



History and Programmatic Overview of the Economic Development Administration

EDA Program Evaluation

Brett Theodos, Leiha Edmonds, Daniel Teles, Christina Stacy, Benjamin Docter, Christopher Davis, and Jonathan Schwabish

October 2021 (updated October 29, 2021)

The US Economic Development Administration (EDA) is working with municipal governments and regional economic development partners across the country to support the nation’s recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This work by EDA follows a long history of supporting economic recovery informed by the needs of the places most affected by crises. Established in 1965, EDA supports regional economic development through investments in areas such as planning, infrastructure, small-business lending, and technical assistance to state and local governments and nonprofit organizations. This brief describes the history of EDA and contextualizes its approach to economic development. Our research builds on previous literature about EDA, EDA’s administrative data and documentation, and interviews with former and current staff at EDA and partner organizations.

This brief is one in a series of briefs detailing the Urban Institute’s evaluation of EDA (box 1). We begin by describing EDA’s origins and objectives and examining changes in its funding. We then describe EDA’s programs and their evolution. The brief is informed, in part, by 20 interviews with current or former designers, implementers, or administrators of EDA programs and partners. Interviewees included EDA regional directors, former assistant secretaries, former recipients of EDA grants, and staff members at nonprofits that partner with EDA on economic development initiatives. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of future and emerging economic development needs that EDA hopes to address through its programming.

BOX 1

Program Evaluation of the Economic Development Administration

This brief is the second in a series from the Urban Institute reporting on our evaluation of EDA and the agency's effects on local economies. The first brief describes the agency's programs and projects using EDA's administrative data from 2010 to 2019 (Theodos et al. 2021). Results are also summarized at [Urban.org/EDA](https://www.urban.org/eda).

EDA's Origins and Objectives

EDA is part of the legacy of regional development and employment efforts that the federal government began during the Great Depression and continued after World War II and into the 1960s. During the Great Depression, initiatives from the US Department of Agriculture, such as the Standard Rural Rehabilitation Loan Program (1935) and the Rural Electrification Administration (1939), placed a new emphasis on expanding infrastructure in impoverished rural communities and providing loans for farmland and equipment (Markusen and Glasmeier 2008). Around the same time, under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, the Public Works Administration, a precursor to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, instituted public housing programs, including the development of new housing.¹ In both rural and urban areas, the federal government's role in development was expanding, via programs that offered local governments capital through grants and funding for strategic planning.

The influence of the programs run by the Public Works Administration and the Agriculture Department from the 1930s through the 1950s can be seen in EDA's predecessor, the Area Redevelopment Administration, which was established in 1961. The agency reflected policymakers' belief that basic infrastructure and access to capital were the key elements for (1) mitigating uneven regional development, (2) enabling private investment in communities, (3) preventing high unemployment rates, and (4) responding to technological and industrial change (Lake et al. 2004). The Area Redevelopment Administration initially emphasized programs that could foster business capital to attract and retain private-sector investment in predominately rural communities that had traditionally been reliant on mining (Lake et al. 2004; Markusen and Glasmeier 2008). The agency was dissolved in 1965, and its functions were moved to the newly created EDA and Appalachian Regional Commission (Boyd 2011).

The 1965 Public Works and Economic Development Act established EDA within the US Department of Commerce as the successor to the Area Redevelopment Administration, emphasizing the federal government's role in supporting job creation in distressed areas and public-sector support for infrastructure development to attract long-term private investment. EDA initially focused on three types of regions: industrial areas that were behind in the adoption of new technology, degraded agricultural areas, and depleted mining areas (Boyd 2011; Glasmeier and Wood 2005; Lake et al. 2004).

From these origins, EDA’s first three programs—Public Works, Planning, and Local Technical Assistance—offered regions complementary supports for immediately addressing economic distress and for planning for long-term economic recovery and resilience. Public Works provided grants that could fund a portion of infrastructure development to attract new industries or support the modernizing of existing firms, Planning supported long-term strategies for local development, and Local Technical Assistance helped communities implement development strategies (Lake et al. 2004).

Throughout EDA’s more than 55 years of existence, these core programs have evolved to meet changing economic trends and best practices in economic development. EDA’s work is focused not only on the goals of the three original programs but also on the processes. The agency’s grants are predicated on strong regional partnerships and local participation in planning that is tailored to a region’s economic context.

Comprehensive regional plans have been a prerequisite for EDA grants since the agency’s creation. The Planning program provides funding to municipal agencies involved in economic development planning to support the formation of holistic and place-relevant strategies. These strategies are meant not only to address existing challenges but also to prepare for future economic volatility. They are intended to be rooted in a place’s economic assets and strengths. In 1969, EDA established Economic Development Districts (EDDs), primarily in multicounty regions and tribal communities, as the primary bodies to receive partnership planning grants and develop regional plans (box 2). Today, 393 EDDs are responsible for developing regional plans and act as intermediaries between government agencies and communities.

BOX 2

Economic Development Districts

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) are multijurisdictional entities that are commonly composed of two or more counties and in some instances cross state borders. EDDs help lead the locally based, regionally focused economic development planning processes that leverage the involvement of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to establish a strategic economic development plan for a region. To request designation as an EDD, an applicant must have an EDA-approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, and at least one geographic area within the designated service boundaries must meet EDA’s regional distress criteria.

The EDD planning activities were originally guided by the Overall Economic Development Program, to promote regional economic development, funded by EDA. Beginning in the late 1960s, EDA enhanced its evaluation of grant applications and established the practice that regions include proposed economic development projects in their economic development plans. In 1998, via the reauthorization of EDA, the primary tool for regional planning shifted from Overall Economic Development Program guidance and planning regulations to the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs).

These regional plans are updated every five years and continue to be a prerequisite for most EDA implementation grants (box 3).

BOX 3

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

Eligibility for EDA grants begins with the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy in an applicant's region. This plan for regional economic development is created by area stakeholders, which can include local economic development and planning agencies, chambers of commerce, and nonprofit and private developers investing in regional development. The planning strategy document allows EDA to verify that future grant investments are tailored to an area's needs and enables applicants to qualify for EDA assistance under the agency's Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance programs. In addition, a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy is a prerequisite for designation by EDA as an Economic Development District.

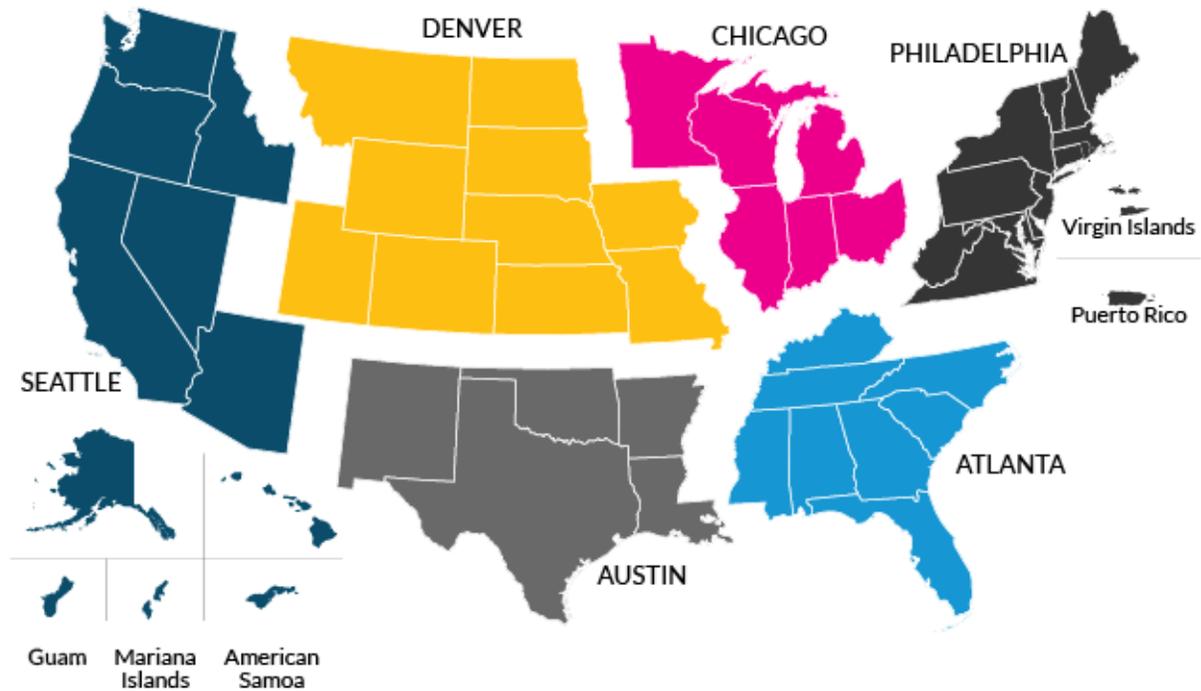
Entities that apply for EDA grants for projects (e.g., the expansion of a sewer line or the creation of a health care tech incubator) are typically from an EDD with a CEDS (i.e., they apply in higher quantities than entities without an EDD or a CEDS). EDDs can also develop and nominate projects for EDA funding. And EDDs can facilitate the EDA goal of being responsive to community needs, rather than having one approach to investment or a blanket allocation for work within a state. EDDs try to increase communication with municipalities and economic developers and secure their buy-in for economic development across a region. As a former EDA staff member described,

That's what distinguishes us, it's working with local communities—CEDS spells out local community needs regionally, not disadvantaging one town versus another to get a big project but working together for the region. EDA has people with that understanding. The regional offices, they are closest to the people where our aid and systems go, and it can't be substituted.

EDA has six regional offices that work with the EDDs and EDA's headquarters in Washington, DC, to manage EDA investments and oversee a network of state, regional, and local partners (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

The Economic Development Administration's Regional Offices



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: "Overview," US Economic Development Administration, accessed April 1, 2021, eda.gov/about/.

EDA has had regional offices since its inception, but in the late 1970s, the agency began to expand their responsibilities and to emphasize their networks of local economic development partners (Lake et al. 2004).

Building on a history of supporting regional priorities, EDA regional offices today not only facilitate EDA grant programs locally but also connect local partners with other federal resources. Economic development integration is part of EDA's mission, and regional offices can refer potential applicants or those ineligible for EDA funding to other federal programs. An EDA staff member said:

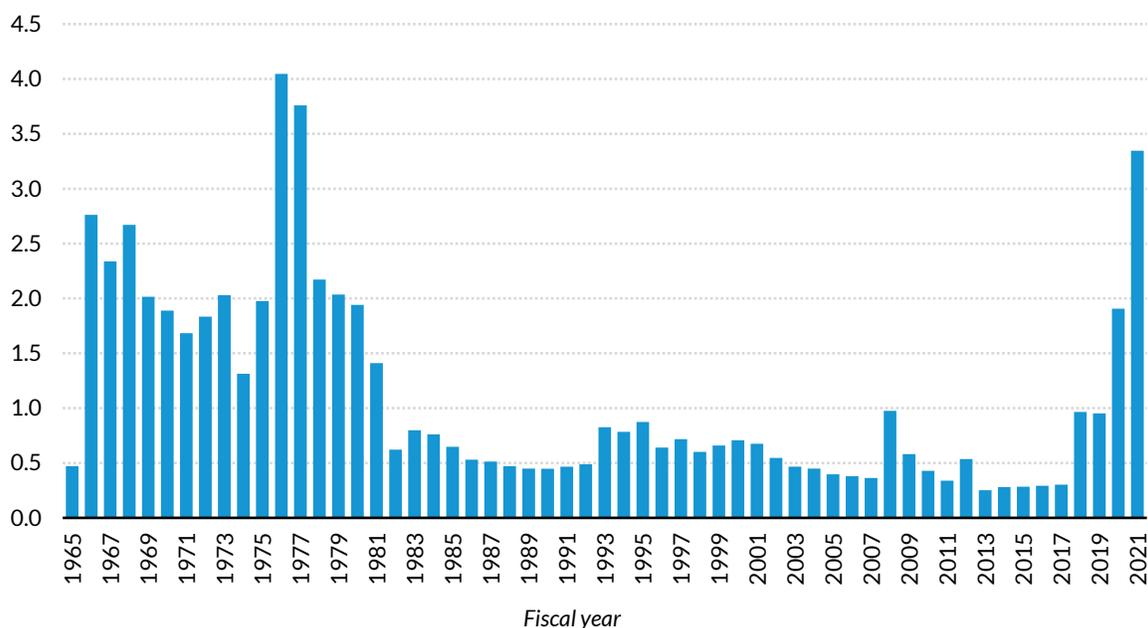
We now have staff in each of the six regional offices focused on trying to better coordinate federal resources related to economic development. So, for example, an application comes into EDA and maybe it's not the greatest fit for EDA. We don't just turn them away and say, "No, not a good fit for EDA—good luck." Instead, we provide a service to help them try to find resources from other federal agencies. So we've really strengthened our connections, whether it's through formal memorandum of understanding with [the US Department of Housing and Urban Development] and with [the US Department of Agriculture] or whether it's through just getting to know, becoming better acquainted with, the other federal agencies within the regions across the country so that we can provide referrals to each other.

This coordination enables EDA to facilitate local economic development priorities beyond the agency's scope and expand access to other federal programs.

EDA's Funding

Since nearly the inception of EDA, some presidential administrations have questioned EDA's broad authority and its potential to overlap with other federal programs. Despite these concerns, EDA's direct benefits to local and regional municipalities have ensured continued funding for the agency, primarily because of members of Congress who were focused on supporting their local constituents' economic needs. By the 1980s, the agency's early growth had diminished (figure 2), but EDA continued to implement its programs across the country.

FIGURE 2
Federal Appropriations to the US Economic Development Administration, 1965–2021
Billions of dollars



URBAN INSTITUTE

Sources: Economic Development Administration administrative data; Robert W. Lake, Robin Leichenko, Elvin Wyly, Antonia Casellas, Niki Dickerson von Lockette, Louise Stanton, Amy Glasmeier, Tracey Farrigan, and Larry Wood, *EDA and US Economic Distress, 1965–2000* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2004).

Notes: Funding levels are presented in constant 2021 dollars. The Local Public Works program was established in 1977 with \$22.65 billion in funding (in 2021 dollars) and lasted one year. This one-time funding infusion is not reflected in the annual appropriations in the figure, to better visualize annual trends for regular appropriations.

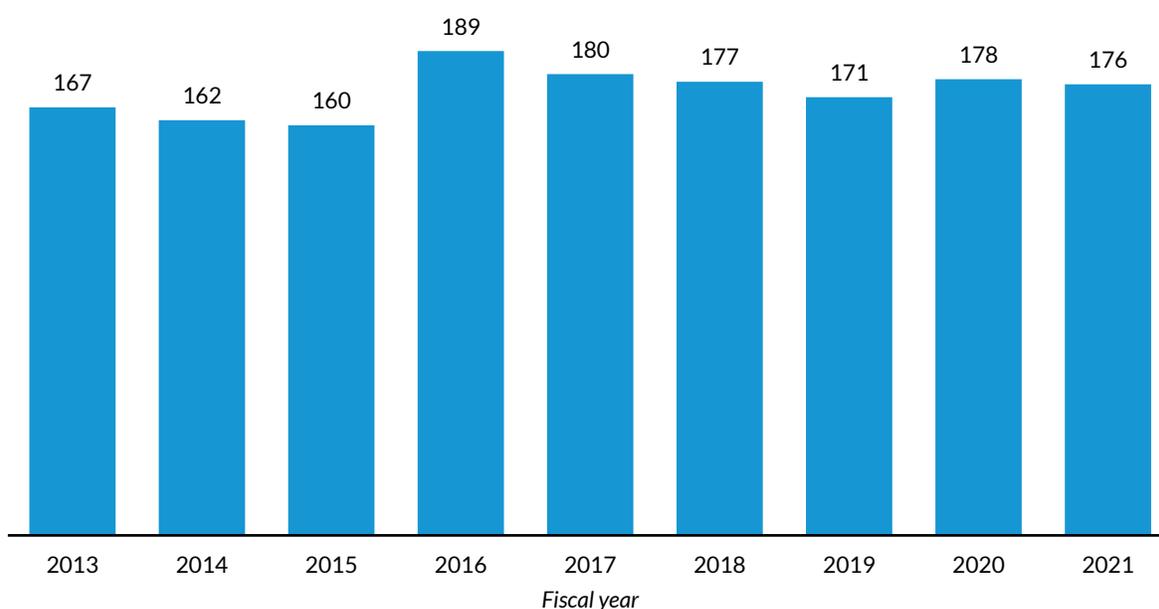
Congress did not reauthorize EDA from 1982 to 1998; instead, the agency was funded by annual appropriations. As one former staff member summarized,

For 16 of EDA's first 33 years, the agency survived by appropriations since we were not authorized. Many years, the president's budget had EDA zeroed out. Amazingly, EDA not only survived, but as evaluations showed, we performed well...Congress was very strong to fund us through appropriations because the results in their districts were always very effective.

EDA's investments in diverse regions also have helped the agency sustain bipartisan support from members of Congress whose constituents have benefited. In 1998, after a long period of diminishing funding and limited authority, EDA was reauthorized and received renewed support from both Congress and the executive branch of the federal government. However, EDA was last authorized in 2004, and its authorization expired in 2008.

One consequence of the decline in EDA funding has been fluctuating levels of staff (figure 3). In recent years, staffing levels have been as low as 160 and as high as 189.

FIGURE 3
US Economic Development Administration Staffing Levels, 2013–21



URBAN INSTITUTE

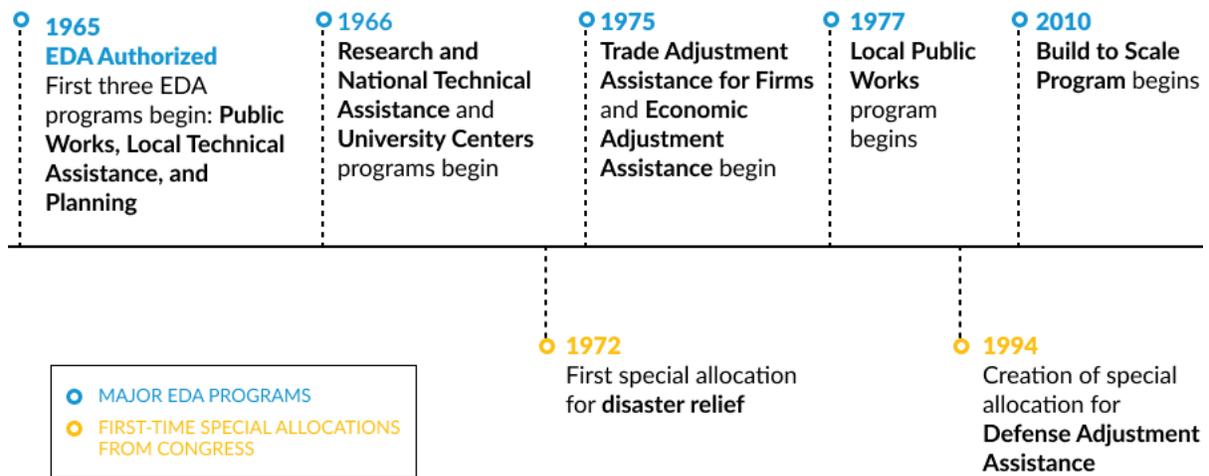
Source: Economic Development Administration administrative data.

EDA's Programs

EDA's programs and associated policy goals have evolved in response to national and regional economic trends, shifts in the understanding of best practices in economic development, and the changes to the political ideologies that prevailed in presidential administrations and congressional majorities (Lake et al. 2004). EDA has also acted in response to specific and urgent situations connected to environmental or economic crises throughout much of its history via special congressional authorizations. Figure 4 highlights the establishment of EDA's major programs and special congressional authorizations for expanded economic recovery efforts since 1965.

FIGURE 4

Timeline of US Economic Development Administration Programs



URBAN INSTITUTE

Sources: "EDA Programs," US Economic Development Administration, accessed April 1, 2021, eda.gov/programs/eda-programs/; Robert W. Lake, Robin Leichenko, Elvin Wyly, Antonia Casellas, Niki Dickerson von Lockette, Louise Stanton, Amy Glasmeier, Tracey Farrigan, and Larry Wood, *EDA and US Economic Distress, 1965–2000* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2004).

EDA’s programs grew in response to regional economic development needs. When the agency launched in 1965, it had three major programs: Public Works, Planning, and Local Technical Assistance. The Research and National Technical Assistance program and University Centers program followed shortly after, in 1966. By the 1970s, structural changes to the economy led EDA to establish two new programs, Trade Adjustment Assistance for Firms and Economic Adjustment Assistance (EAA), that aimed to address the long-term consequences of deindustrialization and the immediate challenges of firm closures in communities. The Local Public Works program emerged in the late 1970s as a one-year initiative to address the lingering issues of unemployment after the 1973 to 1975 recession. Finally, Build to Scale, formerly Regional Innovation Strategies, is the newest EDA program, developed in 2010 to support economic development focused on innovation and entrepreneurship. Among these, the eight major programs (excluding Local Public Works) continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of communities and regional economies. In this section, we discuss the programs and their evolutions in detail.

Public Works

At its start, Public Works focused on expanding road and sewer lines in communities previously unserved by public infrastructure. Today, the program invests in infrastructure development such as adding fiber-optic cable to business and industrial parks, improving water and sewer systems, developing business incubator facilities, expanding port and harbor facilities, and redeveloping brownfields.

Planning

Initially, the Planning program focused on rural communities experiencing economic decline. It then expanded to support local economic development areas (EDDs, tribal communities, and other eligible areas) with short- and long-term planning efforts in rural, suburban, and urban communities. The Planning program also supports CEDS development for regions. Using a region's CEDS, the Planning program provides tools and resources to inform economic development, such as conducting industry cluster analysis, identifying foreign direct-investment opportunities, or creating economic resiliency plans. Planning has also supported capacity building for historically underresourced regions by funding part of a local planner's salary, although this support has diminished in recent years. As an EDA grant recipient reflected,

Planning partnerships are vital to EDA's process...Often, rural communities don't have the planning capacity, so it's great to have an EDD available to do that as well as the partnership planning grant. EDA used to provide a portion of staff to local government and on the planning side. It was a unique and vital support because you are saving a lot of federal resources by putting planning behind a community, not just reaction to economic crisis after the fact.

Local Technical Assistance

EDA's first technical assistance program, Local Technical Assistance, began in 1965 and is administered by EDA's regional offices. Local Technical Assistance provides market feasibility studies to municipalities on potential economic development projects. These studies help a region determine whether it will support an activity or site—for example, an industrial park or a high-technology business incubator. In some cases, EDA's local technical assistance can prepare a region to apply for Public Works grants and other federal and state funding for development.

Research and National Technical Assistance

The Research and National Technical Assistance program funds both economic development research projects and projects that provide technical assistance with a national scope. These projects support best practices among communities trying to solve problems related to economic development goals. The program supports activities that are beneficial to the economic development community nationwide and includes outreach, training, and information dissemination.

University Centers

The University Center Economic Development Program supports institutions of higher education and consortia of universities to establish and operate centers that are focused on leveraging university assets to strengthen regional economies. University Centers provide technical assistance and planning support to local governments and businesses in their regions. In interviews, former EDA staff members described the work of the University Center model. One explained:

As part of UC capacity, we do everything from working with minority firms to running one of the oldest business incubators in the country. We've helped spawn various programs related to proofs of concept for medical devices and health IT. We focus primarily on serving universities, governments, and nonprofits, and our mission really is to help these people...We help develop strategies for those organizations to implement economic development programs.

University Centers' responsiveness to local economic development needs allows EDA to offer applied research and training to economically struggling communities that without technical assistance might not have the capacity to access EDA resources or grants.

Trade Adjustment Assistance for Firms

In the 1970s, with the rise of globalization and the decline of US industry, EDA developed programming to meet the new needs of industrial communities. One of those programs was Trade Adjustment Assistance for Firms, established in 1975. It is a national network of 11 centers that help strengthen the competitiveness of US companies which lost domestic sales and employment because of an increase in imports of similar goods and services. Through Trade Adjustment Assistance for Firms, eligible firms can receive direct technical assistance to create and implement targeted business recovery plans.

Economic Adjustment Assistance

In addition to Trade Adjustment Assistance for Firms, EDA began the Economic Adjustment Assistance program in 1975. EAA was established to help state and local governments adapt after an area loses a significant industry. EAA includes both strategy grants to support economic planning efforts and implementation grants for infrastructure improvements, including site acquisition, site preparation, construction, rehabilitation, and equipping of facilities to recruit or retain key industries. EAA frequently facilitates the development of time-sensitive initiatives such as Assistance to Coal Communities.

Additionally, EDA's revolving loan fund (RLF) efforts are administered principally through EAA. RLFs supply small-business owners and entrepreneurs with the capital needed to expand or start a business. EDA makes an average of six RLF awards annually, with award amounts generally ranging from \$800,000 to \$1.4 million (EDA, n.d.). EDA's RLF portfolio consists of more than 500 RLFs nationwide, with a combined EDA investment of more than \$560 million. The RLF portfolio has a combined capital base of approximately \$870 million (including EDA investment, grantee matching funds, and capitalized income), of which approximately \$340 million is currently available for lending.

Local Public Works (1977–78)

The Local Public Works program operated from 1977 to 1978 in response to the lingering effects of the 1973 to 1975 recession. The program, which is separate from the Public Works program, was initiated during the Ford administration, passed over the president's veto, and funded for a single year (fiscal year 1977) under the Carter administration (EDA 1980). Local Public Works received the largest single-year appropriation in EDA history. The one-year, \$22.65 billion (in 2021 dollars) effort "funded 10,600

projects to create jobs and provide capital improvements in areas of high unemployment” and “included a 10 percent set-aside for minority firms, the first use of a minority set-aside in a federal program” (Lake et al. 2004, 106).

Build to Scale

As the 2010s began, after a long period of maintaining the first seven major programs, EDA refined its focus on the knowledge economy and supporting innovation. In 2010, the agency launched its first new program in more than 20 years: Build to Scale (formerly Regional Innovation Strategies), which supports innovation and entrepreneurship through competitive grants to localities investing in new technology, incubators, and growing industries.

Build to Scale offers three categories of grants: Venture Challenge (formerly i6 Challenge), Capital Challenge (formerly Seed Fund Support), and Industry Challenge. Venture Challenge grants fund new product innovation or new technology adoption. Projects could include improving the commercialization of research in a sector or enhancing a region’s overall innovation capacity and resilience. Capital Challenge grants support the formation, launch, or scaling up of investment funds seeking to invest their capital in scalable startups or help organizations expand capital deployment within a community, region, or regional industry. Industry Challenge grants focus on entrepreneurship and accelerate the growth of businesses modernizing a particular industry.

Build to Scale’s establishment was in line with EDA’s long-term strategies. One former staff member explained,

EDA is always invested in innovative projects, meaning that what we are focused on is making economic development investments in regions to help them become more competitive in a global economy and create jobs and attract private investment through innovation. [Build to Scale] is just the newest manifestation.

EDA’s dual focus on alleviating problems associated with long-term structural change and short-term economic dislocation informs the agency’s approach to grantmaking and investment. Since its inception, EDA has tried to promote best practices in economic development and infrastructure investment. The establishment of the Stevenson-Wydler Technology Innovation Act of 1980 enabled EDA to increase support for entrepreneurship and for encouraging growing sectors like technology, health care, and light manufacturing.

Whether funding site development for a business incubator or supporting plans to expand a medical device manufacturer, EDA remains focused on place-based strategies to improve the economic vitality of a region. As one staff member who oversees performance and national programs described,

There is an increased focus [by EDA] on kind of raising the economic bar, so to speak. So looking at not just creating and retaining jobs, but how are we able to create higher-skill, higher-wage jobs, and looking at that relative to the specific areas that EDA was investing in.

The increased allocation of resources and grant opportunities through Build to Scale suggests EDA will continue to foster regional growth in innovation and entrepreneurship in the 2020s.

EDA's Expanding Role in Economic Crisis and Natural Disaster Recovery

EDA is well-positioned to respond to crises because of its local-level relationships and its expertise in economic development planning and infrastructure support that is oriented toward building economic strength and stability. After Hurricane Camille in 1969 and Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972, the Public Works and Economic Development Act was expanded to formalize EDA's authority to provide economic aid in areas affected by natural disasters (Lake et al. 2004). Since then, Congress has targeted special appropriations to EDA in response to economic crises and natural disasters. This supplemental funding has expanded EDA's role in disaster recovery initiatives and influenced its growth, especially in the past two decades. The agency's work not only addresses a community's pressing crisis but also works to prevent the next one. As one staff member explained,

For disaster recovery, we have a network of 393 EDDs—local officials, private-sector stakeholders, regional offices, and economic development specialists. We can implement projects on the public works side if the need bends toward rebuilding infrastructure, and we can support the planning for recovery.

EDA's recovery work also includes responding to sudden, human-made crises such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and large-scale declines in an industry. Also, beginning in the 1980s, EDA has been involved with Base Realignment and Closure activities in coordination with the US Department of Defense. This work eventually grew into a special allocation for Defense Adjustment Assistance in 1994 to support regions with decommissioned military bases as they develop new strategies for economic development. As a former regional director described,

When communities are impacted by a Base Realignment and Closure, generally EDA can help plan for reuse and then invest in projects to help communities overcome the closings. Successes can be found all over the country...[and] have resulted in greater civilian employment than was lost in [Department of Defense] employment.

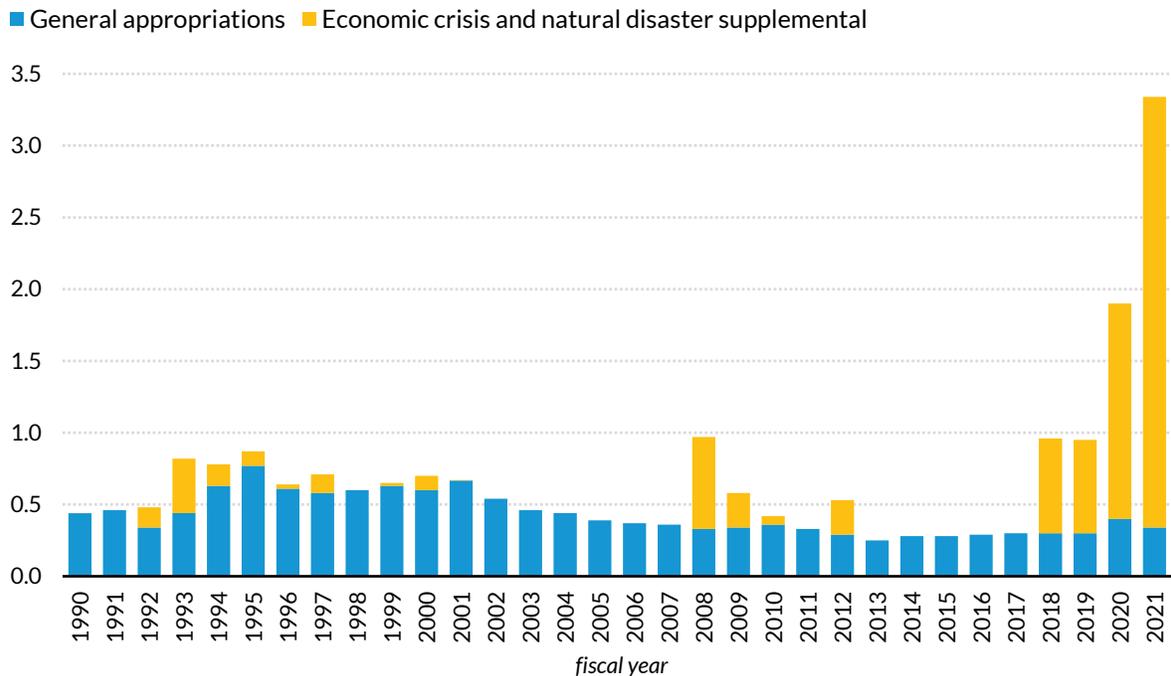
Additional funding to respond to significant economic crises, beyond traditional appropriations, often goes through EDA's EAA program. For example, in 2016 in response to coal industry declines and nuclear plant closures, Congress initiated additional funding for EDA targeted at communities affected by the decline of coal and nuclear energy companies. This funding grew into the Assistance to Coal Communities and the Assistance to Nuclear Closure Communities initiatives, which supported economic transition strategies (Lawhorn 2021).

Although EDA remains a small federal agency, its allocations for disaster response often considerably expand its grantmaking budget (figure 5).

FIGURE 5

EDA Economic Crisis and Natural Disaster Supplemental and General Appropriations, 1990–2021

Billions of dollars



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Economic Development Administration administrative data.

Notes: EDA = US Economic Development Administration. Funding levels are presented in constant 2021 dollars. Data are only available for 1990 to 2021.

EDA has long been involved in crisis and disaster recovery, but that work has increased in recent years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, EDA received federal funding to support economic recovery as part of the response. A former EDA staff member said: “EDA’s role in disaster recovery has changed dramatically in the last 10 years, including support for national disaster response. The COVID supplemental funds are more than EDA’s annual appropriation.” In 2020, EDA’s total operating budget was \$1.91 billion, with \$1.5 billion coming from the supplemental appropriations to EDA through the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act. In 2021, EDA’s budget was \$3.35 billion, with \$3.0 billion coming from the supplemental appropriations to EDA through the American Rescue Plan Act.

Looking to the future, interviews with EDA staff members suggest the agency will continue to build on its strong foundation in recovery efforts and increasingly focus on resilience planning and preparedness. One EDA staff member described the shift in CEDS planning that captures this emphasis on resilience:

EDA is asking regions to be resilient to disasters obviously, but even more broadly to any type of economic disruption. So if there’s a downturn in the economy or loss of a major employer, you have the wherewithal as a region to kind of bounce back and bounce back better from those types of disruptions.

In addition, EDA's natural disaster response informs how the agency refines its practices when meeting the needs of communities in crisis. A former director of a University Center advocated for EDA to expand investment in infrastructure and people through recovery work: "I know that getting power back and getting the hospitals up and running and making sure the roads are passable are extremely important. But there are also the people who live in these places, who are going to be the ones that help you get back quickest, and they also happen to be the most resource-starved...Bricks and mortar without people who are skilled to do the work of recovery beyond basic infrastructure projects, I think [we need people] to solve these long-term recovery problems."

As EDA looks to the future of regional collaboration, EDA staff members emphasized in interviews the growing practice of coordinating with other federal agencies and improving the experience of EDA's local grantees as they navigate the landscape of federal programs and eligibility. This coordination often occurs on projects that require the involvement of multiple federal agencies—for example, when EDA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development are tasked with providing support after a flooding event. In some cases, EDA has joined pilot programs that intentionally coordinate interagency work. A former EDA staff member said:

EDA joined an [Environmental Protection Agency-led] interagency team in a very focused and coordinated manner through their Brownfield pilots and their showcase community where multiple federal agencies would kind of show up on the ground to help communities overcome those problems [around brownfields].

Conclusion

At EDA's founding, the directive from Congress was to target federal resources to economically distressed areas to help develop local economies. EDA focused on investing in infrastructure and increasing local economic developers' capacity through technical assistance so communities facing economic instability—from, for example, the departure of a major employer—would have the tools to recover. Rural and urban communities that lagged in economic development, industrial growth, and personal income were eligible for EDA assistance. Over the next five and a half decades, EDA focused on the mandates of supporting economic growth and assisting economically distressed communities while evolving programs to address new economic needs (Mulock 2002). As a member of EDA staff described, "EDA helps communities and regions build the capacity for economic development, assisting them in better understanding their challenges and better leveraging their assets so that the private sector can succeed."

Over its 56 years of existence, EDA has consistently supported regional economic development through investments in planning, infrastructure, and technical assistance while adjusting its strategies and methods to remain relevant to grantees' needs. The agency's emphasis on local and regional partnerships and leadership in disaster recovery and its growing focus on innovation inform previous grant successes and plans for future work. Many staff members interviewed about the agency reflected that it continues to focus on improving its programming, partner coordination, and support for grantees. A staff member said: "We're still growing and learning today. I think we've learned a lot from our natural

disaster recovery experience about how we can bring different federal, state, and local actors together in a more coordinated, cohesive manner and get to better overall economic recovery.”

The staff members we spoke with hope to build on EDA’s growing portfolio of disaster recovery work while retaining the strong investment in regional planning and infrastructure development that make communities more resilient to economic instability.

Note

- ¹ “US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1930 to 2020,” HUD User, accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.huduser.gov/hud_timeline/.

References

- Boyd, Eugene. 2011. *Economic Development Administration: A Review of Elements of Its Statutory History*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
- EDA (Economic Development Administration). 1980. *Local Public Works Program, Final Report: Creating Jobs through Public Works Projects in Areas of High Unemployment*. Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration.
- . n.d. “[Economic Adjustment Assistance Revolving Loan Fund \(RLF\) Program](#).” Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration.
- Glasmeyer, Amy, and Lawrence Wood. 2005. “Policy Debates Analysis of US Economic Development Administration Expenditure Patterns over 30 Years.” *Regional Studies* 39 (9): 1261–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400500390081>.
- Lake, Robert W., Robin Leichenko, Elvin Wyly, Antonia Casellas, Niki Dickerson von Lockette, Louise Stanton, Amy Glasmeyer, Tracey Farrigan, and Larry Wood. 2004. *EDA and US Economic Distress, 1965–2000*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.
- Lawhorn, Julie M. 2021. “[The Economic Development Administration’s Assistance to Coal and Nuclear Closure Communities Initiatives for Economic Transitions](#).” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
- Markusen, Ann, and Amy Glasmeyer. 2008. “Overhauling and Revitalizing Federal Economic Development Programs.” *Economic Development Quarterly* 22 (2): 83–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891242408314281>.
- Mulock, Bruce K. 2002. “Economic Development Administration: Overview and Issues.” Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
- Theodos, Brett, Leih Edmonds, Daniel Teles, Christina Stacy, Christopher Davis, Benjamin Docter, and Jonathan Schwabish. 2021. “Economic Development Administration Programs and Project Types: EDA Program Evaluation.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Errata

This brief was revised on October 29, 2021, to correct the titles of three authors. Daniel Teles is a senior research associate, Christina Stacy is a principal research associate, and Christopher Davis is a data scientist.

About the Authors

Brett Theodos is a senior fellow in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute and director of the Community Economic Development Hub.

Leiha Edmonds is a former research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, where she conducted mixed-methods research focused on community and economic development and place-based policy initiatives.

Daniel Teles is a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, where he specializes in applied microeconomic policy analysis.

Christina Stacy is a principal research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, where she specializes in urban economics and inclusion.

Benjamin Docter is a former research assistant in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center.

Christopher Davis is a data scientist in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center.

Jonathan Schwabish is a senior fellow in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute and a member of Urban's communications team, where he specializes in data visualization and presentation design.

Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the US Economic Development Administration. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © October 2021. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.