

Rural Practice Brief

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The Walsh Center
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NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Supporting Change Agents across Sectors to Improve Health and Equity in Rural Communities

Background

Rural communities have remarkable strengths, assets, and change agents across sectors that are often overlooked when developing strategies to improve rural health and equity in the U.S. Rural health inequities are well-documented,^{1,2,3,4} and it is important to address the root causes of these inequities. Alleviating poverty and ensuring gainful employment are primary priorities and challenges in rural areas because they are critical for strong, thriving, and healthy communities. Further, rural communities experience challenges ensuring access to high-quality health care, infrastructure and built environment that supports healthy living, clean environments, and social conditions that promote overall well-being. Despite these challenges, it is also essential to leverage the strengths and assets of rural people and places that serve as protective factors and provide opportunities to improve rural health and equity. Health equity has been defined as, “having a fair and just opportunity to be healthier, this requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.”⁵ Change agents across sectors and ties between community champions and organizations can help address community challenges.⁶ The importance of recognizing change agents across multiple sectors to improving health and equity is even more pronounced in rural areas where interdisciplinary teams may be more common and where aspects of rural culture reinforce independence, innovation, and community engagement.⁷ Motivated by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s vision for building a Culture of Health, where everyone in America has the opportunity for health and well-being,⁸ the NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis conducted formative research to explore opportunities that will accelerate changes to improve health and equity in rural communities. This work enhances understanding of assets in rural communities and regions, identifies key partners and change agents with the potential to improve health and equity, and suggests opportunities for action for philanthropies, government agencies, and other community partners.

The findings from this project are highlighted in three practice briefs. This brief describes findings related to change agents across sectors. Two other briefs describe findings

related to leveraging local culture and history as assets and recommendations for philanthropies and government agencies. The briefs and final report are available on the NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis website (<http://www.norc.org/About/Departments/Pages/public-health-research/walsh-center-rural-health-analysis.aspx>)

Change Agents, Champions, and Partners across Sectors

Findings from our project highlight the value of engaging existing networks, partnerships, and anchor institutions (trusted organizations grounded in the community that often do not move or change location despite changes in the community)⁹ to impact

Key Findings

- Recognizing change agents across sectors and fostering cross-sector collaboration is important to improving health and equity in rural communities.
- Cross-sector change agents that are particularly important to improving health and equity include residents, schools, faith-based organizations, cooperative extension, planning and development, health care and public health, employers, transportation, local government and public safety, local media, and finance.
- Key recommendations for state and national partners to support cross-sector change agents include:
 - Engagement of local conveners, organizations, and networks.
 - Forums for learning across rural communities to facilitate new ideas, dissemination of promising practices, and networking.
 - Development of cross-sector advisory panels to inform rural implementation efforts.
 - Support for economic development efforts to have upstream impacts on health and well-being.
 - Further study of formal and informal cross-sector networks and partnerships to understand how they can be mobilized for change.

health and equity in rural communities. A sampling of important change agents across sectors include:

“If you are thinking about [change agents in] these rural environments, it’s going to depend on what is the trusted brand... Community colleges have done a good job and they try to anchor themselves in the community. Libraries work to be that anchor too and be responsive to the needs of their community. Faith-based organizations are often key for health, wealth, and self and they are always key when it comes to bringing change.”

Residents. Participants described rural residents as one of the key partners in mobilizing change for their communities. Residents can include those that community-based organizations aim to serve, community advocates, energetic and engaged community members, and those with whom residents regularly interact, such as hairdressers, beauticians, shop owners, and cashiers.

Schools and Post-Secondary Institutions. Schools were described as one of the primary anchor institutions in rural communities, and school leaders and board members were described as important change agents. In general, the education sector was frequently described as a critical partner in implementing any type of community change. The physical school building can serve as a gathering space in rural communities, and school activities were cited as opportunities for people to congregate and potentially discuss important health topics. It was noted that schools also serve as a community hub, providing job and vocational training, as well as direct access to health services through school-based health clinics. Several specific programs were provided as examples, including one that links farmers markets with school health and nutrition programs. Community colleges were also highlighted as key partners for their ability to bring communities together to understand and address issues impacting a community.

Faith-Based Organizations. Faith-based organizations and places of worship were described as trusted agents that provide a communal space where people regularly convene and discuss important issues. Participants highlighted the important role of churches—noting that they are highly respected and important places to find and grow talent, particularly among youth. Research suggests that religious leaders and congregants who take leadership roles can serve as both champions and change agents.¹⁰ Faith leaders bring credibility to health programs and initiatives and can help generate buy-in among their congregants. Pastors, local clergy, and other religious leaders were described as important change agents and figures in many rural communities, serving as counselors, community-activists, and community mobilizers.

Cooperative Extension. Land grant college cooperative extension programs exist in or near almost every rural county in the U.S. These programs provide knowledge-based resources to rural residents; extension offices often serve as a community gathering place, and extension agents are frequently viewed as a trusted community resource.¹¹ Many extension agents focus on family and consumer sciences, making them a key partner in addressing issues related to health and community development. Extension programs often have newsletters, which highlight

local community stories and feature examples of community development and transformation. Participants described the important role of extension programs in conducting research on topics directly connected to local needs, such as helping farmers understand and mitigate the impacts of climate change, weather patterns, and diseases relevant to the region. Extension offices in some rural areas conduct community-based participatory research, directly involving the community in learning and action, and ultimately implementing change.¹²

Planning and Development. The community planning and development sector, including regional development organizations,¹³ focuses on building sustainable infrastructure and community capacity. Regional development organizations play several roles in strengthening rural communities, including serving as conveners, resource connectors, backbone network organizations, capacity builders, project managers, and technical assistance providers. Participants described that the nature of their work requires collaboration with other sectors, so they also help other sectors work together more effectively towards mutually beneficial goals. Regional development organizations have contributed to the overall well-being of rural communities by focusing on economic development, more broadly, and by creating an environment where people and businesses will want to locate, such as through the development of trails, water and sewer lines, and housing.

Health Care and Public Health. Participants described that hospitals and other partners in the health sector can serve as change agents by assuring and coordinating services in communities, providing direct funding for care and community health initiatives, and connecting residents to health and social services. In addition to hospitals, local health departments and federally qualified health centers were highlighted as additional health sector organizations that provide life-saving and life-improving services such as direct health care services, immunizations, school health programs, community health assessments, public health nursing programs, community health worker programs, and emergency services. Participants described that these organizations are embedded within their communities and contribute to improving health and equity by providing resources to educate and motivate residents to address health issues.

Employers. Public and private sector employers bolster the local economy and often support the implementation of new programs and initiatives. Key sector partners such as hospitals and school systems also serve as large community employers, and can impact the local economy through investments in their workforce. Notably, employers in rural communities often share health insurance providers, providing opportunities to leverage insurer funding to support health promotion activities within the community. Locally-owned business were also highlighted as key partners based on their frequent willingness to invest in community-based initiatives. Further, local chambers of commerce often serve to connect these businesses and may be additional partners to promote community activities to improve health and equity.

Community-Based Organizations. Community-based organizations can also be important partners since they are actively identifying opportunities to improve health and

equity in communities. Housing and social service agencies were also highlighted as key community partners with a keen understanding of community need. According to participants, many of these organizations are beginning to partner with health care organizations in new and innovative ways, such as sharing office space and staff, as well as sharing grant resources and funding, all for the benefit of the community.

Public Libraries. Public libraries were described by research participants as a convening place for community members. Public libraries are open to everyone regardless of belief or association, making them a common place for people to congregate and participate in community life. In general, research suggests that people visiting public libraries use many of the resources to obtain health information.¹⁴ Librarians provide valuable information to their communities and may offer structured lessons and classes to build skills, including job training.

Transportation. Transit agencies and transportation programs can play a role in economic development and supply services that are critical to community life and equity, providing transportation to places of employment, health care facilities and other locations. Some of the key partners in the transportation field mentioned by participants include Department of Transportation regional offices, local transit agencies, and private transit companies.

Local Government and Public Safety. Participants highlighted the critical role of government, elected officials, and other community leaders as change agents in rural communities. Several examples of champions include the mayor, police chief, local county commissioner, city manager, fire officials, and emergency management. Similarly, parks, recreation, and tourism networks in rural communities were highlighted as important partners because they are embedded within the built environment, provide access to physical and social activities, and improve quality of life.

Local Media. Participants emphasized the continued role of local media, news outlets and newspapers, which continue to educate and inform rural community members about new initiatives and community-based activities. These media outlets were seen as an untapped partner in some locations since many residents continue to receive information from these sources daily.

Finance. Finally, financial institutions, including locally-owned banks and credit unions, and community development financial institutions (CDFIs), were seen as having a strong sense of the types of initiatives that are most likely to succeed in a given location and directly investing in residents and the local economy. These institutions help meet the financial needs of the community and can provide economic protections for residents by allowing them to avoid predatory lenders and helping people establish bank accounts.

Fostering Cross-Sector Engagement to Leverage Rural Assets

Implementing cross-sector approaches to improve health and equity may be particularly helpful in rural communities with limited resources. Recommendations for engaging cross-sector partners include:

Recommendation #1 - Foster Cross-Sector Collaboration

State and national partners can support and expand community-level cross-sector collaboration:

- Encourage national associations to work with their regional and state affiliates to serve as cross-sector conveners and to facilitate coordination across sectors.
- Develop rural cross-sector network development programs to engage local partners working toward common goals.

“Rural communities are used to working collaboratively and working with partners, and you can’t avoid it. [People] will talk with one another and talk about common ground and solutions. There is tenacity, resiliency, [and a sense that] ‘we are going to figure it out.’”

Recommendation #2 - Foster Cross-Sector Learning across Communities

A strong theme that emerged was a desire among change agents in rural communities to learn from one another. Participants discussed the value of shared learning, and expressed a desire to know how other rural communities are implementing cross-sector solutions to community health problems. Approaches to fostering cross-sector learning include:

- Integrate peer-learning into existing programs and efforts.
- Develop a rural peer-learning community or “community of practice” for cross-sector rural community leaders, coalitions, and groups working to improve health and equity in their communities.¹⁵

Recommendation #3 - Develop Rural Cross-Sector Advisory Panel

Rural community health efforts should be designed to reflect rural context, assets, and to engage change agents across sectors. State and national partners could support the development and facilitation of cross-sector panels to plan and structure rural implementation efforts and develop recommendations and policy briefs. The cross-sector panel can:

- Include cross-sector experts with extensive experience working with and supporting rural communities.
- Disseminate and vet recommendations to regional and local affiliates in order to facilitate local implementation.

Recommendation #4 - Support Economic Development Efforts

Poverty is a powerful determinant of health and equity, and there is limited access to job opportunities and economic resources in many rural communities. Cross-sector partners can support rural economic development efforts that will have upstream impacts on the health and well-being of rural communities:

- Invest in rural economies beyond the health care sector - investments that build infrastructure and support small businesses can have direct impacts on health and equity in rural communities.
- Increase collaboration between the health care sector and the community development and economic development sectors

by formalizing relationships and fostering opportunities for partnership.

- Support rural economies by engaging in rural wealth creation,¹⁶ an economic development approach that leverages multiple forms of capital and assets to build prospering communities for all residents.

Recommendation #5 – Continued Rural Learning

There is a need for further research to identify and expand opportunities to improve health and equity in rural communities using cross-sector approaches. Areas of further investigation include:

- Understanding informal rural networks to determine how they can be mobilized for change.
- Exploring facilitators to developing and maintaining cross-sector partnerships in rural communities to sustain mutually beneficial cross-sector engagement.

Conclusion

This project highlighted the importance of engaging existing networks, partnerships, and anchor institutions in rural communities to improve health and equity. Change agents across sectors from within rural communities bring an understanding of local culture, history, assets, and challenges, and play many important roles in the community. Engagement across change agents from multiple sectors is critical in order to overcome challenges in implementing programs, policies, and practices that advance health and equity in rural communities, since not one sector can succeed alone.

Methodology

The NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis utilized a qualitative design to explore assets that can be leveraged to improve health and equity in rural communities. Grounded by an asset-based community development framework¹⁷ and the social ecological model,¹⁸ we used a capacity-oriented approach to identify opportunities to improve health and equity in rural communities. This framework focuses on strengths and assets in communities rather than needs and deficiencies. Research questions for this study were designed in collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Informed by an extensive literature synthesis of rural assets, we developed a rural asset map to guide our study. The asset map included rural culture and history as important assets. Findings and recommendations were reviewed and refined by over 400 national, regional and local cross-sector stakeholders who participated in a national discussion forum, key informant interviews, regional community forums, regional vetting sessions, and national conferences.

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