

# Tennessee

## TN Center for Rural Innovation (TCRI)

Tennessee Tech EDA University Center

### University

Tennessee Tech

### Center Director

Bharat Soni

Michael Aikens

### Center Location

Office of Research & Economic Development

### Center since 2017

#### Center Activities

- Grow small business
- Increase access to capital and funding
- Expand agricultural innovations
- Market natural assets
- Create linkages network
- Grant writing assistance

#### Clients

- Chambers of Commerce
- Local and regional communities
- Entrepreneurs
- Existing businesses
- Healthcare institutions
- Natural resources

#### Assessment Techniques

- Business analytics and metrics
- Business growth
- Quantitative and qualitative research
- Customer satisfaction surveys

#### Contact Information

www.TechCRI.org  
info@techcri.org

Our goal for the TCRI is to create companies and build economic development through manufacturing, health care, information technology, agriculture and tourism sectors to reduce poverty levels and increase prosperity throughout Tennessee rural regions.

Today, Tennessee is ranked first in the nation for advanced industry job growth, first in foreign direct investment, and second in the nation in the growth of household median incomes. Unfortunately, this unprecedented growth is concentrated in the state's urban areas located in 17 counties and not shared by the remaining 78 rural counties, leaving many small, rural communities on the losing end of globalization and economic transition. The U.S. Economic Development Administration sponsored Tennessee Center for Rural Innovation (TCRI) is created to address this disparity.

#### Technical Assistance

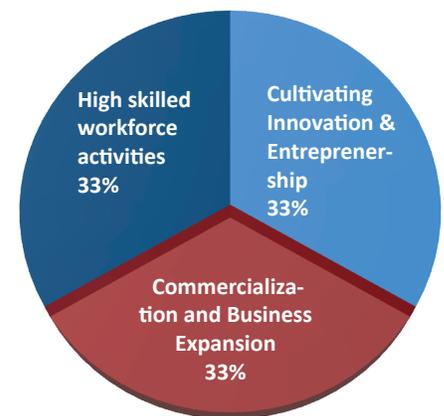
- iCube Innovation/Virtual Reality Lab
- Innovation maker space
- Entrepreneurial support via Small Business Development Center and Biz Foundry accelerator
- Grant writing
- Innovation and business training modules and workshops
- High-skilled workforce development
- Business expansion
- Economic development
- Advanced manufacturing
- Research capabilities in the areas of water, energy, agriculture, healthcare

#### How we help

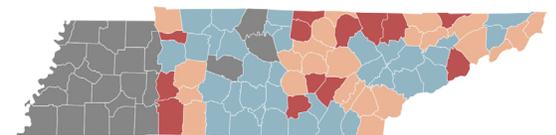
- High-Skilled Workforce Activities
- Cultivating Innovation & Entrepreneurship
- Commercialization & Business Expansion

#### Activities

- Grow Small Business & Create New Investments
- Increase Access to Capital & Funding
- Expand Agricultural Innovations
- Market & Expand Natural Assets
- Increase Technology & Healthcare Workers
- Connect Dots & Create Linkages Network



#### Service Area



The TCRI serves 44 rural counties in the middle-East region of Tennessee. The service region has a population of over 1.4 million with a combined poverty rate of 17.8%. Counties in red are considered distressed. Those in peach are at-risk, and the blue counties represent the others additionally served by the TCRI.

# Success Stories

## Clark Buford Bait Company

The TCRI's goal is to increase the economic development efforts of rural and impoverished areas. Celina resides in Clay County, which is considered economically distressed. The combined poverty rate in the TCRI's service region is 17.8%, which represents the rural counties that have not recovered from recent economic downturns and have not shared in the economic growth of the state's urban areas. Unemployment rates in these areas have remained around 6.9%, with 15.1% of these areas classified as food-insecure. The TCRI is working to develop these areas and cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit that will help the residents grow their business ideas and expand the economy in those regions.

In December 2017, the TCRI began working with the Clark Buford Bait Company (located in Celina, TN), and affiliated company Wonder Tacklebox, to do the following: develop online marketing strategies, including enhanced keyword marketing, online optimization, and target market analysis, to create and save jobs through better branding strategies and improved performance metrics.

The TCRI collaborated with the Tennessee Small Business Development Center (TSBDC), which provides free business mentoring to small businesses in the area, to develop the online and social media marketing plan. The Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD) was also involved to help provide additional loan funding to the company. The TCRI worked with four student interns to create a social media plan, produce photographs of the Wonder Tackle Box products, and create social media posts. Another student also developed imagery for online ads and social media posts. The purpose is to build the momentum for the company to sell more of its Wonder Tackle Box subscriptions.

Through these efforts, the TCRI reports that five or more jobs were saved, and four student jobs were created. The TCRI feels strongly that a new full-time private sector job could be created in response to positive outcomes from the project.

## Celina Daycare Facility

George Jones sang a song that challenged us to think of a world where no music was playing, a church where nobody was praying, and a garden where no plants were growing. That song is strangely symbolic of the rural town of Celina, Tennessee, where, believe it or not, there is not one daycare facility in the 1.7 square mile area of the tiny town. Parents and guardians are dependent entirely on family or home-based child care operations to provide for their children during work hours.

This is just the sort of project that the TCRI thrives on. The TCRI was developed to help bring an entrepreneurial spirit to rural, underserved communities in the state. It encourages residents of those towns to develop creative solutions to the problems that naturally come to economically distressed regions, like Clay County, where Celina resides.

The TCRI began working in February 2018 on the project to establish a daycare in Celina. Several discovery meetings have been held to help find a facility to house the daycare and determine the customer base and target market. The TCRI has also sought collaborations with the Tennessee Small Business Development Center to create a business plan. While the project is in the early stages and no jobs have been created yet, there will be a need for trained staff at the facility in the future, which will result in higher-level jobs for the region.

Projects like these help reverse the trends playing out in economically depressed regions of the state and metaphorically put music back in the world; praying people back in churches; and beautiful, thriving plants back in the gardens, bringing a happy ending to a tragic country song.



**Center for Rural Innovation**

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