to tracking funding and accrued program benefits in distressed communities). The DRA plans to continually track these metrics and to assess how and where funds are being used to promote equity across the region.

The following initiatives exemplify the progress and impact the DRA has fostered in the region.

STATE'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SEDAP)

As one of DRA'S main investment tools, SEDAP provides direct investments for basic public infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, business development, and workforce development. From 2017-2022, SEDAP projects facilitated these impacts:

- 504,297 Total Families Affected by Infrastructure Projects
- 164,197 Total Individuals Trained
- 35,409 Jobs Created or Retained



DRA SEDAP PROJECT: GUTHRIE-TODD COUNTY, KY

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE FUND (CIF)

CIF complements SEDAP as a primary investment tool for DRA. Investments support projects that address flood control, basic public infrastructure, and transportation infrastructure improvements. Since 2017, CIF projects facilitated these impacts:

- 298,505 Total Families Affected by Infrastructure Projects
- 1,537 Total Individuals Trained
- 8,020 Total Jobs Created or Retained

DELTA DOCTORS

This program increases access to quality healthcare in DRA communities by using a J-1 visa waiver to allow foreign physicians trained in the United States to work in areas with a shortage of health professionals.

- From 2019 to 2021, the DRA sponsored 440 physicians across the region, with 47% of projects taking place in Alabama and Louisiana. ~25% of DRA-sponsored doctors work in a primary care role, with the remainder working across more than 18 specialties.

DELTA REGION COMMUNITY HEALTH SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (DRCHSD)

In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), DRCHSD enhances healthcare delivery by providing technical assistance to critical access hospitals, small rural hospitals, rural health clinics, and other healthcare organizations.

- From 2017 to 2021, the program supported 43 organizations (37 hospitals, 5 Rural Health Clinics, and 1 Federally-Qualified Health Center) in 40 DRA communities across all eight DRA states. A total of 73,220 county jobs were supported due to hospital and clinic employee spending (2017-2021), which represents about 19% of all local jobs in these communities.

INNOVATIVE READINESS TRAINING (IRT) MISSIONS

Through a partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the U.S. Military's reserve forces, the DRA brings medical, dental, and optical care to residents in need of quality healthcare at no cost to the patients. DRA works closely with communities and the DoD to assist with the application process as well as planning and implementation for the two-week medical missions.

- Between 2021 and 2022, DRA IRT missions totaled \$2,055,800 and served over 5,500 patients across nearly 9,280 unique mission services.



IRT MISSIONS (2021-2022)



DRA PROJECT: JOB CORPS - KY

WORKING OPPORTUNITIES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES (WORC)

WORC works with the U.S. Department of Labor to expand the impact of existing workforce development initiatives and to support workforce training and education in rural communities.

- From 2019 to 2022, DRA communities received 44 WORC grants, totaling over \$57 million in grant funding, serving 12,426 participants.

DELTA LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE (DLI)

The DLI was created to empower a corps of leaders with the tools, experiences, and networks to address local and regional challenges across the DRA's footprint. Programs have included the DLI Executive Academy, Delta Leadership Network (DLN), and the Authentic Leadership executive education program

at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

- Between 2016 and 2021, there were 263 DLI and DLI + Harvard Kennedy School Participants. Today, there are over 600 members in DRA's Delta Leadership Network.

DELTA WORKFORCE PROGRAM (DWP)

To complement the WORC partnership, the DRA awards grants, along with pre-award technical assistance workshops and webinars, and post-award technical assistance to grantees.

- From 2019 to 2021, DRA communities received 35 DWP grants that totaled over \$5 million in grant funding and served 82 different communities across the region.

CHALLENGES & NEEDS

While the challenges and needs in DRA communities are not unique to the region, this particular combination of challenges and needs is unique, given that the drivers are so deeply rooted. The challenges and needs are born of a history of multigenerational poverty, unemployment, and outward migration, which the DRA works to address through investments guided by its goals and strategies.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic proved particularly damaging to the region. Five DRA member states (Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana) were among the top ten states with the highest rates of death between March 2020 and December 2022.¹

The pandemic exacerbated the lack of digital connectivity in the region and highlighted the

need for increased infrastructure investments. It also furthered the disparity of available healthcare resources and lack of healthcare professionals, which have reduced the quality of life of residents and potential population growth. This all negatively impacts childhood education, families' well-being, and workforce participation.

DRA counties have experienced a sharp increase in unemployment and a reduced labor force. Unemployment rates have fallen as economic activity has returned to normal; however, labor force participation remains below pre-pandemic levels, with DRA counties and parishes trailing behind DRA states and the nation.² Along with an aging population and “brain drain”, these factors have contributed to continual outward migration and population declines.

5/8

DRA states were among the top ten states with the highest rates of death for COVID-19 (adjusted for pop.; Mar '20 - Dec '22).



“We have seen some the best and brightest leave the Delta due to lack of opportunity and desire for a better quality of life. This also results in a lack of investment because the workforce shortages and shrinking populations make it a risky bet to invest in the Delta.”

DRA RESIDENT

Fortunately, each need points to an opportunity to fulfill that need and, in the process, to address one or more of the underlying challenges. Resilient people residing in the Mississippi Delta and Alabama Black Belt are determined to overcome the forces that have resulted in persistent poverty, unemployment, outward migration, and limited access to healthcare. To support their efforts, the DRA has identified the following specific challenges and needs to be addressed.

AGING PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Public infrastructure in the form of utilities (such as water and sewer facilities), digital communications (primarily broadband and cellular), and transportation improvements (for example, improvements to roads and public transit), remain a major priority for the DRA region. Robust and resilient public infrastructure directly supports residents, attracts and retains businesses, and fosters economic growth.

PERSISTENT POVERTY

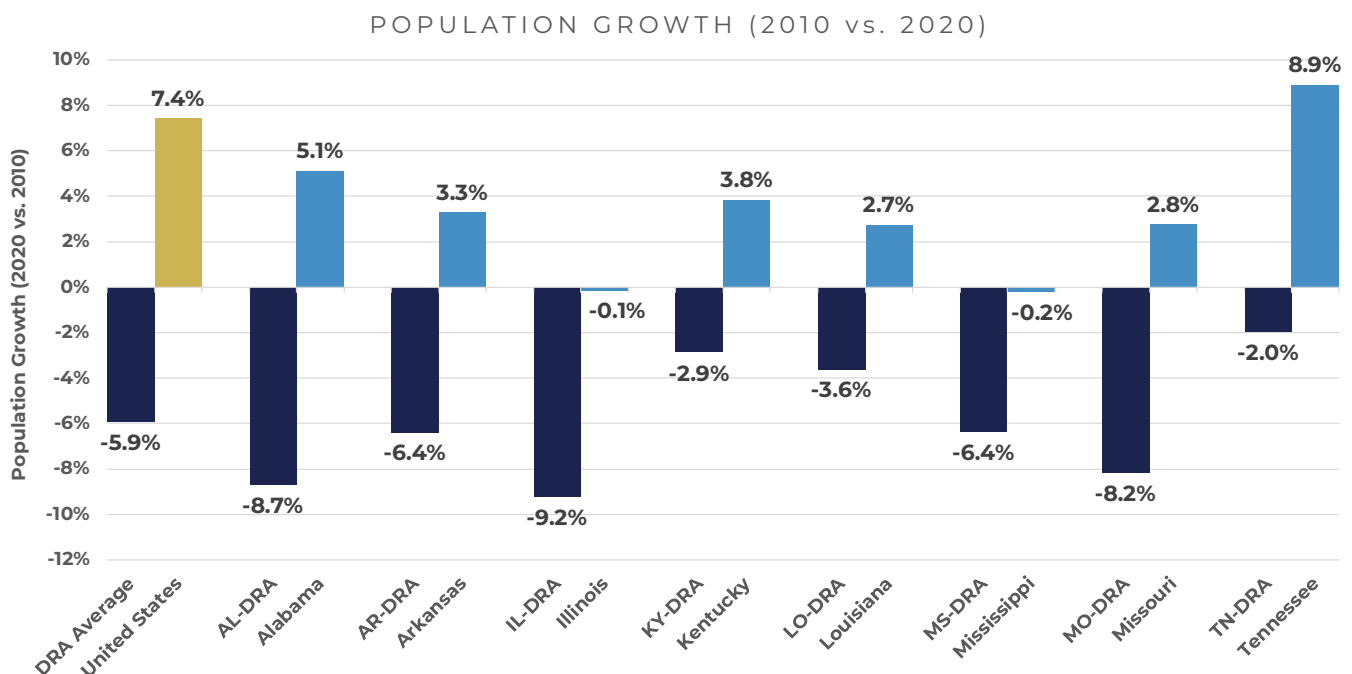
In 2020, one in five DRA residents was estimated to be living below the federal poverty line. This is both a driver and a result of high unemployment; banking, healthcare, and broadband deserts; and lack of affordable housing. Investments that address the root causes of multigenerational poverty will not transform the region overnight, but a sustained and targeted effort can help break the cycle.

Marginalized groups across the DRA region continue to live with the impact and legacy of actions and policies that have profoundly impacted the distribution of land, wealth, and education. These realities have resulted in unequal access to economic opportunity for people of color and for rural residents in general, too many of whom have not been able to fully participate in our nation's growth and prosperity.

POPULATION DECLINE

While most DRA states experienced significant population growth during the last 10 years, DRA counties and parishes within these states saw population decreases that averaged 6%. The ability to attract and retain talent remains essential to the region's future economic vitality.

HISTORICALLY UNDERINVESTED COMMUNITIES



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

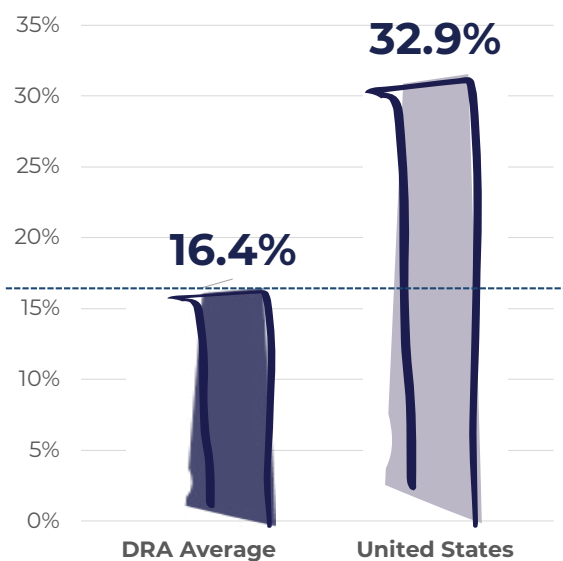
WIDESPREAD HEALTH INEQUITY

91% of DRA counties are Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), while 50 rural hospitals have closed across DRA states since 2005, impacting patients' access to healthcare and leading to job losses in surrounding communities.³ Poor health, resulting from limited access to healthcare, undermines child development, limits workforce participation, and reinforces cycles of poverty. The region's residents need access to quality, affordable healthcare as well as investments in innovative public health practices, such as telehealth.

"Our county has some of the highest rates of chronic disease and is known for its poor health outcomes and health disparities. Rural towns across the area suffer similar conditions: poor access to high-quality care, race-based health disparities, aging populations, and health-adverse socio-environmental factors."

DRA RESIDENT

PERCENT OF POPULATION WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE (2020)



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT GAPS

While the DRA region has comparable rates of high school diploma or equivalent attainment as the national average, DRA counties and parishes have about half the percentage of individuals with a four-year college degree (16.4%) compared with the national average (32.9%). The region's counties and parishes also trail behind their state-level peers by ten percentage points (at 27% of the population).⁴ The ability to attract and retain talent is an essential element of economic vitality that warrants urgent action. Additionally, limited access to affordable and quality housing continues to place a strain on the local workforce. The U.S. now has a deficit of 3.8 million homes, with the greatest supply shortages at low-income price points.⁵

CHALLENGING SMALL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Small businesses account for 99.4% of businesses across DRA member states and employ 46% of the active workforce⁶ emphasizing the importance of cultivating a robust ecosystem for small businesses to thrive, empowering minority-owned businesses, and increasing access to

capital. In a survey to DRA community residents, respondents identified "Business Development and Entrepreneurship" as the top-ranked area that the DRA should focus on to support a strong and health community, further enforcing the acute role for DRA to support local businesses and communities.

LOW LEVELS OF JOB GROWTH

The DRA region suffers from slower job growth than national averages. A survey launched by the DRA in support of this plan found that 66% of respondents believe there are not enough job opportunities in the region. When asked about the greatest challenges to economic development and growth, 19.9% of respondents cited “Providing job opportunities with a living wage (or better)” as the biggest obstacle.

“Although there are several opportunities for jobs; many of them do not pay a living wage. People in my community have to travel to other counties for a living wage.”

DRA RESIDENT

“We possess unmatched resilience forged by living through and recovering from various disasters. We have an undying spirit to succeed and overcome the odds, and we embrace and embody the strong cultural elements of our history.”

DRA RESIDENT

SEVERE CLIMATE EMERGENCIES

In the past five years alone, FEMA declared 233 disasters across the eight DRA states, including hurricanes, tornadoes, tropical storms, severe storms, and floods.⁷ These major disasters, which disproportionately impact low-income and other marginalized communities, have resulted in “severe property damage, deaths, and injuries”⁸ in addition to infrastructure disruptions and failures, such as power outages and limited access to clean water and energy. They have also degraded the natural environments on which many communities rely for economic stability.



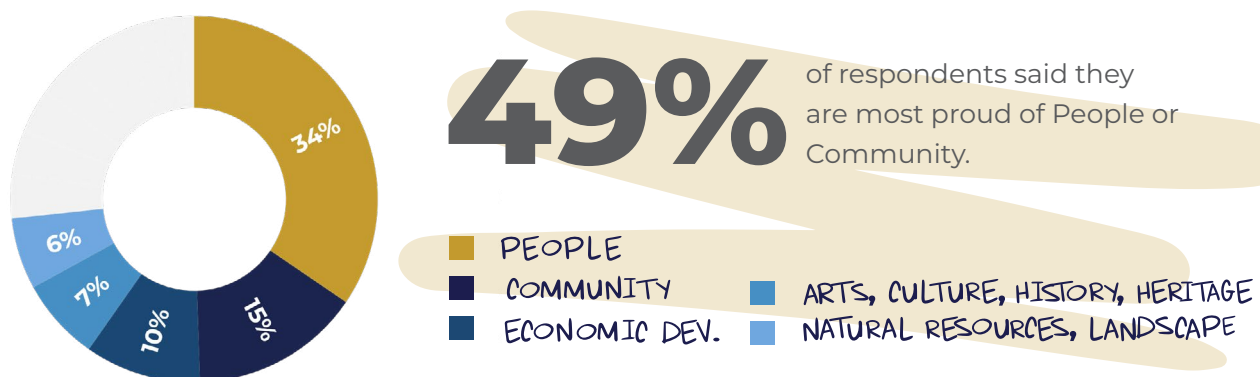
CAPE GIRARDEAU, MO

ASSETS & OPPORTUNITIES

The DRA region remains rich in assets and presents numerous opportunities to enable its residents to navigate toward economic growth and further enrich their lives. The region's assets attract visitors to, and keep residents in, the area. From the Mississippi River and its tributaries, to diverse higher education institutions, to rich historical and cultural traditions, people in the DRA region are justifiably proud of their homeland and the contributions they have made and continue to make to the nation.

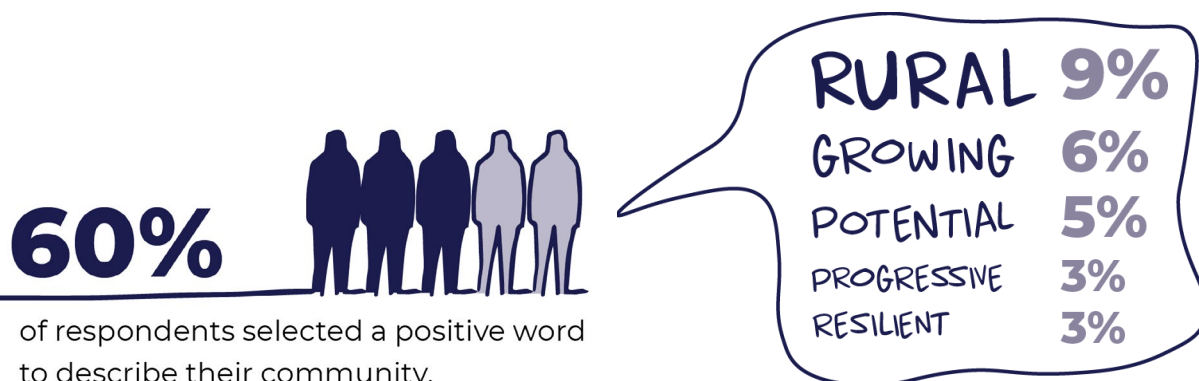
The DRA Community Survey was launched by the DRA to solicit residents' perspectives from across the region on their communities' strengths and challenges. When asked what makes them proud to live in their communities, respondents most often highlighted the people (accounting for more than one-third of responses), their community (described as close-knit, with ample character and charm), and the region's potential for economic development and growth.

WHAT MAKES YOU MOST PROUD TO LIVE IN YOUR COMMUNITY? (DRA COMMUNITY SURVEY)



When asked what one word they would use to describe their community, 60% of respondents cited a positive reference. Of the 166 responses, the top five most submitted words were: rural (9%), growing (6%), potential (5%), progressive (3%), and resilient (3%).

WHAT ONE WORD WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE YOUR COMMUNITY? (DRA COMMUNITY SURVEY)

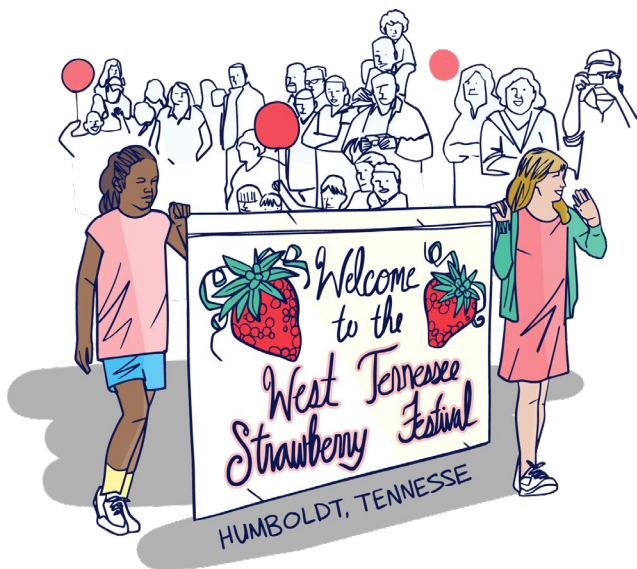


According to observations provided by DRA partners, stakeholders, residents, and Delta Leadership Institute (DLI) participants, the top assets in their areas are:

1. PEOPLE & COMMUNITY

“Without a doubt, the people of the Black Belt Region are its strongest asset. [...] I work on a daily basis with the people of these communities and know firsthand how passionate they are and their willingness to take on new projects and improve current initiatives.

DRA RESIDENT



Residents of the DRA region cherish the people and sense of community that they have created and that has been passed down to them. This feeling of connectedness compels them to stay in the region despite its economic and environmental challenges, and to work to make their communities all that they can be.

Regional Spotlights

Tennessee: Held since 1934, the West Tennessee Strawberry Festival is Tennessee’s largest and longest running festival. For a week, over 75,000 people come together to participate to celebrate and experience the food, fun, and entertainment that West Tennessee has to offer.

Federally Recognized Tribes: DRA is home to five federally recognized Tribes: Tunica-Biloxi Tribe, Poarch Band of Creek Indians, Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Jena Band of Choctaw, and Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, each of which provides a rich cultural heritage and connection to the region.



2. INDUSTRY & EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The DRA region is home to essential agricultural and commercial industries. Its 690 two- and four-year institutions of higher learning,⁹ including 20 HBCUs¹⁰, drive local economies and prepare residents for the workplace.



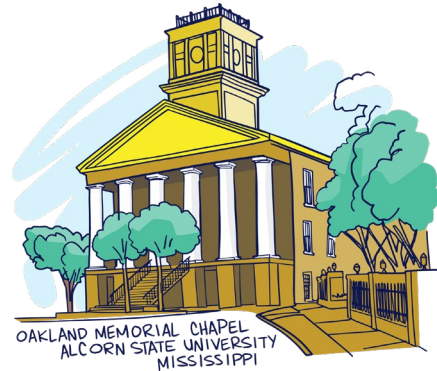
Regional Spotlights

Louisiana: Together, five of Louisiana’s deep-water ports on the lower Mississippi River – New Orleans, South Louisiana, Baton Rouge, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines – comprise the largest port complex in the world, handling more tonnage than any other port system.

"This community college is such a great asset to our area. It gives the parent who wants to go back to school a local option, the high school student dual-credit hours to graduate college sooner, and the fresh graduate from high school a few more low-cost years at home while earning their degree."

DRA RESIDENT

Mississippi: Alcorn State University (Claiborne County) is the nation's oldest historically Black land-grant college. The university was founded in 1871 as a result of Mississippian's efforts to educate the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans.



3. NATURAL RESOURCES & RECREATION

Among the strongest assets are the waterways, forests, and open areas of the DRA region, which provide habitat for wildlife and opportunities for outdoor recreation. As with people and

community, the natural beauty of this area of the country also motivates residents to stay despite the challenges it presents.

Regional Spotlights

Kentucky: The Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge provides a popular destination for residents and visitors for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other recreational opportunities given its biological diversity and abundant wildlife.

Missouri: The Ozark National Scenic Riverways is America's first congressionally designated national park for the preservation of a wild river system. The park encompasses more than 80,000 acres around two spring-fed rivers: the Current River and its major tributary, the Jacks Fork River.

Arkansas: Bayou Bartholomew, considered the longest bayou in the world, begins near Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and flows 359 river miles to the Ouachita River in Sterlington, Louisiana. It provides opportunities for fishing, hunting, and trapping, outdoor recreation, and a home for wildlife.



4. HISTORY & CULTURE

The history and culture of the counties and parishes of the DRA region have given birth to distinctive cuisines, entire musical genres, and civil rights movements. Given its own unique history and culture, the region's contribution to the history and culture of the United States has been profound and, while always evolving, clearly worth preserving.



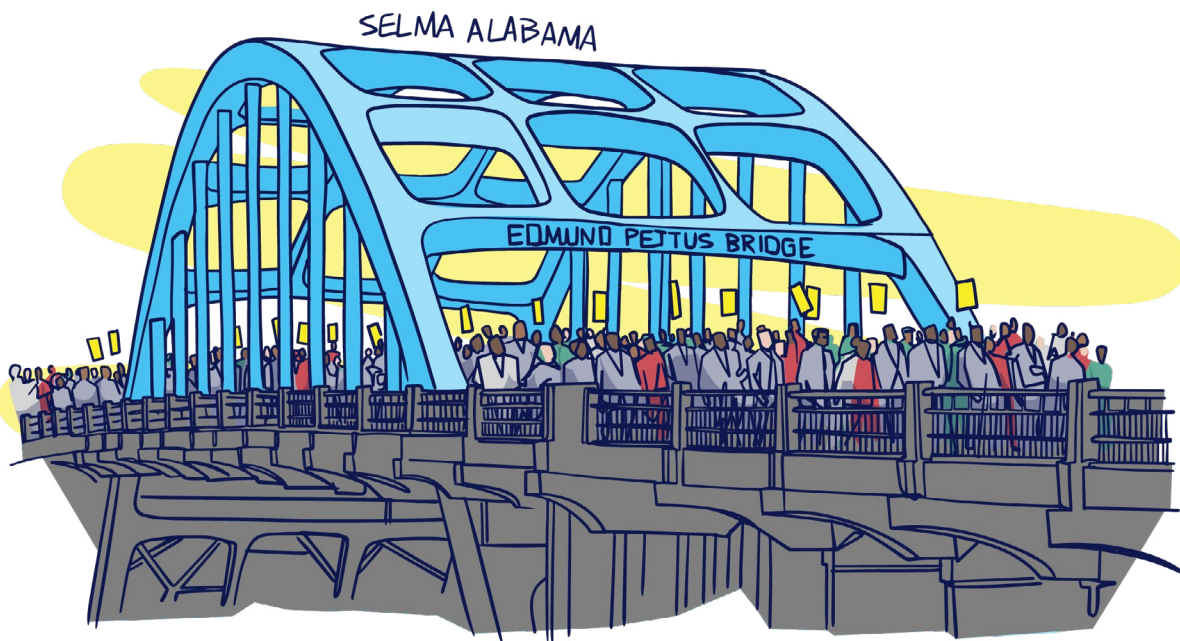
Regional Spotlights

Alabama: The Gee's Bend Quiltmakers, the community's unique patchwork quilting society, preserves a tradition with roots that date back to the 19th century. Drawing from their history, this group of quiltmakers was formally founded in the

1960s as the Freedom Quilting Bee, a workers' cooperative providing economic opportunity and political empowerment for African American women, and endures today. Hailed by the New York Times as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced," Gee's Bend quilts constitute a crucial chapter in the history of American art and today are in the permanent collections of over 20 leading art museums.



Mississippi: The GRAMMY Museum Mississippi is a celebration of the power and history of music. Exhibits, interactive experiences, and films explore great music including genres from rock and hip-hop, to country, classical, Latin, R&B, and jazz and provide visitors the opportunity to engage, learn, and be inspired.



5. WORKFORCE & BUSINESS GROWTH

While beset by unemployment and its resulting poverty, the DRA region is home to a workforce that seeks opportunity and economic growth. There is an opportunity for communities to adopt innovative practices through increased data access, similar to smart cities across the U.S., along with supportive services (e.g., transportation, childcare, and healthcare) for job training success.

Regional Spotlights



Illinois: An example of the local makers and business owners in the DRA region can be found in Southern Illinois where beekeepers, potters, Alpaca farms, and local wineries comprise the Makers' Trail.

Arkansas: Arkansas ranks first among rice-producing states, accounting for more than 40 percent of U.S. rice production—primarily long and medium grain varieties.¹¹

"The people in my community are like none other. Yet they want to live better, have more. With training and education, they are skilled and ready to do just about any job. We simply need more opportunities to display that we don't mind working hard for what we want and to provide a better quality of life for our children."

DRA RESIDENT



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The DRA's guiding principles provide an overarching framework that assists in focusing on initiatives that address and balance long-standing challenges and more immediate needs. These principles can be viewed as setting the overall direction for the DRA's work over the next five years.

MOVE TOWARD EQUITY: Encourage stakeholders to enact programmatic and policy-related changes to prioritize equity across the DRA's programs to reflect DRA's commitment to prioritizing equity in its grants and programs. Enhance regional sensitivity by responding to the unique needs, opportunities, and cultural contexts presented across the region's 252 counties and parishes.

ELEVATE RURAL COMMUNITIES: Prioritize investments in economically distressed communities and in support of inclusive, sustainable rural communities. Support the efforts of local grassroots organizations engaged in furthering progress on DRA strategic goals.

FOSTER TRUE COLLABORATION: Encourage productive partnerships by prioritizing collaboration among states, economic development districts, institutions of higher learning, the private sector, philanthropic organizations, and DRA region residents.

ADOPT LEADING PRACTICES: Promote efficiency and effectiveness by implementing collaborative, innovative, and proven management practices to rapidly reinvest taxpayer dollars in the communities that the DRA serves. This includes being accountable for performance targets and driving partners and grant recipients to shoulder

shared responsibility for meeting those targets.

MEASURE OUTCOMES: Use data to inform decisions regarding grants and investments and track outcomes from those initiatives. Facilitate thought-leadership and data-sharing in order to promote transparency while monitoring emerging challenges and ongoing progress.

LOOK TO THE LONG TERM: Prioritize investments that address the challenges and needs of the DRA region not only today but in the future. Also, promote investments in resilient infrastructure that ameliorate environmental impact.



2023-2027 GOALS & STRATEGIES

As the theme of this plan underscores, the DRA's strategic goals reflect the Authority's fourfold commitment to advancing infrastructure, job creation, business expansion, and local economies. They are related and, to an extent, interdependent in that they support one another. Also, each goal aims to enact specific strategies. For example, infrastructure investments that reinforce resilience and stewardship of resources preserve the region's natural attractiveness. Investments that contribute to residents' health and well-being enable the stability and effectiveness of the workforce.

Within each strategy, the plan highlights example projects and actions that the DRA and its partners may take to advance the corresponding goal. These examples are synthesized from Collaboration Sessions, 1:1 interviews, academic and industry research across the region, innovative case studies, and successful DRA investments and programs. They are illustrative, not comprehensive, and offered to provide inspiration to potential partners and grantees.

Therefore, these goals and their supporting strategies have been carefully conceived to achieve progress toward realizing DRA's vision and fulfilling its mission. Indeed, the example projects and actions aim to convey the extremely broad range of opportunities, initiatives, and activities that the DRA may consider funding.



1 We invest in public infrastructure.

DRA will expand and invest in the resiliency of the region's public infrastructure to improve residents' quality of life and increase economic opportunity. This includes utilities (e.g., water, sewer), digital communications, (e.g., broadband, cellular), and transportation (e.g., roads improvements, public transit).

Strategy 1.1 Invest in resilient public physical infrastructure repair and modernization to provide DRA residents with reliable transportation, utility, telecommunications, digital and other public infrastructure.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Support modernization projects for public utilities (e.g., wastewater treatment plants, sewer systems).
- Deploy new broadband infrastructure, replace antiquated infrastructure, or upgrade or extend existing infrastructure across the region's communities, including support for the establishment of public carrier-neutral submarine cable landing stations.
- Make strategic investments in the region's public transportation infrastructure (e.g., highways, railroads, ports, waterways, dams and bridges, and airports) that further workforce retention or job creation.
- Repair existing transportation infrastructure so that social and economic activities within communities are not disrupted.
- Facilitate resident access to work opportunities within and across communities through improvement of roads, public transit, and public transit alternatives (e.g., carpooling programs, partnerships with ridesharing companies).



DRA PROJECT: WATER CONTROL, BAYOU LAFOURCHE, LA

Strategy 1.1 cont'd

- Support infrastructure investments that are resilient to and will withstand climate emergencies and natural disasters (e.g., severe weather events, disasters, flooding).
- Support dredging and port infrastructure investments that help maintain traffic along the region's waterways and contribute to the economic viability of the ports; this will help strengthen the Mississippi River's attractiveness to national and global businesses by partnering with local stakeholders, such as the Mississippi River Cities and Towns Initiative.

Strategy 1.2 Invest in high-efficiency public infrastructure development to preserve the region's natural heritage and urge natural resource stewardship.

Example projects and actions by DRA partners may include:

- Prioritize clean drinking and surface water and waste management projects aimed at responsible resource management and the removal of waste threatening wetland ecosystems.



- Expand the DRA region's energy infrastructure and production capacity, by emphasizing high efficiency, clean technologies and indigenous resources (e.g., biofuels, water, wind, geothermal, hydroelectric, and solar) wherever possible.
- Provide investments that support clean energy and resilience while creating jobs and rebuilding manufacturing capacity in the DRA region.
- Invest in public infrastructure that will improve physical access to natural assets (e.g., waterways, state parks, local landscapes) and boost eco- and cultural tourism.

Strategy 1.3 Pursue digital inclusion through affordable, quality digital communications infrastructure to enable communities to remain connected to and access critical services and resources.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Construct telecommunications and broadband infrastructure and broadband alternatives (e.g., cable, fiber, wireless, fixed wireless, and satellite) that use commercial grade equipment that will meet current needs and be scalable to meet future public needs.
- Develop infrastructure to reduce the digital divide by constructing middle mile or last mile networks as well as interconnection in rural areas and tribal lands.
- Stimulate access to high-speed broadband services by DRA communities for telehealth, remote learning, telework and entrepreneurship, economic growth, and job creation by endorsing affordable, quality digital infrastructure.
- Repurpose abandoned facilities to use as communal digital learning centers (where residents can access distance learning, telehealth, digital inclusion efforts, economic resources, and telework) by refurbishing the facilities with broadband access and digital devices, as a lower-cost alternative when carrier services are not available in the area.
- Work with major telecommunications and broadband providers in the DRA region to better understand and communicate challenges and opportunities of improving digital infrastructure and discuss opportunities for smaller firms to expand services to support rural areas.



DRA PROJECT: SOUTHERN ILLINOIS REGIONAL AIRPORT

Strategy 1.4 Support environmentally sustainable investments in communities within the region that are disproportionately affected by human-made environmental hazards.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Develop and implement recognized solutions to support communities overburdened by pollution or subject to underinvestment in physical infrastructure.
- Engage in regional planning to improve spatial equity and improve access to public services and encourage business development.
- Reconstruct physical infrastructure that exacerbates socio-economic challenges in communities or hinders community expansion.
- Convene and include low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, and tribal communities in the creation of sustainable, inclusive environmental public infrastructure planning.
- Work to invest in programs that promulgate environmental sustainability.¹²

DRA SUCCESS STORY: Hernando Green T. Road Widening in Mississippi

Hernando, Mississippi (DeSoto County)

To accommodate a new 1 million square-foot grocery distribution facility creating 79 new full-time jobs, the City of Hernando agreed to widen Green T Road. Green T Road is a service road adjacent to Interstates 55 and 269, which are main thoroughfares in Mississippi's 3rd most populous county. This infrastructure improvement was necessary for highway safety to allow for the proper transfer of trucking access from state Highway 51 to Interstate Highway 269. Preparing for a 2023 operational deadline, the bids for work came in at approximately \$1 million over budget due to market increases in prices of asphalt and other materials.

DRA funds filled the gap with a \$986,000 award that allowed the project to be completed as planned and on schedule.



2 We nurture local workforce ecosystems.

DRA will improve networks of agencies, organizations, businesses, and educational institutions providing workforce development opportunities. It will promote access to services, funding, and programs that enable career stability, including healthcare, housing, education, and food security.

Strategy 2.1 Invest in workforce development programs (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, programs at technical and community colleges) tailored to regional needs, designed to support residents to enter and remain in the workforce, and structured to connect participants to existing jobs and/or attract new employment opportunities.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Expand workforce development programs to provide industry-specific training (e.g., clean energy, broadband installation and maintenance, healthcare), strengthen talent pipelines, enhance industry clusters, and support regional economic development.
- Build on successful programs that align vocational education, professional certification programs, skills training, and apprenticeship/internship opportunities with local, regional, and state-wide industry economic development efforts and provide incentives for trainees to stay in their communities.
- Convene and partner with federal, state, and local agencies as well as regional employers and partners (e.g., state workforce development programs, regional workforce boards, universities, technical and community colleges) to create benchmarks for workforce development needs in the DRA region, share best practices across counties and parishes, and leverage available funds.
- Support programs that develop mentorship networks and opportunities in workforce development.
- Pursue strategic initiatives that strengthen partnerships between industry and higher education institutions to enable workforce and regional economic development.
- Support the creation and promotion of an online knowledge bank of information on future employment opportunities aimed at educating parents, students, and teachers about career options.

Strategy 2.2 Equip and enable an inclusive and equitable workforce today for multi-generational impacts and a stronger workforce in the future.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Invest in the education, certification, and career growth of educational professionals, especially those who care for and educate pre-k through 3rd grade students to increase children's likelihood of pursuing a post-secondary education, future earnings, and economic mobility and help alleviate persistent poverty.¹³
- Fund wrap-around support services that address barriers to participation and increase enrollment in and completion of critical training programs. These may include financial difficulty, inadequate childcare, family care-giving responsibilities, personal or family health concerns, lack of transportation, and/or other barriers to participation.
- Expand access to reliable public transportation to enable more workers to access employment sites.
- Develop and expand public/private partnerships to provide low-cost transportation service, ridesharing, carpooling, and/or bus pass benefits for transportation to and from employment sites and to ease "first and last mile access" (the way riders arrive to and leave from stops).
- Support programs that focus on work readiness, technical skills, and traditional and digital literacy skills across age groups, particularly those that leverage partnerships with higher education institutions to simultaneously build talent pipelines (e.g., "Grow-Your-Own" programs).
- Support local strategic economic development projects, inclusive of planning for affordable housing needs to support workforce development.

Strategy 2.3 Increase access to affordable, high-quality health and wellbeing services to improve employees' health and support communities' economic prosperity.¹⁴

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Invest in programs and initiatives that increase the number of healthcare providers in Healthcare Provider Shortage Areas (e.g., J-1 visa waivers), with an additional focus on rural areas and mental health and substance use disorder support professionals.



Strategy 2.3 cont'd

- Promote healthcare education to encourage residents' use of health care resources for higher labor-force participation and healthier people across the DRA region.
- Increase access to medical, dental, and optical care for DRA residents, particularly in rural areas, through the existing partnership with U.S. Department of Defense through Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) missions.
- Enhance healthcare delivery and boost economic development in select rural communities through intensive technical assistance to healthcare providers through the Delta Region Community Health Systems Development - Technical Assistance Program.
- Support the creation and promotion of an online knowledge bank of information to increase awareness of existing healthcare programs that support disadvantaged populations (e.g., persistent poverty communities, rural communities, and historically marginalized populations).
- Invest in programs that expand access to mental health and substance use disorder services so DRA residents can access and retain jobs.
- Convene federal, state, and local agencies to design and implement new public-private strategies for improving health access and outcomes.
- Prioritize investment in projects with a direct connection between economic development and healthy food access in response to the White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health.



WORC grant for a UWA's Economic and Workforce Development Division, Leveraging Interconnected Networks for Change and Sustainability (LINC)

DRA WORC GRANT - UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA (UWA)

DRA SUCCESS STORY: Commercial Driver's License Training in Kentucky

Madisonville, Kentucky (Hopkins County)

DRA funds were used to purchase a truck with a sleeper area, which was converted into a three-person seat to facilitate more individuals traveling together for Commercial Driver's License (CDL) driving practice and testing at Madisonville Community College (MCC). The availability of CDL training was advertised through promotional wrap placed on the truck. A portion of funds were budgeted for supplies such as cones to set up a driving course and traditional marketing materials such as flyers, handouts, etc. MCC uses a parking lot on its Technical Campus for driving practice and instruction as students cannot drive on a public road with a CDL permit.

From July 2020 to October 2021, the college enrolled 50 students in CDL training with a 96% completion rate. Thirty-six of the students received tuition funding.

The staff of MCC recognized a workforce development need and were able to meet this need due in part to the financial support provided by the DRA. The MCC CDL training project funded by DRA has made the City of Madisonville a more desirable place for people to live and work by supporting training and education in this area.



3 We promote business growth and entrepreneurship.

DRA will strengthen the competitiveness of the region's employers and attract new employers to the region. Support the long-term growth of micro and small businesses, especially those that promote local industries such as tourism.

Strategy 3.1 Invest in programs and business opportunities that address critical challenges facing DRA communities while providing opportunities to attract and retain talent locally.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Expand partnership opportunities between micro businesses and local institutions, such as schools, community colleges, and universities, to provide services – such as website development, website design – at a discounted or no cost.
- Support entrepreneurs, small and micro businesses, programs, and investments that focus on high-growth industry sectors (e.g., health, technology, energy) or high-demand regional challenges (e.g., childcare, food access, clean energy and technology, transportation).
- Increase rural access to the benefits of unique innovation assets (e.g., startup incubators) found within urban centers for greater regional collaboration.
- Address entrepreneur and small and micro business physical space needs (e.g., makerspaces, incubators, shared working spaces, façade and signage needs) that also support community space needs.
- Support the education, creation, and/or implementation of Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) to ensure measurable, local benefits (e.g., local hiring commitments, job training, funding for community services) for DRA residents while reducing risk and increasing access to subsidies for developers on large development projects.
- Support state and local economic development organizations and local development districts in their efforts to put in place deal-ready sites for business recruitment and expansion projects.

Strategy 3.2 Provide technical assistance and other support for entrepreneurship and small business development in the DRA region.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Develop programs and resources to support small and micro businesses and historically marginalized business owners in navigating business registration and certification processes, such as dealing with licensing and codes, applying for loans, and obtaining minority-owned business certification.
- Support the development of an entrepreneurial network to provide mentorship, coaching, and/or expertise to micro or small businesses, such as connections to vendors for new product development and resources for minority-owned businesses to become more competitive when responding to RFPs, especially for those in rural communities.
- Encourage sustainability in business development initiatives to ensure businesses can endure for the long-term.

Strategy 3.3 Expand access to business capital (e.g., revolving loan funds, micro loans, angel investing) to support entrepreneurship, local, small and micro business innovation, and economic equity.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Facilitate access to seed and growth capital and credit, including micro-loans, revolving loan funds, and loans with flexible interest rates, especially for marginalized groups and minority-owned businesses.
- Provide personal finance education, especially related to credit union and banking systems, and work with vested community partner to promote access to affordable banking services.
- Encourage angel investing in rural businesses and local investment into small and micro businesses, especially funding mechanisms that pool resources like community foundations.



Strategy 3.3 cont'd

- Support entrepreneurs in growing microenterprises and/or tapping into federal funding sources.
- Facilitate public/private partnerships to create loan funds and offer credit enhancement programs with Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) that increase access to credit bridge gaps in collateral shortfalls for historically marginalized groups across the DRA footprint.

DRA SUCCESS STORY: Business Expansion and Job Growth in Sharp County, Arkansas

Ash Flat, Arkansas (Sharp County)

Emerson Professional Tools officially opened their \$35 million Arkansas facility on July 29, 2022. The company re-fitted the former 277,000 square foot Cherokee Frame manufacturing plant for its professional tools business, with a primary focus on producing Greenlee specialty tools and related products for electrical tradespeople across North America.

The Delta Regional Authority invested \$307,000 into this project in Sharp County, Arkansas which helped leverage an additional nearly \$12 million in other federal funding with over \$24,000,000 in company investment to bring 285 new jobs to this northcentral Arkansas area. The State of Arkansas contributed Community Development Block Grant funds for construction and equipment purchase with the Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration contributing funds for construction.

Industrial revenue bonds (IRBs), commonly known as “Act 9 Bonds” in Arkansas, provided the Company with competitive financing options for property, plant and equipment expenses. Under Arkansas Act 9 of 1960, cities and counties are authorized to issue IRBs to benefit private companies.

“Today is the culmination of the strong partnerships we have forged over the past two years with local, state, and federal organizations, and we deeply appreciate their support,” Craig Sumner, president of Emerson’s professional tools business said. “We are looking forward to establishing strong ties here in the Ash Flat community and taking a leadership role in developing the next generation of skilled manufacturing workers in Arkansas.”



4 We support community placemaking and capacity-building.

DRA will expand efforts to enhance sustainable and inclusive local placemaking, quality of life, and community capacity. This includes enabling community connectedness, increased efficacy, leadership development, and the ability to receive federal support, especially with under-resourced groups.

Strategy 4.1 Provide for leadership development among local leaders and organizations by investing in education, skill development, and pilot initiatives.

Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:

- Develop new strategic initiatives and continue existing programs that develop leadership, administrative, budgetary, and program management skills among local leaders.
- Invest in professional training opportunities for individuals employed by local government, educational institutions, small businesses, and non-governmental organizations that advance sustainable economic development.
- Support the development of a wider array of leaders across the region, including youth and emerging business and community leaders.



DELTA LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE (DLI)



Strategy 4.1 cont'd

- Engage with local residents, such as volunteer elected officials, small business leaders, local non-profits, or individual citizens, and perform outreach activities to reach a diverse range of community leaders and solicit input to co-create equitable and sustainable economic development solutions.
- Nurture community leaders by organizing workshops, hosting collaborative sessions, and building networks of professionals striving to accelerate prosperity across the region.

Strategy 4.2 Create support mechanisms to enable communities to be competitive when applying for and increasing the ability to receive financial support.**Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:**

- Provide funding to organizations, community groups, small businesses, and local governments for grant-writing activities (e.g., staff, SMEs/consultants, technical assistance, application knowledge-sharing).
- Develop training and educational resources on grant writing, fund access and management, program management, and implementation to local development districts (LDDs), small businesses, and community organizations.
- Increase community ability to respond to macro-economic trends by documenting socio-economic development best practices, supporting local data collection and reporting, and fostering collaboration between city and state leaders during development planning.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing and coalition building of government, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and grassroots activists to implement large-scale projects and cultivate communities to become a locus of upward economic mobility.

Strategy 4.3 Enhance collaboration and social capital to empower residents to drive change within and outside of their communities.**Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:**

- Convene and cultivate strong partnerships among under-resourced groups stimulating regionally relevant social and economic initiatives (e.g., HBCUs, Indigenous Environmental Network, National Black Farmer's Association) to encourage local prosperity.
- Participate in creative approaches to introduce assets from DRA communities to the global economy (e.g., Sister Cities International, city-state global trade agreements).

Strategy 4.3 cont'd

- Provide technical assistance to community organizations, institutions, and businesses in order to stimulate access to and adoption of high-speed broadband services by DRA communities for telehealth, remote learning, telework and entrepreneurship, economic growth, and job creation.
- Invest in robust social impact measurement, data analysis and reporting to share information on collective successes and opportunities.

Strategy 4.4 Invest in local grassroots efforts that provide support for creative placemaking and projects that celebrate local culture in order to enrich the quality of life and quality of place for current and future residents.**Example projects and actions by the DRA and its partners may include:**

- Highlight the stories of successful downtown revitalization efforts and other place-making initiatives across the DRA region that have yielded benefits in the form of increased economic activity and talent attraction.
- Work with local and state organizations to better connect residents and visitors to tourism-based events and festivals.
- Preserve and promote DRA region's natural ecosystems to increase eco-tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities for residents and visitors.
- Facilitate the transformation of under-utilized physical spaces into community gathering spaces or cultural centers.
- Use the Local Foods, Local Places program and other initiatives to support the region's farmers and farmers markets, revitalize DRA communities, and increase access to locally grown foods.
- Promote attractions that leverage the DRA region's unique cultural heritage (e.g., civil rights history, the Mississippi River, the Mississippi Blues Trail) and contribute to regional branding as a great place to visit.
- Support projects that provide affordable working space for artisans and creative workers.
- Invest in the preservation of DRA communities' dynamic arts, cultural, and heritage traditions.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Love Your Block Program

Jackson, TN



"In 2022, the City of Jackson, TN was selected as one of eight U.S. cities to receive a \$100,000 grant to participate in Love Your Block (LYB), a grant program that brings city leaders and residents together to build stronger neighborhoods, one block at a time. Through the program, the City of Jackson, TN awards mini-grants to residents and community partners to reduce distressed properties and spur neighborhood-driven change. LYB provides competitive mini-grants to community groups to purchase the supplies needed to implement local, volunteer-led projects.

In the first year, the team completed 61 home repairs across 9 projects in East Jackson. Repairs like these help low income and elderly homeowners stay in their homes, increase neighborhood and civic pride, improve the appearance of the neighborhood, and increase property values. 150 volunteers were engaged in the program, over 17,176 pounds of trash were removed from target neighborhoods, and over \$26,000 of resident cost-savings through volunteer labor and donations were achieved. We are preparing to launch year two of the program this spring, with an expansion into more neighborhoods in Jackson that are designated as qualifying census tracts."

DRA Resident, TN

MEASURING CHANGE

To concretize its goals and ascertain that the DRA is assisting communities in meaningful ways, DRA aims to adopt measurable targets related to those goals. The DRA is committed to achieving four cross-cutting performance targets through investments in its four Strategic Goals.

These targets relate to the broad outcomes that the DRA is working to achieve over the 2023 to 2027 plan period. Progress toward those targets will assist communities within the region in their efforts to navigate economic ebbs and flows and to enrich the lives of their residents. The extent to which various goals align with targets will vary, depending on which grant projects and actions are funded. Based on the illustrative projects outlined in the 2023-2027 Goals & Strategies section, all performance targets align to each of the four strategic goals.

PERFORMANCE TARGETS

- 1. Families with improved access to infrastructure and/or services.
- 2. People trained.
- 3. Jobs created.
- 4. Jobs retained.

DRA is also committed to several administrative and operational actions such as improving their grant application portal; advancing principles of the Justice40 Initiative; revising programmatic guidelines to increase engagement with HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes; devising a more inclusive stakeholder outreach strategy and revising programmatic guidelines to increase engagement with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups; and revising programmatic guidelines to increase investment in persistent poverty counties.

INDICATORS OF PROGRESS

In contrast to the performance targets that the DRA will use to measure the outcomes of investments as they relate to its overall strategic goals, these indicators of progress reflect more macro-level outcomes. These indicators relate to socio-economic progress and can be measured at the county/parish or higher level.

By tracking related socio-economic data, the DRA can develop information that will inform and guide future initiatives and programs related to regional and community economic growth and development.

Sample Socio Indicators of Progress	Sample Economic Indicators of Progress
Population, age, race, and ethnicity	Employment and unemployment rates
Education rates Population health rates	Industry employment rates
Mortality rates	Labor force participation rates
Access to basic infrastructure (e.g., utilities, water, cellular)	Incomes and earnings
Transportation and commuting patterns	Poverty rates

THE FUTURE OF THE DRA REGION

Despite the headwinds that communities faced due to COVID-19 and 233 FEMA-declared disasters, there is every reason for optimism in the DRA region. The people in our communities continue to prove their resilience and industriousness. The river and the land remain vital to the area, to the DRA states, and to the nation. By many measures, the region has made important advances.

However, much work remains before us. That work will aim to fulfill the four strategic goals set forth in this plan: to invest in public infrastructure, nurture local workforce ecosystems, promote business growth and entrepreneurship, and support community placemaking and capacity-building.

Like the cycles of nature, economic cycles — both short term and long term — will continue as we move forward as a region and as a nation. The communities within the DRA region will also persevere.

To do that, however, those communities will need the support of stakeholders at the local and state

levels. Each state must remain aware of the current and potential resources and contributions of its DRA counties or parishes, and of the role that state-level decisions play in the fortunes of rural communities. In that way, they can enable those communities to move more rapidly toward achieving the DRA's strategic goals.

The DRA's vision and mission are timeless. The Authority envisions the region as a place where people and businesses in vibrant, sustainable, and resilient communities have access to economic opportunities. Consequently, the DRA's mission is to engage in the practical application of innovative ideas and strategies that will foster inclusive communities, strengthen regional collaboration and productive capacity, achieve sustained, long-term economic development, and produce opportunities for all people in the DRA region.

The DRA warmly invites all stakeholders in the region, and beyond it, to join us in pursuit of this vision and in the work that supports our mission.



APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A: COMMUNITY SURVEY DATA

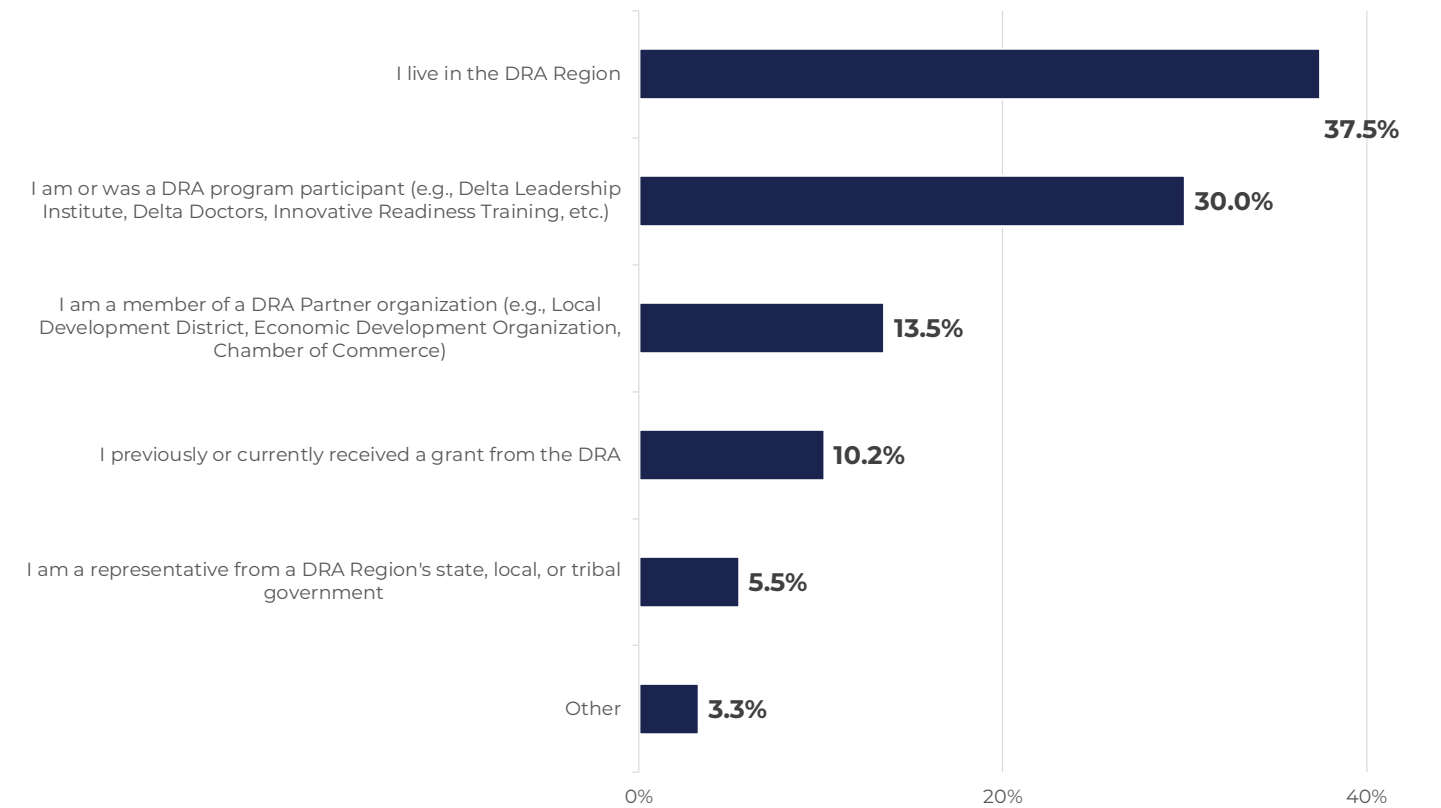
As part of developing the RDP IV, the DRA launched a 14-question survey in November 2022 requesting resident perspectives on their communities as well as the respondents’ demographic information. Participants were asked to respond to a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions.

DRA shared the survey with people living in the DRA region (e.g., DLI alumni, DRA community members, members of LDDs, government representatives, and others) via electronic mediums such as email, social media, and network listservs. Recipients were also encouraged to share the survey with others in the region. The survey generated a total of 166 responses from community members across the eight-state region. All responses were synthesized to produce this report.

Question 1: What is your relationship to DRA?

Most respondents (67%) either live in the DRA region or are currently or were previously a DRA program participant.

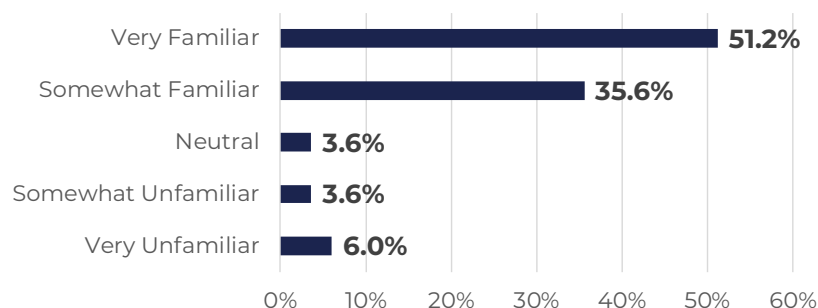
Q1: WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO DRA?



Question 2: How familiar are you with DRA's programs and projects?

A significant majority (86.8%) of respondents are either very or somewhat familiar with DRA's programs and projects.

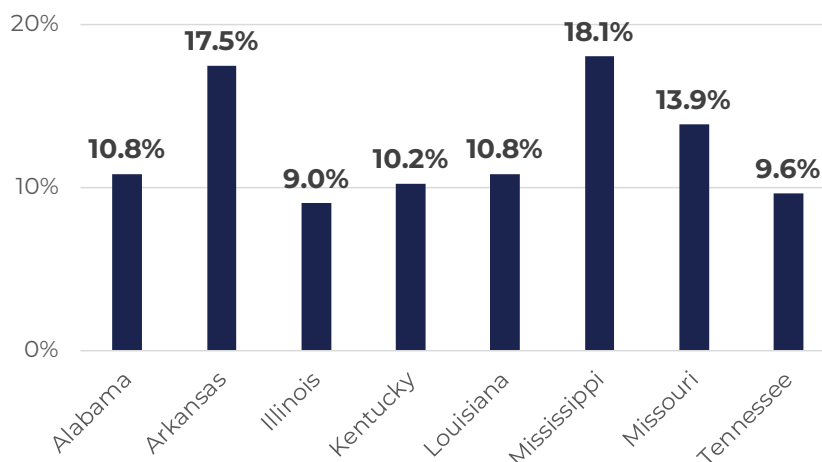
Q2: HOW FAMILIAR ARE YOU WITH DRA'S PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS?



Question 3: In which state do you currently live?

The greatest number of responses came from Mississippi (18.1%), Arkansas (17.5%), and Missouri (13.9%), followed by Alabama and Louisiana (10.8%), Kentucky (10.2%), Tennessee (9.6%), and Illinois (9.0%).

Q3: IN WHICH STATE DO YOU CURRENTLY LIVE?



Question 4: In which county, parish, or tribal lands do you currently live?

Respondents represented the following counties and parishes (note: no tribal lands were shared).

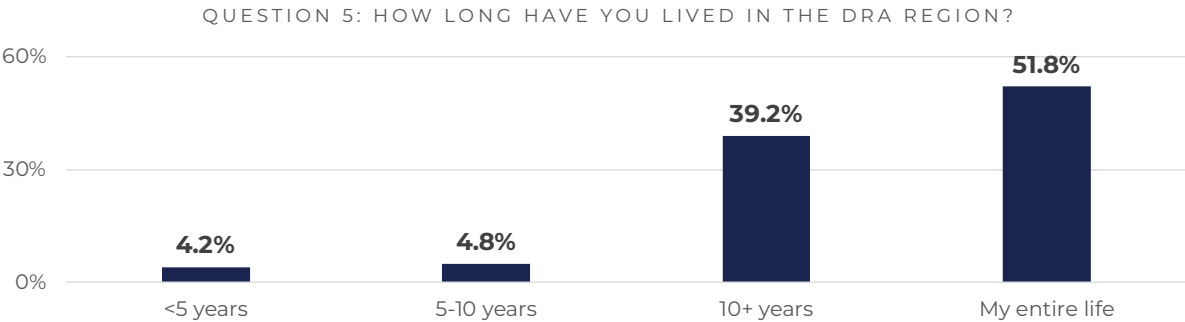
Question 4 cont'd.

Q4: IN WHICH COUNTY, PARISH, OR TRIBAL LANDS DO YOU CURRENTLY LIVE?

Alabama	Arkansas	Illinois	Kentucky	Louisiana	Mississippi
Conecuh	Boone	Franklin	Calloway	Catahoula	Adams
Dallas	Chicot	Hardin	Henderson	East Baton Rouge	Attala
Greene	Columbia	Jackson	Hopkins	Franklin	Bolivar
Wilcox	Craighead	Johnson	McCracken	Lincoln	Coahoma
Marengo	Drew	Pulaski		Morehouse	Copiah
Montgomery	Faulkner	Saline		Orleans	De Soto
	Greene	Union		Ouachita	Hinds
	Marion	Williamson		Richland	Holmes
	Mississippi			St. John the Baptist	Jefferson
	Monroe			Vermilion	Jefferson Davis
	Phillips				Lafayette
	Poinsett				Madison
	Pulaski				Pike
	Randolph				Rankin
	Union				Warren
	White				Washington
Missouri	Tennessee				
Butler	Chester				
Cape Girardeau	Gibson				
Dunklin	Haywood				
New Madrid	Henry				
Perry	Madison				
Phelps	Obion				
Ripley	Shelby				
Rural	Tipton				
Scott	Weakley				
Stoddard					
Washington					
Wayne					

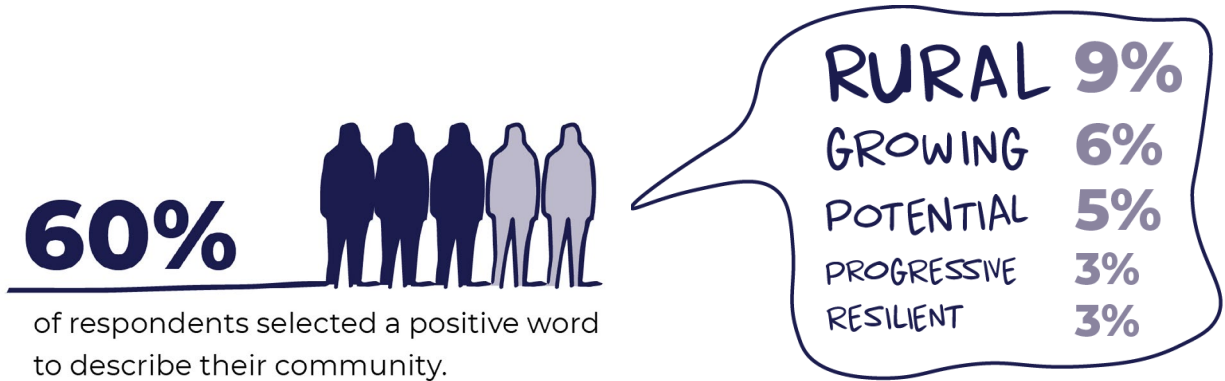
Question 5: How long have you lived in the DRA region?

More than 90% of respondents have lived in the DRA region for over ten years. Only 4.2% have lived in the region for less than 5 years, while 4.8% of respondents have lived there between 5 and 10 years.



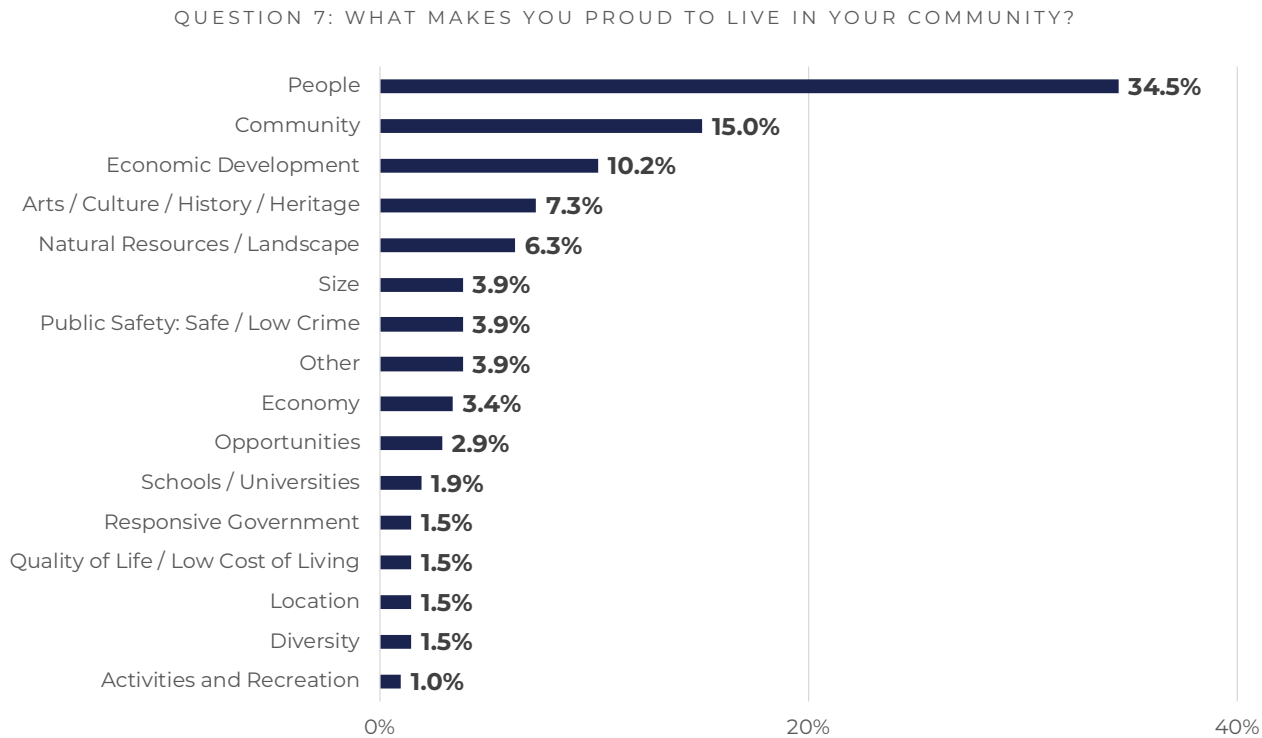
Question 6: What one word would you use to describe your community?

A majority of respondents (60%) used positive words to describe their communities, while 23% of participants shared words with negative sentiments and 16% of participants shared words with neutral sentiments. Of the 166 responses, the top five most submitted words were: rural (9%), growing (6%), potential (5%), progressive (3%), and resilient (3%).



Question 7: What makes you proud to live in your community?

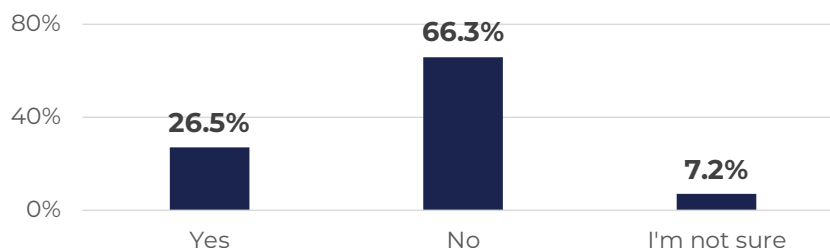
More than one-third of all respondents (34.5%) referred to the People as the aspect of their community they are most proud of. This includes features such as caring, collaborative, resilient, and friendly. The second most common theme was Community, including the charm, character, advocacy and involvement, and close-knit features. The Economy – including ongoing growth and potential – was the third most frequently referenced source of pride.



Question 8: Are there enough job opportunities in your community?

Two-thirds of respondents believe there are not enough job opportunities in their community.

QUESTION 8: ARE THERE ENOUGH JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

**Question 9: When it comes to economic development and growth, what are your community's greatest challenges? Choose up to three.**

When asked what the greatest challenges are to economic development and growth, the topmost selected areas were: "Providing job opportunities with a living wage (or better)" (19.9%); "Providing adequate infrastructure" (15.0%), and "Residents moving away to seek job opportunities elsewhere" (14.8%).

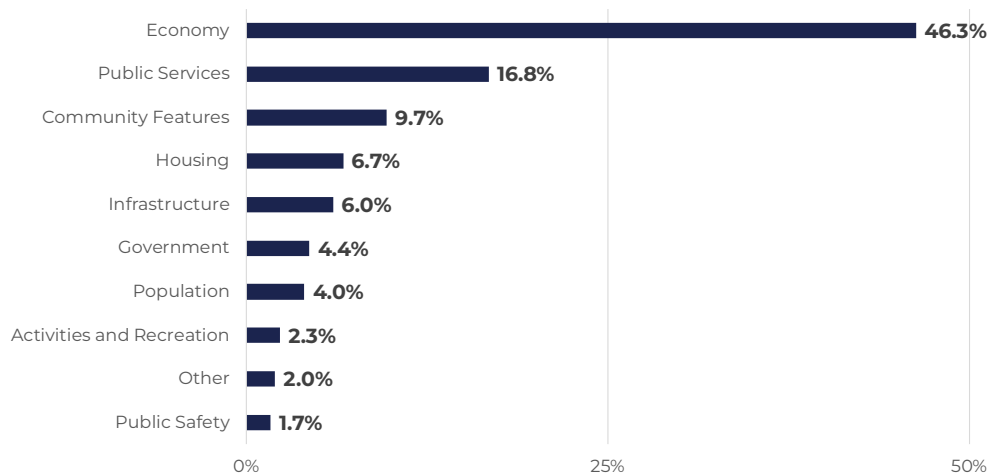
QUESTION 9: WHEN IT COMES TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH, WHAT ARE YOUR COMMUNITY'S GREATEST CHALLENGES? CHOOSE UP TO THREE.



Question 10: When you think of a strong, healthy future for your community, what words come to mind?

Almost half of all respondents (46.3%) referred to the Economy when considering a strong, healthy future for the community. This included topics such as job opportunities; economic growth, development, and diversity; sustainable growth; and workforce development. Public Services – such as health care and education – was the second most referenced theme. Various community features (e.g., resilient, inclusive, forward-thinking, and hopeful) were also highlighted.

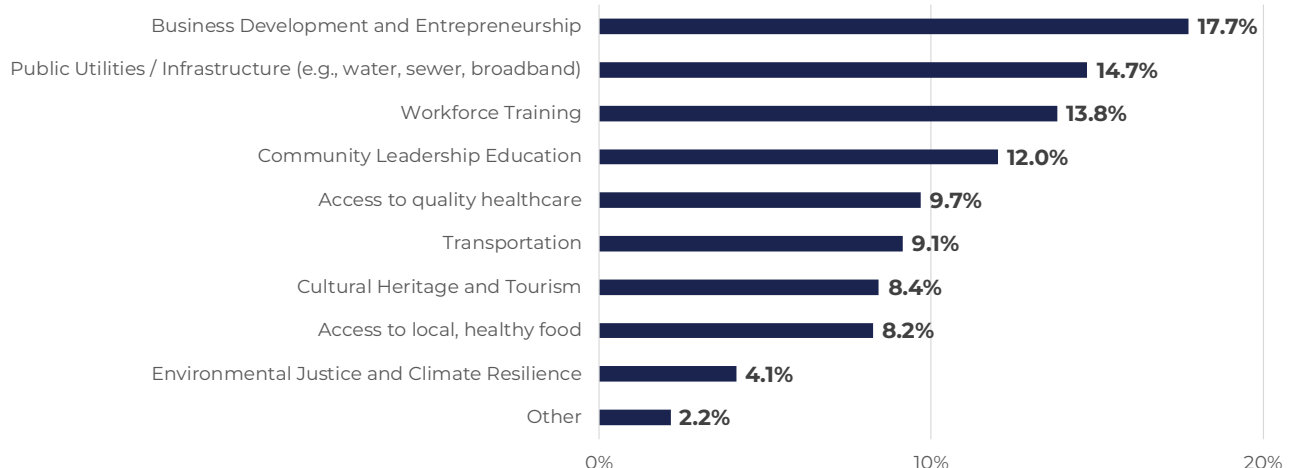
QUESTION 8: ARE THERE ENOUGH JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



Question 11: Which of the following should the Delta Regional Authority focus on that would support your vision of a strong, healthy community?

Respondents selected “Business Development and Entrepreneurship”, “Public Utilities/ Infrastructure”, and “Workforce Training” as the top three areas that the DRA should focus on to support a strong, healthy community.

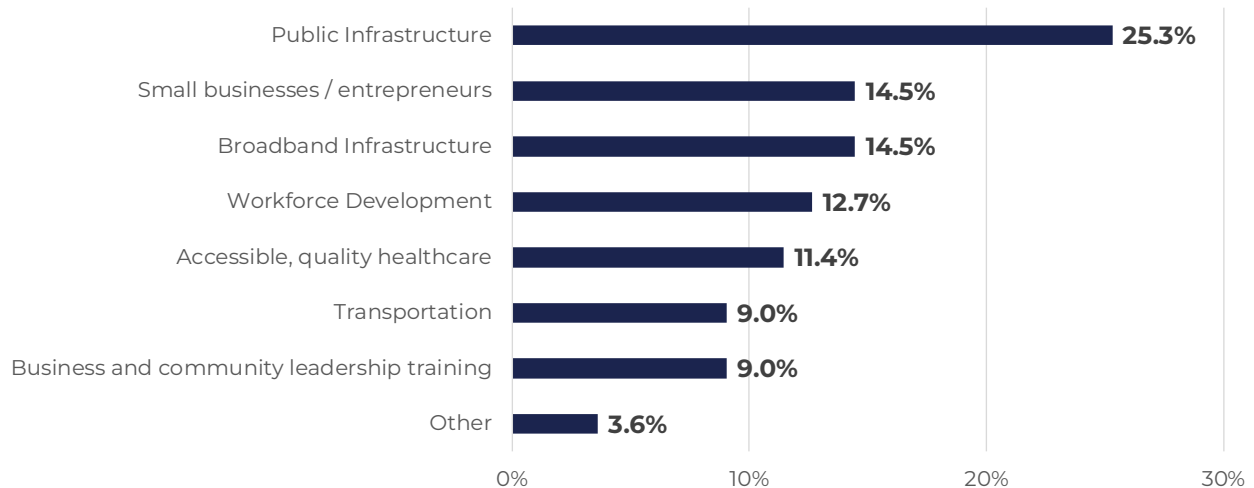
QUESTION 11: WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SHOULD THE DELTA REGIONAL AUTHORITY FOCUS ON THAT WOULD SUPPORT YOUR VISION OF A STRONG, HEALTHY COMMUNITY?



Question 12: When it comes to Federal programs and resources, what does your community need funding for the most?

More than one in four respondents identified Public Infrastructure as the most significant community need.

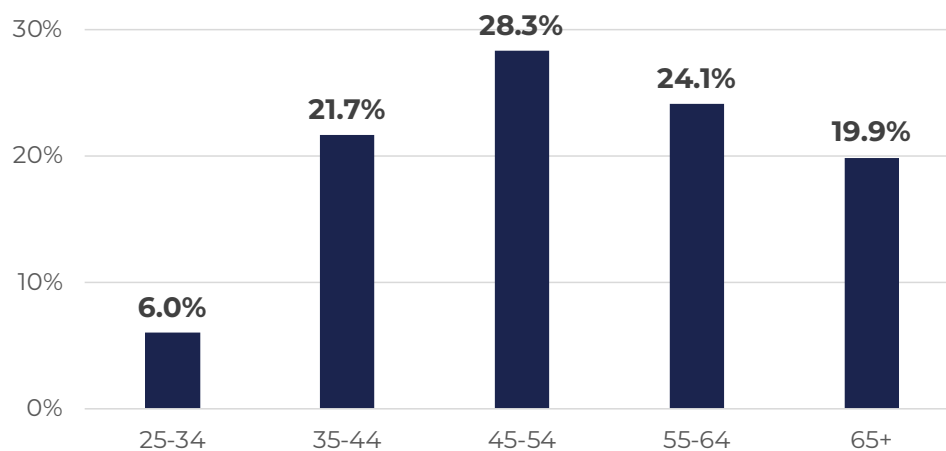
QUESTION 12: WHEN IT COMES TO FEDERAL PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES, WHAT DOES YOUR COMMUNITY NEED FUNDING FOR THE MOST?



Question 13: What is your age?

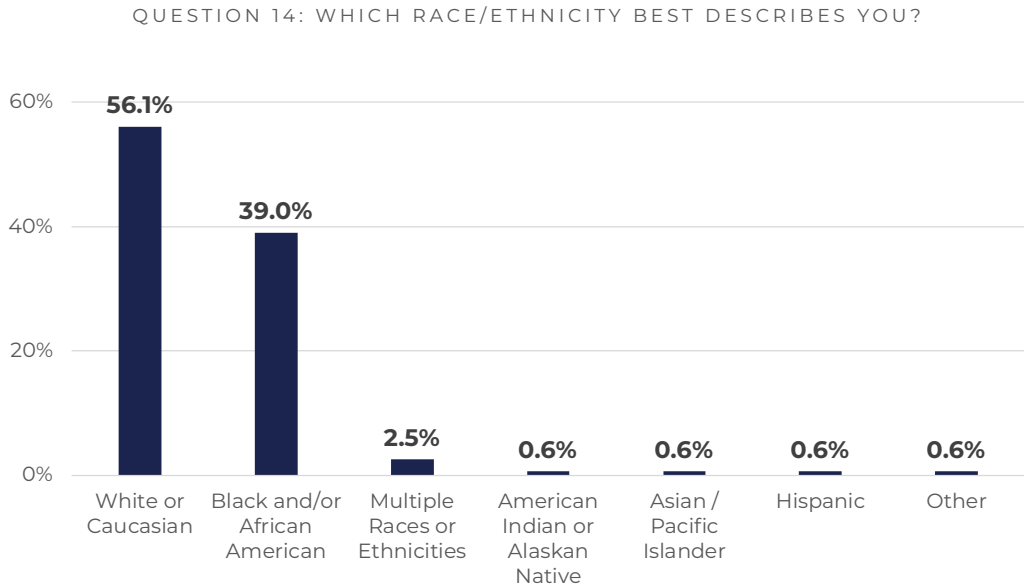
Most respondents were over the age of 45, with most respondents identifying in the 45-54 year old range.

QUESTION 13: WHAT IS YOUR AGE?



Question 14: Which race/ethnicity best describes you?

More than half of all respondents (56.1%) identified as White or Caucasian, followed by 39.0% identifying as Black and/or African American. Less than 5% of respondents identified as multiple races or ethnicities, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or Other.



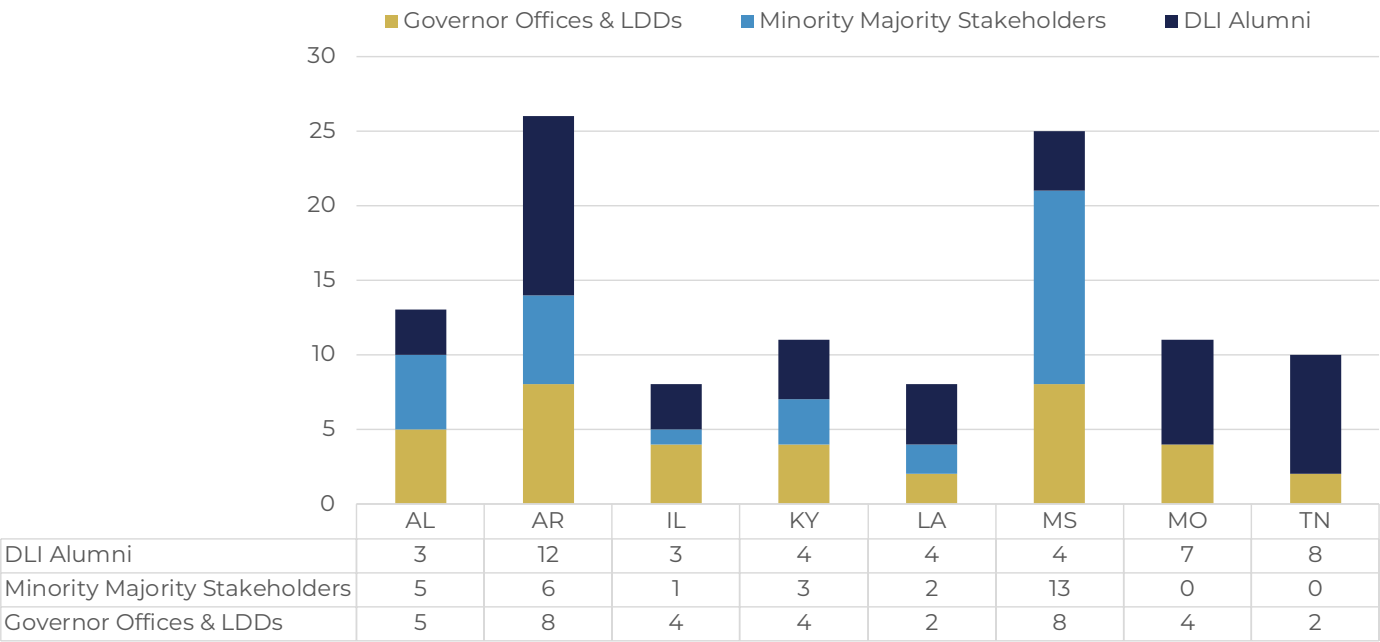
APPENDIX B: COLLABORATION SESSION INSIGHTS

To create and validate key components of the Regional Development Plan, the DRA engaged with DRA staff as well as 138 DRA partners, state and local government officials, Delta Leadership Institute (DLI) alumni, community and business leaders, and residents to ensure the Plan’s alignment with the region’s interests. These collaboration sessions sought to refine and confirm strategic goals, objectives, and activities and to assist in determining the DRA’s guiding principles. They also aimed to clarify the complex challenges facing the region and ways in which the DRA can collaborate with stakeholders to achieve its vision.

The resulting insights were instrumental in formulating the DRA’s Regional Development Plan IV and its strategic goals and guiding principles. Essentially, the strategic goals set forth the DRA’s priorities over the plan period, and the guiding principles define how those goals will be pursued.

Collaboration sessions were segmented according to participant relationships with the DRA. Therefore, four collaboration sessions were held with 58 governor offices and LDD representatives, 34 minority majority stakeholders, 46 DLI and DLI-Harvard Kennedy School participants. The session attendees represented all eight states – Alabama (13), Arkansas (26), Illinois (8), Kentucky (11), Louisiana (8), Mississippi (25), Missouri (11), and Tennessee (10) – across the DRA region as shown in Figure 1.1. Twenty-six participants did not specify their state affiliation

FIGURE 1.1 COLLABORATION SESSION PARTICIPANTS BY STATE



APPENDIX C: REGIONAL DATA

Note: The data in this Appendix has been drawn and developed from data from federal sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau, and state sources, supplemented with information from the DRA. For a full list of references, see Appendix E.

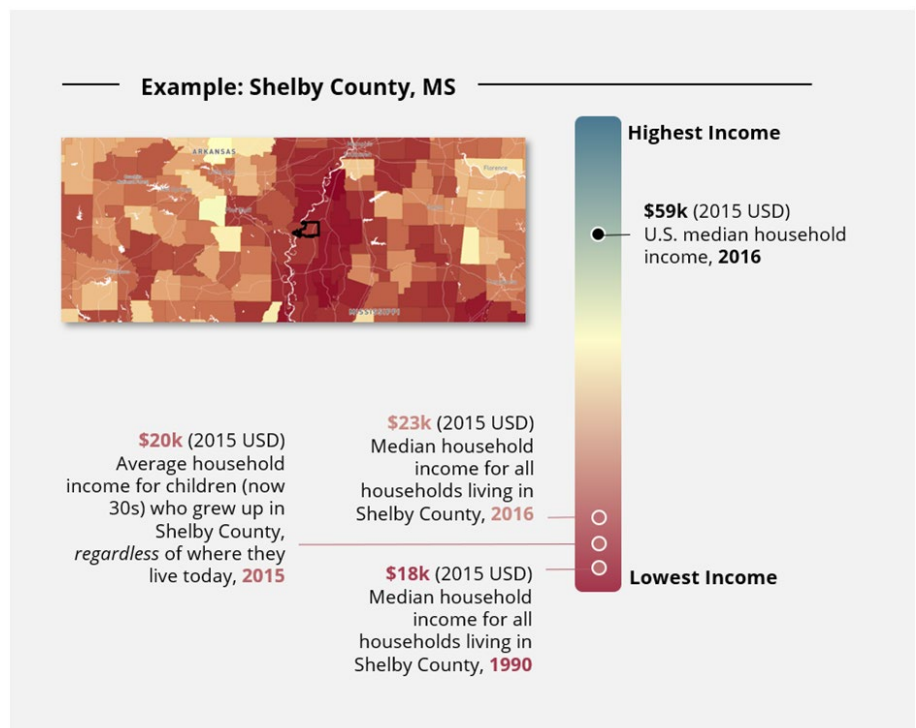
PERSISTENT POVERTY

Multigenerational poverty continues to affect both the regional economy and the daily lives of DRA residents. In 2020, one in five DRA residents was estimated to be living below the federal poverty line, with 88% of DRA counties and parishes experiencing Persistent Poverty.

Persistent-poverty counties have undergone historical underinvestment and typically have high rates of unemployment; banking, healthcare, and broadband deserts; and a scarcity of quality, affordable housing and safe drinking water. Research has revealed that the roots of today's affluence and poverty can be traced back to the neighborhoods where people grew up.

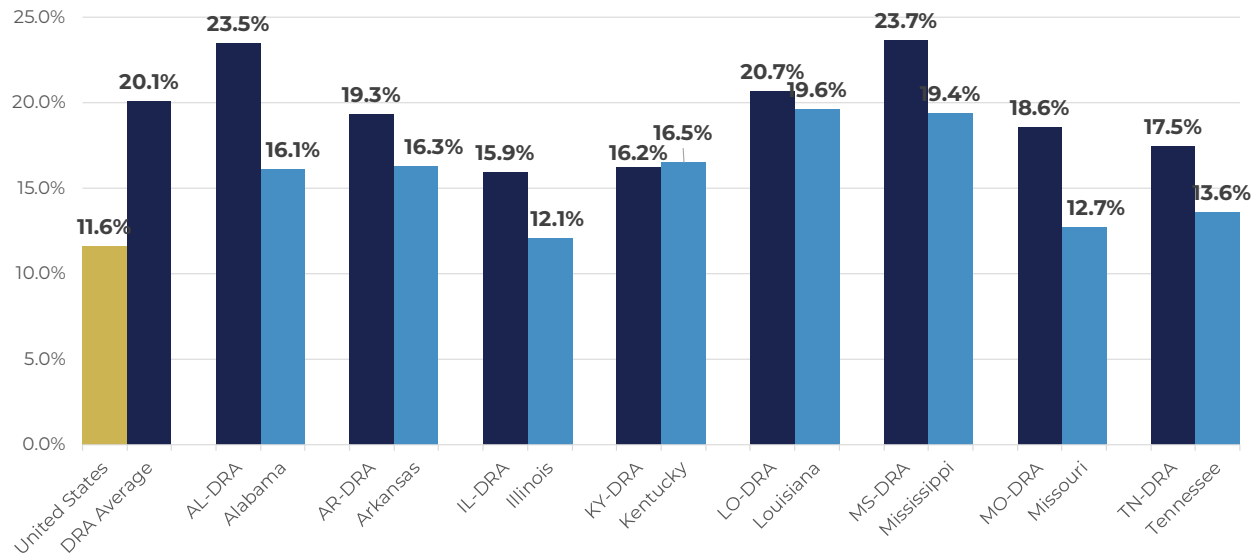
As the example of Shelby County illustrates, poverty is frequently generational and follows people even if they leave the area as adults. Investments that address the root causes of multigenerational poverty will not transform the region overnight, but a sustained and targeted effort can help break the cycle.

Source: Opportunity Atlas



DRA counties and parishes experience a significantly higher level of poverty than the national average – nearly twice as much. This disparity also extends to the states that the DRA operates in, though to a lesser degree.

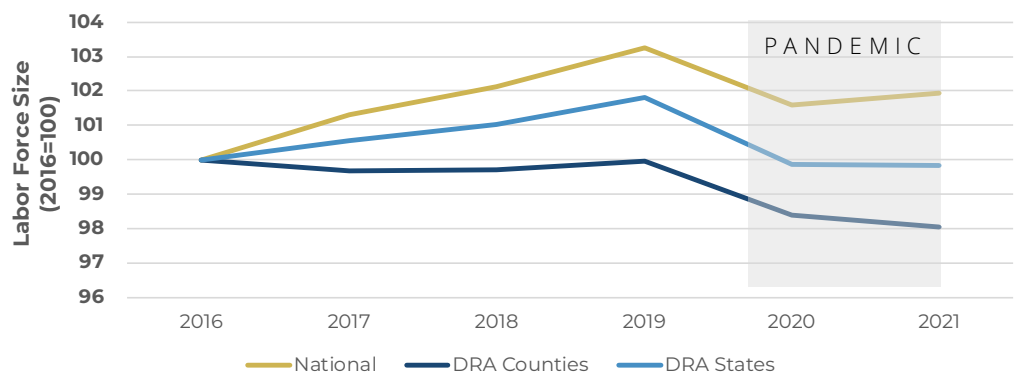
POPULATION LIVING IN POVERTY (2020), U.S. CENSUS BUREAU



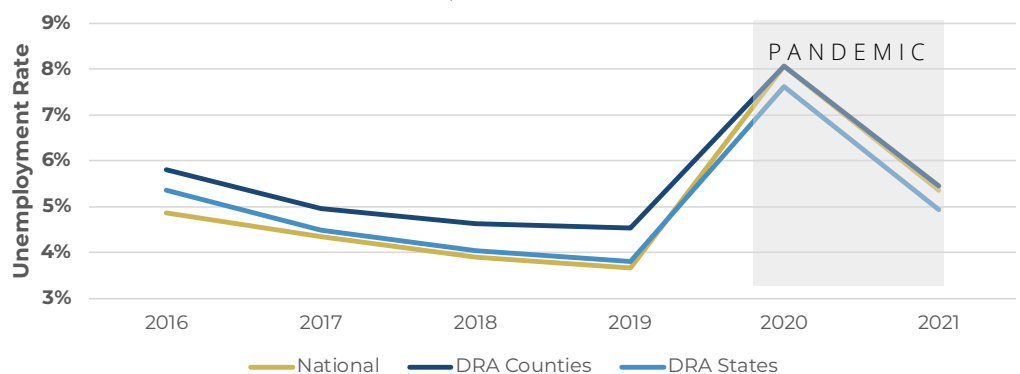
UNEMPLOYMENT

The pandemic led to a sharp increase in unemployment and a decrease in labor force size. While unemployment rates have dropped as economic activity has returned to normal, labor force participation remains below pre-pandemic levels. This trend is particularly acute in DRA counties and parishes, which were already experiencing stagnant levels of labor force participation.

LABOR FORCE SIZE, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS



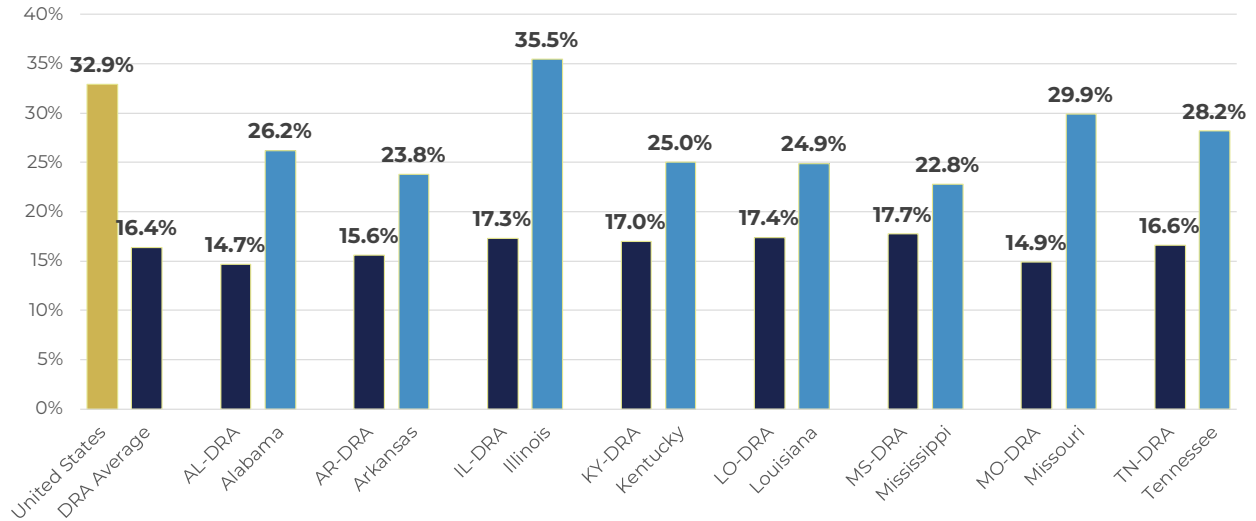
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS



INCOME & EDUCATION

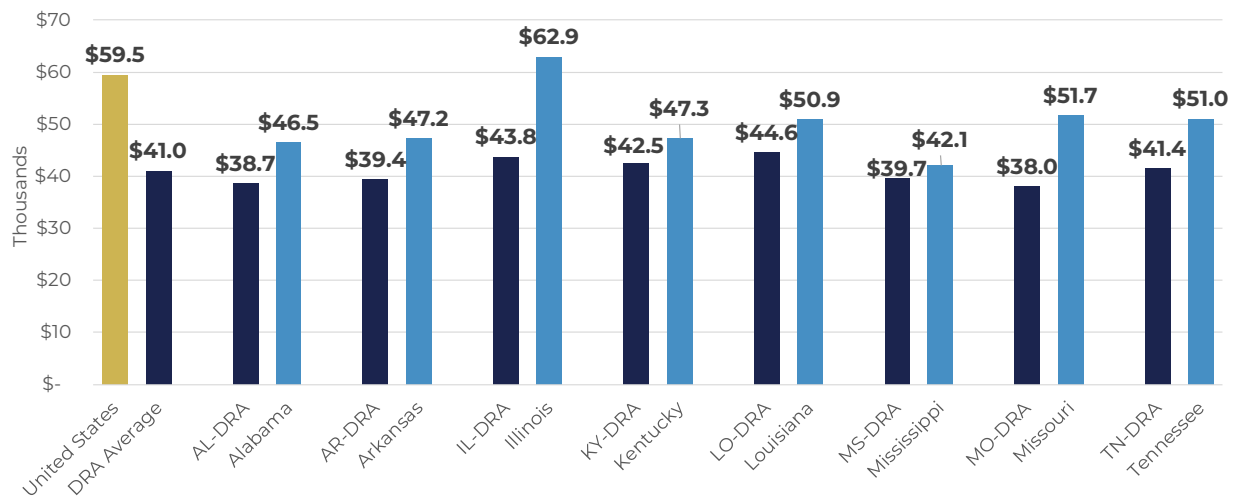
DRA counties and parishes have a far lower percentage of individuals with a college education when compared with their state-level peers and the national average.

PERCENT OF POPULATION WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE (2020), U.S. CENSUS BUREAU



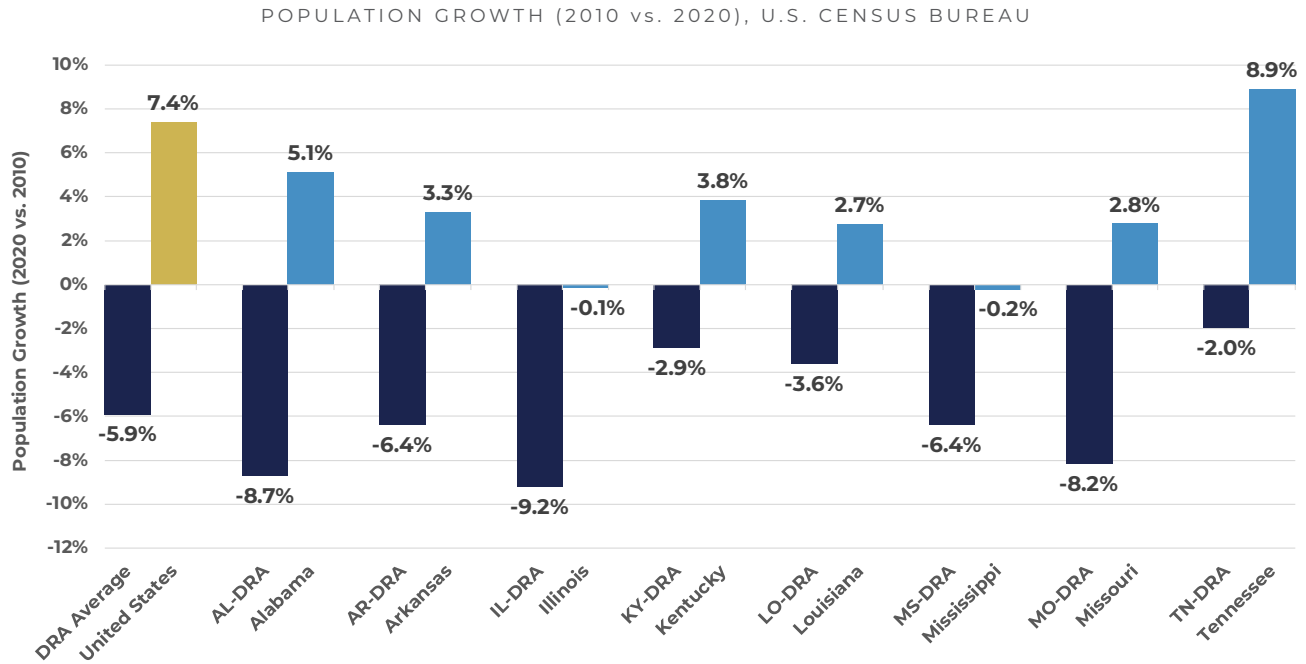
DRA counties and parishes experience a significantly lower level of per capita income when compared with their state-level peers and the national average.

PER CAPITA INCOME (2020), BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY



POPULATION GROWTH

While most DRA states (except for IL and MS) experienced significant population growth during the 2010's, the DRA counties and parishes within these states experienced population decreases.

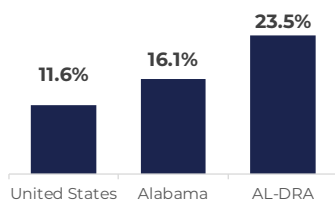


STATE SNAPSHOTS

Alabama

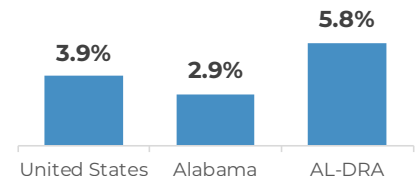
AL Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.

POVERTY RATE



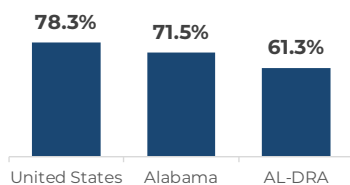
AL Unemployment Rates are mixed when compared with the national average.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

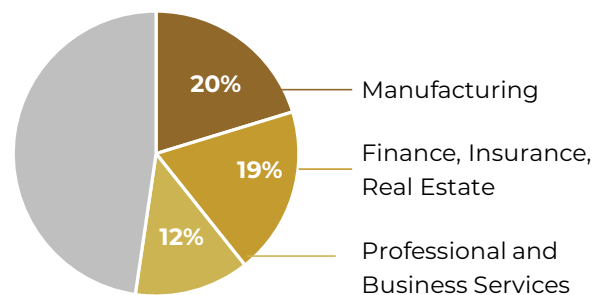


AL Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

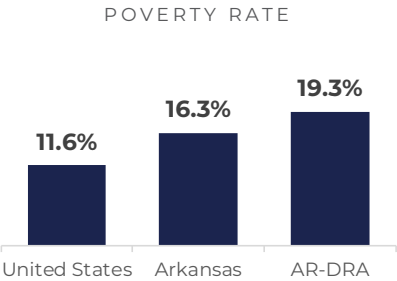


AL TOP 3 EMPLOYMENT INDUSTRIES

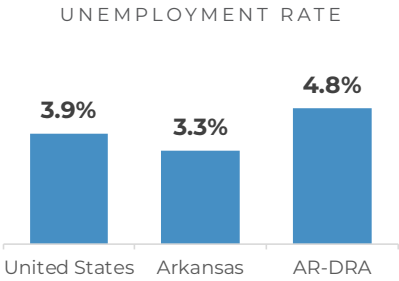


Arkansas

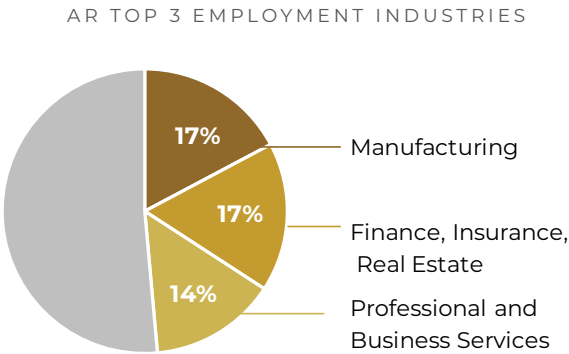
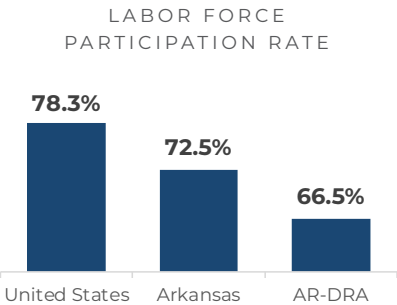
AR Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.



AR Unemployment Rates are mixed when compared to the national average.

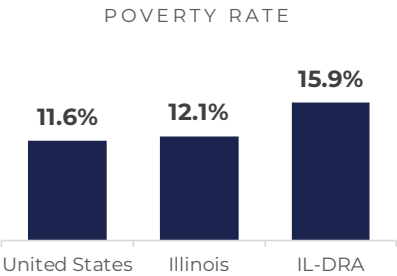


AR Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.

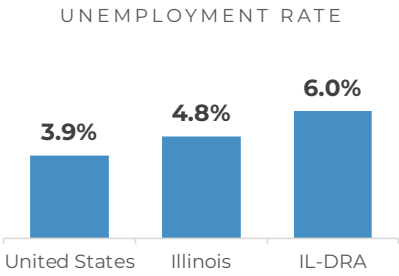


Illinois

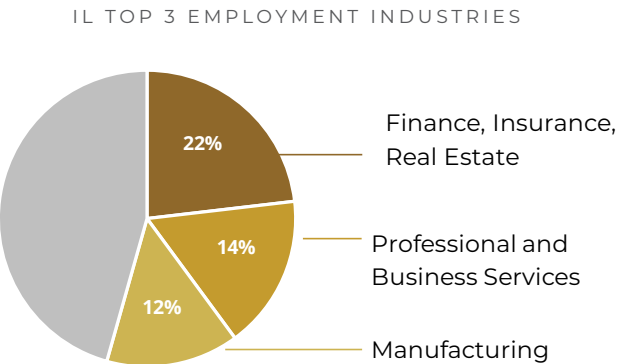
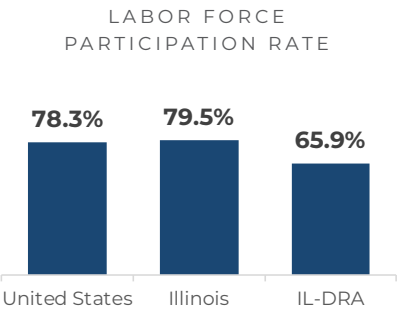
IL Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.



IL Unemployment Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.

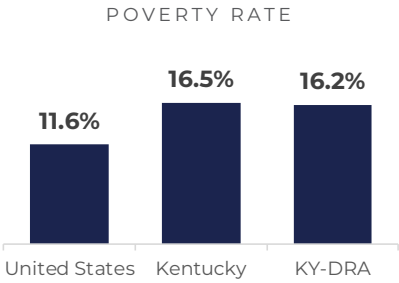


IL Labor Force Participation Rates are mixed when compared with the national average.

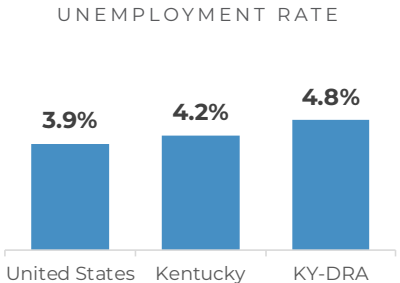


Kentucky

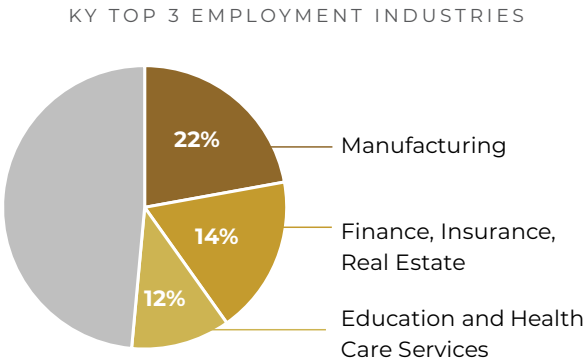
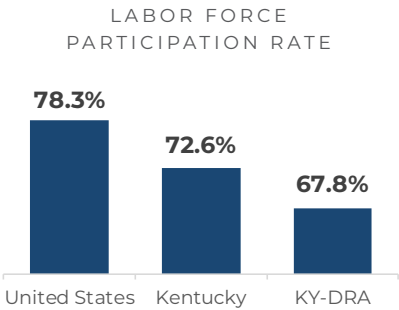
KY Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.



KY Unemployment Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.

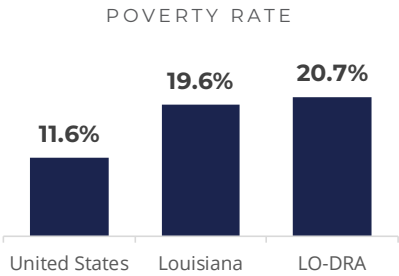


KY Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.

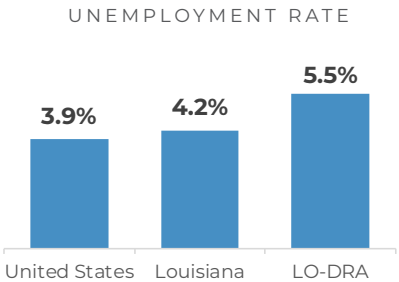


Louisiana

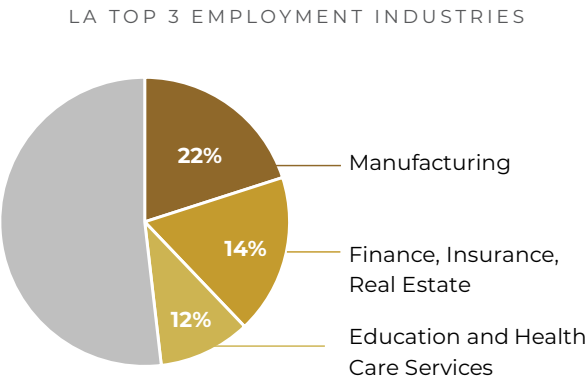
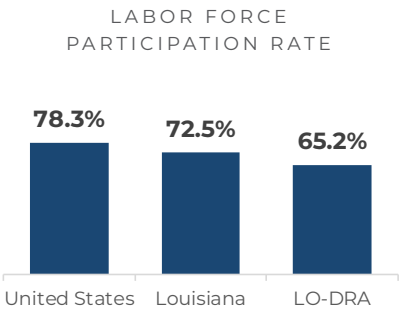
LA Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.



LA Unemployment Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.



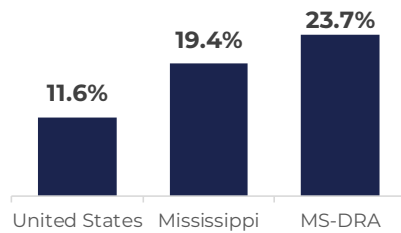
LA Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.



Mississippi

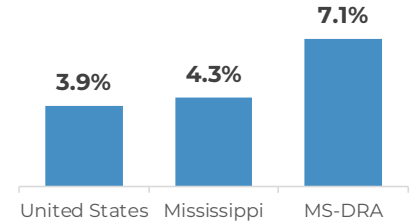
MS Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.

POVERTY RATE



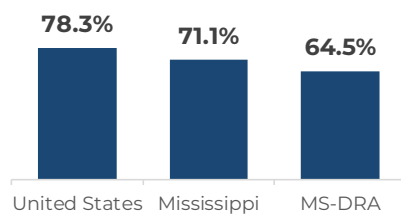
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

MS Unemployment Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.

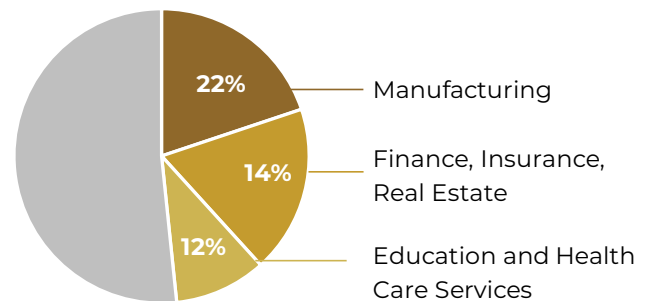


LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

MS Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.



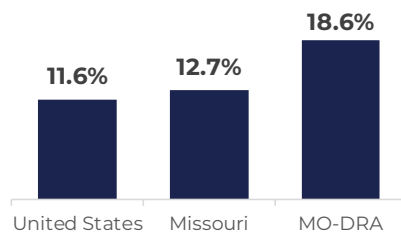
MS TOP 3 EMPLOYMENT INDUSTRIES



Missouri

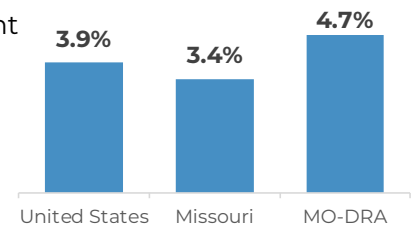
MO Poverty Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.

POVERTY RATE



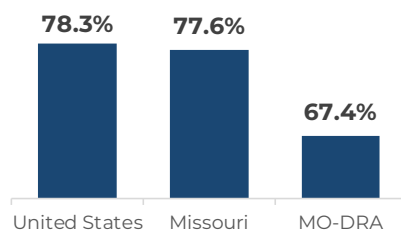
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

MO Unemployment Rates are mixed when compared with the national average.

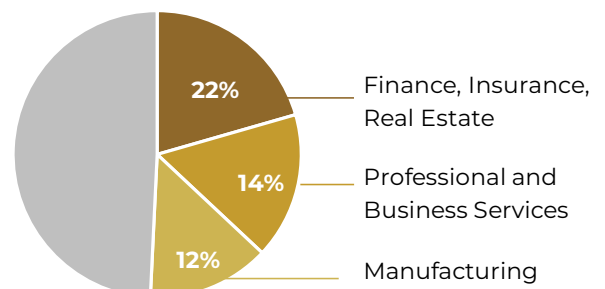


LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

MO Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.

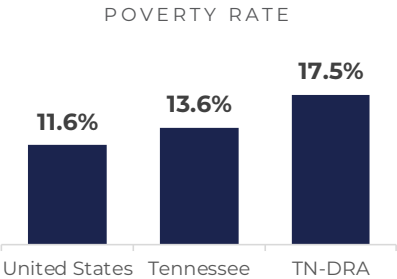


MO TOP 3 EMPLOYMENT INDUSTRIES

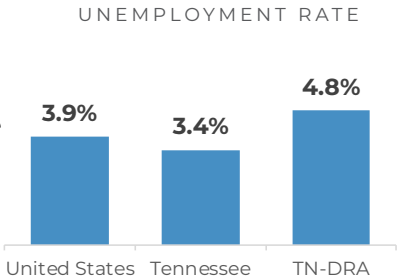


Tennessee

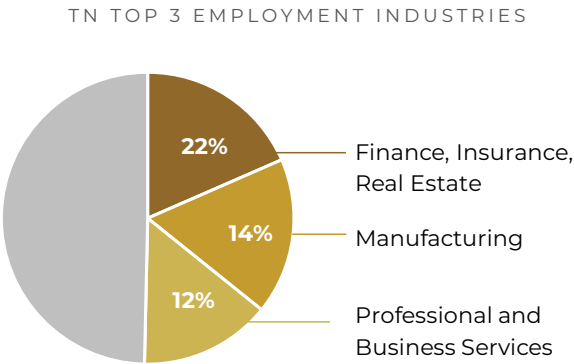
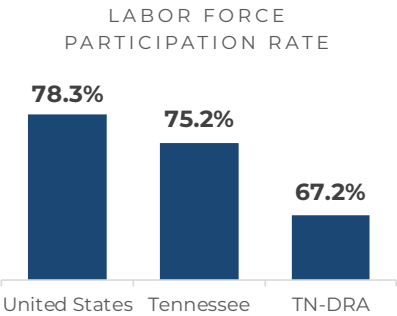
TN Poverty Rates are mixed when compared with the national average.



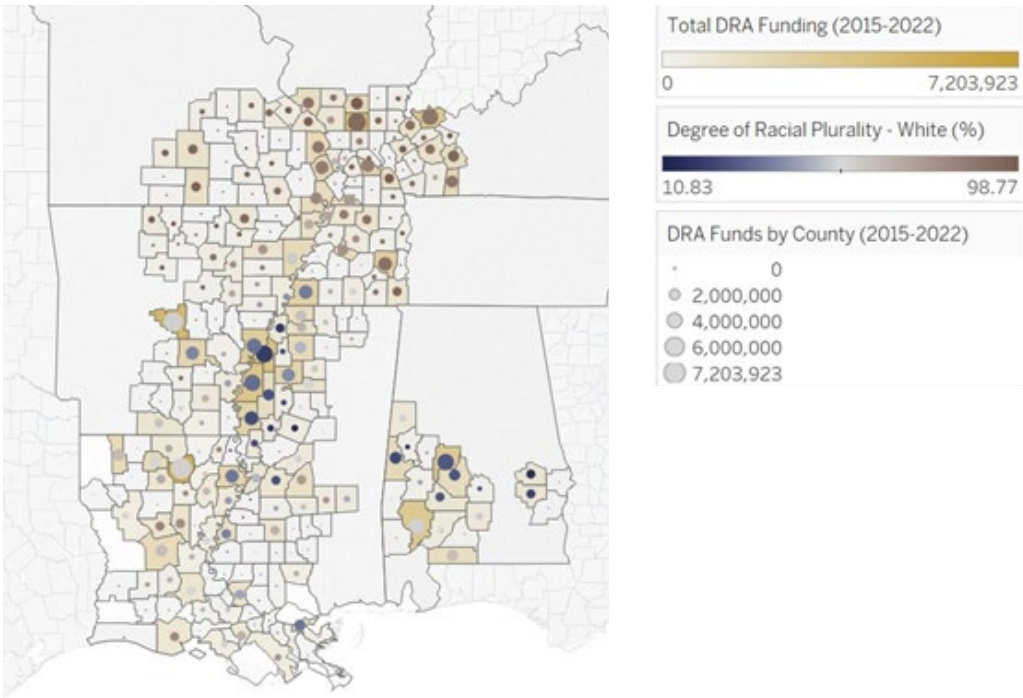
TN Unemployment Rates are above the national average at both the state and DRA level.



TN Labor Force Participation Rates are below the national average at both the state and DRA level.



TOTAL DRA FUNDING (2015-2022) vs. DEGREE OF RACIAL PLURALITY BY COUNTY



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

APPENDIX D: DRA COUNTIES & MAP

Alabama (20 Counties): Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Escambia, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Pickens, Russell, Sumter, Washington, Wilcox

Arkansas (42 Counties): Arkansas, Ashley, Baxter, Bradley, Calhoun, Chicot, Clay, Cleveland, Craighead, Crittenden, Cross, Dallas, Desha, Drew, Fulton, Grant, Greene, Independence, Izard, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lee, Lincoln, Lonoke, Marion, Mississippi, Monroe, Ouachita, Phillips, Poinsett, Prairie, Pulaski, Randolph, St. Francis, Searcy, Sharp, Stone, Union, Van Buren, White, Woodruff

Illinois (16 Counties): Alexander, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Johnson, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, Union, White, Williamson

Kentucky (21 Counties): Ballard, Caldwell, Calloway, Carlisle, Christian, Crittenden, Fulton, Graves, Henderson, Hickman, Hopkins, Livingston, Lyon, McCracken, McLean, Marshall, Muhlenberg, Todd, Trigg, Union, Webster

Louisiana (56 Counties): Acadia, Allen, Ascension, Assumption, Avoyelles, Beauregard, Bienville, Caldwell, Cameron, Catahoula, Claiborne, Concordia, De Soto, East Baton Rouge, East Carroll, East Feliciana, Evangeline, Franklin, Grant, Iberia, Iberville, Jackson, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Lafourche, La Salle,

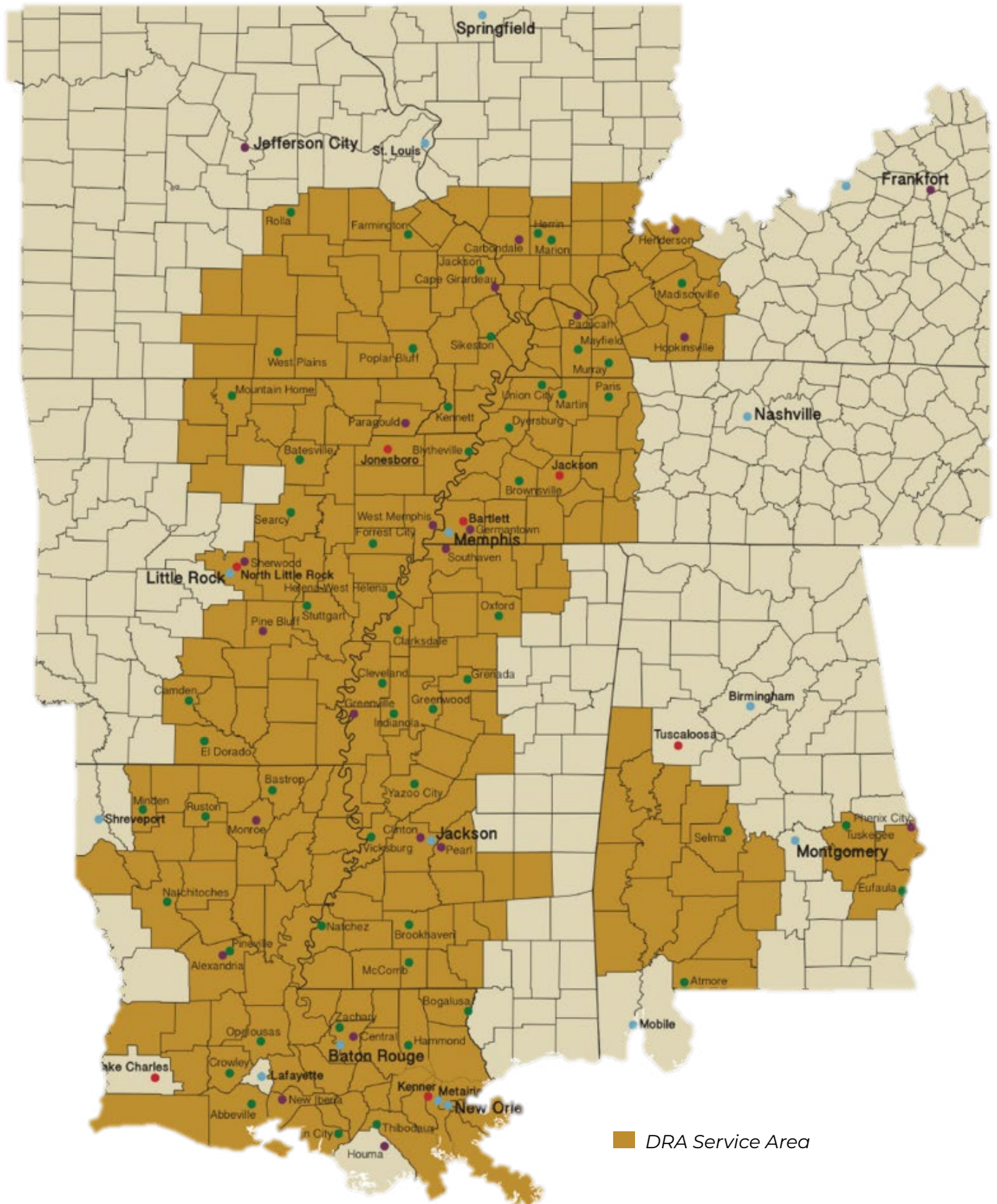
Lincoln, Livingston, Madison, Morehouse, Natchitoches, Orleans, Ouachita, Plaquemines, Pointe Coupee, Rapides, Red River, Richland, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. Helena, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, Tangipahoa, Tensas, Union, Vermillion, Washington, Webster, West Baton Rouge, West Carroll, West Feliciana, Winn

Mississippi (47 Counties): Adams, Amite, Attala, Benton, Bolivar, Carroll, Claiborne, Coahoma, Copiah, Covington, DeSoto, Franklin, Grenada, Hinds, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Jasper, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, Lawrence, Leflore, Lincoln, Madison, Marion, Marshall, Montgomery, Panola, Pike, Quitman, Rankin, Sharkey, Simpson, Smith, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tate, Tippah, Tunica, Union, Walthall, Warren, Washington, Wilkinson, Yalobusha, Yazoo

Missouri (29 Counties): Bollinger, Butler, Cape Girardeau, Carter, Crawford, Dent, Douglas, Dunklin, Howell, Iron, Madison, Mississippi, New Madrid, Oregon, Ozark, Pemiscot, Perry, Phelps, Reynolds, Ripley, Scott, Shannon, Ste. Genevieve, St. Francois, Stoddard, Texas, Washington, Wayne, Wright

Tennessee (21 Counties): Benton, Carroll, Chester, Crockett, Decatur, Dyer, Fayette, Gibson, Hardeman, Hardin, Haywood, Henderson, Henry, Lake, Lauderdale, Madison, McNairy, Obion, Shelby, Tipton, Weakley

DRA REGION



APPENDIX E: REFERENCES

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