




## 16: Connecting Rural Development Strategies and USDA Resources to Work Ready Communities

Rural America is facing some incredible challenges. When rural students graduate high school many of them move away to urban areas. The up-and-coming generation tends to overlook their opportunities in rural areas. This hurts the economy of local communities, including those in Southwest Tennessee.

The Southwest Tennessee Rural Workforce Readiness Collaborative is working to reverse this problem. By building a comprehensive approach to help bridge the skills gap, they're beginning to show students the opportunities around them for meaningful employment in great-paying careers—like manufacturing and construction—and then providing the path.

In order to strengthen the workforce across four rural counties, the collaborative pursued—and received—a first-of-its-kind \$250,000 grant from the [USDA](#). It will likely serve as a national model for similar programs across the nation seeking to build on the success of ACT® Work Ready Communities and generate investment in the talent pipeline.

**“Number one indicator of success in their research is hope; I don’t think you can have hope without having hope for a career and a living wage job. I think ultimately we want them all to have hope”**

On this episode of the ACT  #ReadyforWork podcast, we're joined by Joe T. Wood and Jim Tracy. They discuss the importance of workforce development in rural areas, the technology that the USDA's grant is making possible, the implementation of ACT programs, and what's happening next.

## Join the Conversation

Jasen Jones:	<a href="#">@JasenCJones</a>
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Jim Tracy:	<a href="#">@JimTracy</a>
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## Resources

[Presentation from Joe T. Wood and Jim Tracy at ACT Workforce Summit](#)

[Grant Announcement from USDA and TN Board of Regents](#)

[Functionality of the new Southwest TN Career Readiness Network](#)

[USDA Rural Community Development Initiative](#)

[ACT® Work Ready Communities](#)

[ACT® Workforce Solutions](#)

## About Our Guests

**Joe T. Wood** worked in public education since 1986, serving as a teacher, coach, building administrator, and superintendent. Joe served with Battelle for Kids for six years serving as the statewide coordinator for Tennessee. Currently, Joe is the Workforce Coordinator for the Henderson County Alliance based in Lexington Tennessee. Joe's background includes service with various local, state, and national boards for multiple organizations such as the Tennessee School Board Association, Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents, AASA, and MSSC Advisory Board, among others.

**Jim Tracy** brings 13 years of experience serving as Tennessee State Senator for the 14th Senatorial District, where he was a strong advocate for rural and agriculture issues. Jim's ties to agriculture began in his youth when he was active in 4-H and on the family farm. He grew up in West Tennessee, where his father was a county extension agent. Tracy also has 24 years' experience as a small business owner and early in his career, and he taught Agricultural Education in high school. Jim and his family reside in Shelbyville, TN. As State Director with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, Tracy uses his leadership experience to oversee programs in a customer-focused manner to restore prosperity in rural Tennessee.