EPA ORGANIZATION

ISSUE SUMMARY:

The Office of Community Revitalization (OCR), in the Office of Policy, supports communities in locally-led strategies that strengthen economic development and improve outcomes for the environmental and human health, with a particular focus on disaster resilience, efficient land use, and future planning. Communities request OCR's technical assistance and support to strengthen their recreation economies, build local food systems, foster equitable development, and innovate for sustainable transportation. Helping communities to reuse existing buildings and revitalize neighborhoods brings economic and quality of life benefits while also using resources wisely, preserving undeveloped farmland and open space, and reducing pollution, and can address longstanding disparities in the built and natural environments. OCR also builds networks and peer learning opportunities to enable experts and practitioners to learn from one another. OCR's place- based programs and technical assistance supports Regions and NPMs to achieve EPA FY 2022-2026 Strategic Plan Objective 2.2 and the strategy of "building EPA capacity to support community-driven approaches to developing healthy, sustainable, and climate-resilient communities."

KEY POINTS:

Helping States, Tribes, and Communities. OCR has 25 years of experience in smart growth strategies, sustainable development and economic revitalization. Nearly 700 communities nationwide have received assistance from this office (formerly known as the Office of Sustainable Communities), in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders. OCR complements EPA's regulatory functions and aids regional priorities through planning assistance to communities across states, tribes and territories.

In close coordination with Regions and NPMs, OCR's technical assistance programs help states, tribes, and municipalities identify and implement solutions to promote revitalization and entrepreneurship; improve access to healthy food; create housing and transportation choices for residents and businesses; and better prepare for future economic and environmental challenges.

Meeting Current and Emerging Challenges. OCR recently supported the OP/OCAS partnership with OEJECR to conduct community-driven resilience planning with future applicants for Community Change grants, providing conceptual designs for resilience hubs and other shovel-ready projects to community-based coalitions. The multi-benefit strategies employed to make communities healthier, more resilient, and prosperous included:

- Promoting green spaces and walkable streets where people can safely get fresh air and exercise.
- Encouraging economic diversification for potential future economic and climate conditions.
- Identifying and supporting local economic drivers including local agriculture, outdoor recreation, healthcare facilities, and other place-based assets.
- Planning for resilience to keep people safer during and immediately after natural disasters.

Making the Federal Government More Efficient and Effective. OCR coordinates across EPA and with other federal agencies, including HUD, DOT, USDA, Commerce, NOAA, FEMA, and GSA, to help spend federal money more efficiently and effectively. OCR has leveraged over $5.9M in funds from more than a dozen agencies to support assistance for hundreds of communities since 2018.

Providing Tools and Resources

OCR develops tools and publications to share what we learn from our technical assistance work, partnerships, and research with wider audiences. Recent tools have helped communities:

- Create land use and economic development plans around distinctive, place-based assets.

- Plan strategically for new investment to revitalize economically distressed neighborhoods.
- Design local zoning and related policies and infrastructure to better prepare for and adapt to climate change.
- Identify strategies to grow their outdoor recreation economy and revitalize their main streets.
- Promote local food industries to spur revitalization and improve healthy eating choices.
- Assess economic vulnerability to climate change and develop economic resilience.
- Plan for resilience to natural disasters.

ONGOING/UPCOMING REVIEWS FOR FY2024:

By the end of FY25, OCR anticipates engaging at least 77 communities across the United States, through the following programs:

- **Recreation Economy for Rural Communities:** 25 communities strengthening their main streets and recreational assets.
- **Sustainable Communities Accelerator Network:** 30 communities implementing local actions through peer learning cohort.
- **Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities:** 12 communities pursuing development strategies that expand upon existing Brownfields efforts and advance clean air, clean water, equitable development and other local goals.
- 10 additional communities reached through focused community assistance projects.

OCR will also continue to strengthen existing community-based partnerships with DOE, DOT, GSA and other federal agencies.

KEY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS:

☐ Congress   ☐ Industry   ☒ States   ☒ Tribes   ☐ Media   ☒ Other Federal Agency
☒ NGO   ☒ Local Governments   ☒ Public

MOVING FORWARD:

Recent EPA investments in communities have greatly expanded local communities' capacity to develop and implement durable, multi-media solutions to environmental and health challenges. However, despite this success, many communities will still require sustained support. Ongoing disaster risk and an increasing need to adapt to climate change will leave communities challenged in efforts to plan for, manage and implement land use strategies in more comprehensive, environmentally responsible ways.

For FY26 and beyond, OCR has proposed a National Center for Community Environmental Design and Planning (NCCEDP) that will help institutionalize the progress recent investments have achieved. The new proposed Center is an agency-wide resource to connect the dots between EPA regions, NPMs, and local communities – to sustain the benefits for communities over time and support communities as they figure out what comes next.