



RALPH C. WILSON, JR.  
FOUNDATION

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **New Fellowship Program Places Strategic Talent in Rural Serving Community Foundations Across Southeast Michigan and Western New York**

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation invests \$2.9 million to strengthen the future of philanthropy and expand capacity of partner community foundations

**DETROIT – (March 12, 2026)** – As the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation enters the second half of its 20-year lifespan, the organization is deepening its commitment to improving quality of life in the rural communities it serves across Southeast Michigan and Western New York. Advancing that commitment, the Foundation has launched a new Rural Philanthropy Fellows Program designed to strengthen leadership capacity within rural-serving community foundations.

With an investment of \$2.9 million, the Wilson Foundation has supported the creation of 12 Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Rural Philanthropy Fellows, in partnership with 10 rural-serving community foundations. Joining in the effort, the Michigan-based Herrick Foundation has also provided support for three Herrick Foundation Philanthropy Fellows in additional communities it serves. Together, the 2026-2028 Rural Philanthropy Fellow cohort of 15 emerging and established professionals will each strengthen the capacity of the individual community foundations they serve, while making meaningful contributions to rural philanthropy and the nonprofit sector.

Many rural community foundations operate with lean staffing structures and limited access to specialized expertise. By investing directly in additional leadership capacity, this program addresses those constraints and enables foundations to respond more effectively to emerging community needs and opportunities.

“Our community foundation partners bring unmatched local knowledge and a deep understanding of the most pressing needs and emerging opportunities within the communities they serve,” said Maura Dewan, Vice President of Programs, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation. “By investing in their organizational capacity, and in the next generation of philanthropic leaders, we are helping ensure they can act quickly, innovate locally, and advance community-driven solutions that create lasting impact.”

Reflecting the unique needs of the communities they serve, each community foundation determined the strategic priority for their fellowship position and led the recruitment and hiring process directly within their organization. The variety of fellowship focuses include communications, public policy engagement, data and learning, impact investing and community engagement. By embedding this functional expertise locally, the program strengthens each foundation’s ability to advance strategic priorities while building long-term institutional resilience.

The inaugural cohort reflects a diverse mix of geographic communities and functional expertise across both regions.

## 2026-2028 Rural Philanthropy Fellow Cohort

### Western New York – Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Rural Philanthropy Fellows:

- **Allegany County Area Foundation:** Alyssa Bump (Communications)
- **Cattaraugus Region Community Foundation:** Christian Riethmiller (Data & Learning)
- **Chautauqua Region Community Foundation:** Solimar Vazquez (Community Impact)
- **Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo (Serving the Niagara Area Foundation and Wyoming Foundation affiliates):** Matthew Torres (Generalist)
- **Northern Chautauqua Community Foundation:** Jeannie Gallaway (Generalist)
- **Rochester Area Community Foundation (Serving rural communities of Monroe, Orleans, and Genesee counties):** Sedria Thomas (Marketing & Communications)
- **Rochester Area Community Foundation (Serving rural communities of Monroe, Orleans, and Genesee counties):** Emily Bemis (Public Policy)

### Southeast Michigan – Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Rural Philanthropy Fellows:

- **Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation (serving rural Washtenaw County) –** John Paul Williams-Soriano (Generalist)
- **Community Foundation for Monroe County –** Melissa Fox (Strategic Engagement)
- **Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan (Serving the Community Foundation for Livingston County affiliate, and rural portions of Oakland and Macomb counties) –** Garit Frye (Data & Learning)
- **Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan (serving the Community Foundation for Livingston County affiliate, and rural portions of Oakland and Macomb Counties) –** Joe Newman (Generalist)
- **Community Foundation of St. Clair County –** Colin Holzberger (Communications)

### Michigan - Herrick Foundation Philanthropy Fellows:

- **Jackson Community Foundation –** Kendall Nash (Impact Investment)
- **Lenawee Community Foundation –** Madison Roberts (Generalist)
- **Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area Community Foundation –** Betsy Peterson (Communications)

The Wilson Foundation's investment in the Rural Philanthropy Fellows Program provides for the participants to receive support from philanthropic practice experts, including cohort-based learning opportunities, an individualized professional development budget and one-on-one mentor support to explore long-term career pathways within the philanthropic sector. Fellows will also participate in local and national stakeholder meetings and conferences, strengthening connections across the broader philanthropic ecosystem. The New York Funders Alliance is serving as the fiscal agent for the learning community activities, and longtime community foundation leader Carrie Pickett-Erway is providing program design and execution as a key consultant.

Working within the Wilson Foundation to support more programmatic reach into rural communities is Katie Brisson, who recently transitioned from a two-year position at the Council of Michigan Foundations as a Senior Fellow embedded at the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation to a permanent position within the organization as the Senior Director of Special Initiatives. She brings more than two decades of philanthropic experience to this work, having spent 24 years at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, including 11 years as Vice President of Programs.

“There is tremendous energy and shared commitment among our partners and the inaugural cohort of Rural Philanthropy Fellows around this opportunity for impact,” said Brisson. “Meeting the evolving needs of rural communities requires us to think and act differently. By investing in local leadership and strengthening our community foundation partnerships, we are building a model that can generate meaningful outcomes for rural residents while contributing valuable insights to the broader field of philanthropy.”

The Wilson Foundation anticipates investing in future two-year fellowship cycles, informed by the feedback and learnings of the inaugural cohort, as part of its ongoing commitment to strengthening rural philanthropic leadership across both regions.

###

**ABOUT THE RALPH C. WILSON, JR. FOUNDATION:**

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is a grantmaking organization dedicated primarily to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York. The two areas reflect the devotion of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. to his hometown of Detroit and greater Buffalo, home of his beloved Buffalo Bills NFL team. Prior to his passing in 2014, Mr. Wilson provided that a significant share of his estate be used to continue a life-long generosity of spirit by funding the Foundation that bears his name. Based in Detroit, the Foundation began with a grantmaking capacity of \$1.2 billion over a 20-year period, which expires January 8, 2035. This structure is consistent with Mr. Wilson’s desire for the Foundation’s impact to be immediate, substantial, measurable, and overseen by those who knew him best. For more information visit [www.rcwjrf.org](http://www.rcwjrf.org).

**ABOUT THE HERRICK FOUNDATION:**

Founded in 1949, the Herrick Foundation seeks to empower and support organizations that strengthen communities and help people flourish. Our work is focused on underserved and overlooked communities in Southeast Michigan and communities where engaged family and Board members live. The Herrick Foundation is an invitation only grantmaker, funding anonymously in Housing, Lifelong Learning and Community Wellbeing. For more information about the Herrick Foundation visit [www.herrickfdn.org](http://www.herrickfdn.org)

**MEDIA CONTACT:**

Carly Strachan  
Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation  
313.460.8100  
[Carly.Strachan@RCWJRF.org](mailto:Carly.Strachan@RCWJRF.org)