

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT OVERVIEW

A PRIMER FOR NEW STAFF



INTRODUCTION

“What does your organization do?” is often the question friends and family ask after you tell them you have a new job. For many new to the economic or regional development world, it can be challenging to respond given the broad range of programs and services offered combined with the inherent behind the scenes role of the organization.

As part of the new employee onboarding process, this primer is a useful tool to explain the unique nature of the organization and the role it plays in the larger landscape of regional development across the United States. It is designed to complement existing materials new staff are provided when they start their jobs. It is also designed as a reference tool as new employees settle into their new roles and continue to learn about the dynamic nature of the organization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SETTING THE STAGE

Your organization is part of a national network of more than 500 multi-jurisdictional, quasi-governmental organizations that provide regional planning and local community and economic development services known collectively as Regional Development Organizations (RDOs).

What is a Regional Development Organization (RDO)?

An RDO is a multi-jurisdictional, quasi-governmental organization that provides planning and local community and economic development services on a regional level.

Across the country, RDOs assist thousands of local governments and counties with community development, economic development, workforce training, transportation planning, public infrastructure, affordable housing, disaster prevention, rural capacity-building, public health, regional planning, and the provision of other community services.

Many RDOs help provide needed services and resources within underserved and rural communities. RDOs also administer a variety of federal, state, and local funds. RDOs are also sometimes known as Councils of Government (COGs), Planning and Development Districts (PDDs), Regional Planning Councils (RPCs), Area Development Districts (ADDs), Local Development Districts (LDDs), and others.

Some of the 500 plus RDOs nationwide have federal designations given by other federal agencies, including designation by the U.S. Department of Transportation as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) or as Regional/Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs) that play important roles in regional transportation planning.

Within the RDO national scope, 400 are currently designated as Economic Development Districts (EDDs) by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA). To be designated as an EDD, the organization must serve at least one geographical area within its service area that meets certain distress criteria. It also must have an EDA-approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS).

Although RDO work varies from one organization to another, in general, all RDOs facilitate a variety of community services and initiatives designed to bolster economic competitiveness and quality of life.

EDA works hand-in-hand with local economic development partners, including EDDs, to advance projects linked to regional long-term, sustainable economic development strategies.

Some RDOs are designated by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration as Economic Development Districts (EDDs). EDDs must serve at least one geographic area in their region that meets certain distressed criteria and they must also have an EDA-approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) in place.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

To be eligible for EDD-designation by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration, an organization must have an EDA-approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and has to contain at least one geographical area that meets EDA's regional distress criteria.

EDA has organized states and U.S. territories into six regions corresponding to their geographic locations centered around an EDA Regional Office which is the primary EDA contact for EDDs related to grant awards and funding opportunities. Each state also has an Economic Development Representative (EDR) who assists EDDs in that state to identify potential EDA projects.

EDA REGIONAL OFFICES

- Atlanta, GA (Southeast Region)
- Austin, TX (Southwest Region)
- Chicago, IL (Midwest Region)
- Denver, CO (Central Region)
- Philadelphia, PA (East Region)
- Seattle, WA (West Region)



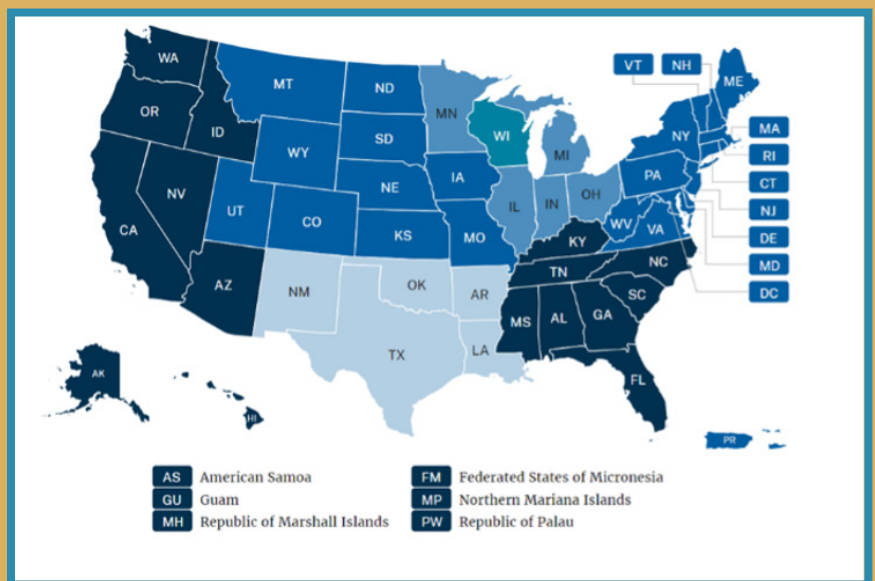
Federally designated EDDs are required to develop, implement, and report on a regional CEDS. EDA-funded projects are required to support objectives outlined in the CEDS of a local region.

If there are no CEDS or EDA-recognized EDDs in a region, then potential EDA grantees can cite an equivalent regional plan that lists the project area for which a grantee requests funding. However, EDA's priority is to develop CEDS with regions, and then work with regions to implement these CEDS recommendations.

Supported projects typically focus on improving and expanding public infrastructure, promoting job creation through innovation and entrepreneurship, and empowering economically distressed communities to encourage business development and attract increased private capital investment. EDA publishes investment priorities for grant funding which are occasionally updated (www.eda.gov/funding/investment-priorities).

EDA funding programs are designed to be nimble and flexible, to support regional economic development strategies across the country that are responsive to local, changing economic conditions. Examples of EDA tools and programs include:

- Technical Assistance
- Post-Disaster Recovery Assistance
- Trade Adjustment Support
- Strategic Planning
- Research Evaluation Capacity
- Critical infrastructure planning and development



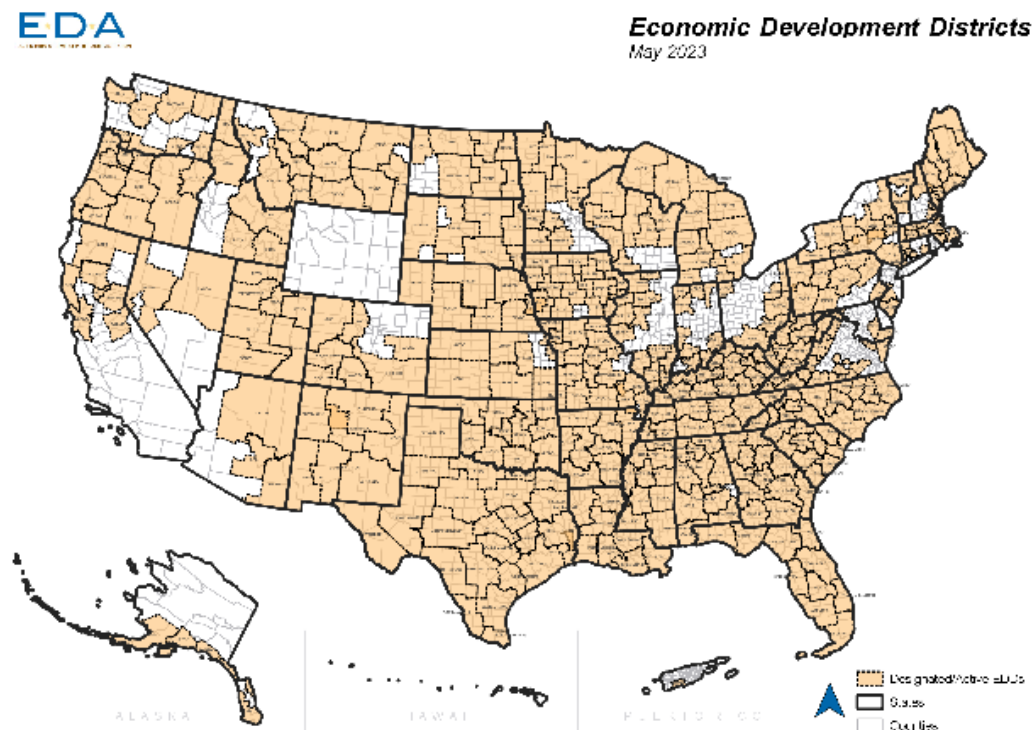
EDA will primarily provide infrastructure or workforce development funds, post-disaster recovery assistance, unemployment services and trade adjustment support, technical assistance, and other project funds to units of local governments (typically cities and counties). Planning funds are provided to EDDs directly from EDA in order to enable EDDs to offer many services necessary to complete a regional CEDS. Examples of ways that planning funds can be used include but are not limited to hiring staff, procuring consulting services, and executing planning and technical assistance programs for local units of governments.

EDA traditionally leverages relatively modest federal appropriations for significant impact nationwide. Funding allocations to EDA have increased in recent years with the passage of the [CARES Act](#), the [American Rescue Plan Act](#), and the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#). In [2021](#) alone, approximately \$1.6 billion in EDA investments in public works and other economic development projects generated an estimated \$9.4 billion in private investment.

NATIONAL NETWORK OF EDDS

Across the nation there are about 400 EDA-designated EDDs. They encourage economic development planning and project implementation in distressed urban, suburban, and rural regions by opening the door for local communities to access grant and loan funding opportunities, administrative and technical assistance, data and technology resources, and other resources and support. Through a national network known as the EDD Community of Practice (CoP), EDDs learn from each other, share their successful approaches to regional development, and seek ideas or solutions from peers. The EDD CoP provides a space for EDD staff to strengthen their capacities to strengthen organizational capacity, and to help their regions become more competitive, resilient, and equitable. [Learn more about the EDD CoP here.](#)

EDA-designated EDDs are located in 47 states and Puerto Rico as illustrated on this map.



STATEWIDE NETWORK OF EDDS

Within states, EDDs partner together to create statewide associations. Several states have statewide associations that receive funding (grants, dues, fee for service) and have full-time or contract staff. Some meet on a regular basis, while others meet as needed. In some cases, the statewide association will convene in conjunction with another event. These associations discuss issues affecting all EDDs in the state, provide a peer network that is readily available, and can prove invaluable to new EDD executive directors and staff seeking peer guidance and support. Statewide associations can also work together to inform their various stakeholders about their impact regionally and across the state.

WHAT SERVICES DO EDDS TYPICALLY PROVIDE?

EDDs primarily assist local governments in leveraging and deploying federal and state funding and resources, including public infrastructure development and deployment of federal entitlement or benefits programs. This can manifest in several different ways as EDD staff responsibilities, including:

- Facilitating the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) process for the region.
- Serving as periphery planning, grant writing, and research staff.
- Providing grant administration and planning support for grant funds originating from a wide variety of federal and state agencies including:



FEMA



Appalachian
Regional
Commission

EDA
U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION



Northern Border
Regional Commission



EDDs are typically structured into departments that administer federal and state funding to achieve the goals of public investment grant programs. The EDD board of directors approves which publicly funded programs an EDD will administer for their member communities.

Across their regions, EDDs assist their local governments with a variety of services and programs, including but not limited to:

- community development
- economic development
- workforce training
- transportation planning
- public infrastructure
- affordable housing
- disaster prevention
- rural capacity-building
- public health
- aging programs
- 911 or other emergency support services
- regional planning
- other community services

Each EDD is different depending on the geographic, political, and social climates in their regions. Some EDDs take on certain programming that another EDD may not. The diversity of program areas and flexibility that EDDs provide their member cities and counties is one of the defining traits that make EDDs impactful for their specific regions.

WHY IS A REGIONAL APPROACH TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SO VALUABLE?

In the United States, the subnational level of government is more robust than in any other country in the world. Municipalities, towns, counties and even unincorporated areas often have economic development priorities and plans focused on ensuring revenue streams can sustain community programs and fundamental public services.

However, communities that collaborate effectively and plan for economic development at the regional level can achieve greater economic outcomes that independent jurisdictions can't achieve alone. Together, local governments and EDDs can invest in plans and implement projects that are attractive to outside private investment and leverage unique regional amenities. At the same time, when the region experiences an economic shock like a natural disaster or major loss of employment, they can respond together to avoid or mitigate negative ramifications that are not constrained to one city or county.

EDDs prioritize planning and implementation that responds to and utilizes complex systems and patterns that are best understood at a regional scale. Utility systems, labor sheds, workforce training opportunities, capital and input markets, supply chains, transportation assets, commute patterns, natural resources and recreation amenities, and other economic factors do not stop at one single municipal or county border.

Creating regional plans like the CEDS with input and advice from regional stakeholders, and executing regionally significant, transformative economic development projects and programs, are the primary missions of EDDs.

WHAT IS THE CEDS?

A CEDS is a locally-focused, regionally-driven economic development planning process and document created in collaboration with a range of partners, which may include:

- Community leaders and residents
- Native American Tribes
- Private sector participants
- Local economic development organizations
- Workforce training programs
- Educational institutions including K-12 representatives, community colleges, and four-year institutions

EDD staff facilitate the creation, monitoring and execution of the CEDS process. A regional CEDS or equivalent document is necessary to apply for funding from EDA and other federal partners for economic development projects and technical assistance. However, a well-facilitated CEDS process has the potential to result in a medium-term strategy that regional stakeholders can implement successfully, driven by a shared vision for economic prosperity and resilience.

A CEDS should be a living document that serves the needs of the region, and every CEDS is somewhat unique. Resources for new EDD staff participating in or leading a 5-year update or initial draft of their region's CEDS can be found at [CEDS Central](#).