

Rural Practice Brief

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The Walsh Center
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NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Recommendations for Philanthropies and Government Agencies to Improve Health and Equity in Rural Communities

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 Philanthropies and government agencies are well positioned to leverage these assets in ways that can improve rural health and equity. 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,⁶ 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 recommendations for philanthropies and government agencies. Two other briefs describe findings related to leveraging local culture and history as assets and change agents across sectors. 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>).

Key Findings

Recommendations for philanthropies and government agencies to improve health and equity in rural communities include:

- Leverage existing programs, practices, and policies by highlighting the work of rural grantees.
- Incorporate rural components into existing program efforts.
- Adapt funding and grant structures to help rural communities overcome barriers to accessing resources.
- Provide opportunities to all rural communities, including those that need to build initial capacities or have historically lacked external funding sources.
- Strengthen community and organizational capacities to support program planning and implementation.
- Pilot efforts in rural communities to develop scalable evidence-based practices.
- Build the evidence base of what works – and what does not work – to improve health and equity in rural communities.

Opportunities for Action to Improve Health and Equity in Rural Communities

Our research points to several opportunities for philanthropies and government agencies to leverage communities' strengths and change agents across sectors to improve health and equity in rural America. Opportunities for action reflect common themes among project participants and were generated through an interpretation of findings and recommendations. A sample of opportunities for funders to improve health and equity in rural communities are described below; a full set of recommendations is included in the final project report.

Recommendation #1 - Leverage Existing Efforts to Impact Rural Communities

Many philanthropies and government agencies already support rural communities through existing initiatives, and can leverage and elevate existing efforts by highlighting the work of rural grantees and partners. Specifically, philanthropies and government agencies can:

- Create a rural focus within existing programs by highlighting the work of rural grantees and partners through briefs, webinars, conference presentations, and other strategies.
- Evaluate rural components of existing programs, and explore facilitators of and barriers to positive change in rural communities.
- Package and disseminate existing rural work to stimulate replication and adoption of programs and strategies elsewhere.

Further, there are opportunities to identify avenues to add rural components to other existing programs, policies, and practices to improve health and equity. Philanthropies and government agencies can:

- Consider rural “carve outs” in funding opportunities.
- Tailor grant programs or interventions to reflect rural priorities and context so they can be implemented in rural communities.
- Partner with associations and organizations that serve rural communities to ensure dissemination and/or adoption of promising strategies.

Recommendation #2 - Adapt Funding Strategies to Support Rural Communities

Philanthropies and government agencies can adapt funding strategies and grant structures to address rural barriers to participation in grant programs in a variety of ways:

- Allow for longer funding cycles, providing initial support to identify and leverage existing assets, build local capacity, and generate needed buy-in.

- Provide support for operational and indirect expenses to allow rural communities to build organizational capacities.
- Adapt matching requirements for communities with limited financial resources, such as through in-kind or partner support.
- Balance the need for consistently structured programs with flexibility to address local priorities, context and assets.

Recommendation #3 - Provide Opportunities for All Rural Communities

Philanthropies and government agencies could consider criteria that would identify rural communities that are ready for change but may lack certain capacities, such as grant writing, in addition to funding communities that already have established capacities. Opportunities to support all rural communities include:

- Develop grant criteria that reward success factors such as having a trusted, local champion, a strong existing network, or other assets that could potentially be mobilized for change.
- Partner with regional and state organizations to identify communities that have historically lacked external resources and support, but can still demonstrate potential to leverage assets to address needs.

Recommendation #4 - Strengthen Community Implementation Capacity

Philanthropies and government agencies can strengthen community implementation capacity in rural communities. Opportunities to increase capacity in rural communities include:

- Grow rural leaders by enhancing individual-level knowledge and skills.
- Support community visioning⁷ and strategic planning.
- Strengthen networks of community stakeholders, including peer-to-peer organizational mentorship.
- Enhance community grant writing skills.
- Support robust evaluation of rural programs to build a rural evidence base.
- Support the collection and analysis of local qualitative and quantitative data.
- Identify, document and disseminate best practices.
- Support community-level engagement in local and regional policy and advocacy.
- Increase the use of information technology.

Recommendation #5 - Consider Rural Communities as Program Pilot Sites

Rural communities are well suited to pilot efforts to improve health and equity; specifically, programs can be tested on a smaller scale with fewer confounding factors. Recommendations for philanthropies and government agencies to leverage rural communities to test interventions include:

- Use rural communities to pilot test programs for potential replication and scalability to other communities.
- Leverage rural assets, such as creativity and innovation, to identify new models and strategies for addressing health and equity.
- Offer pilot grants, seed funding, mini-grants, and demonstration project as strategies to test locally identified strategies.

Recommendation #6 - Build the Rural Evidence Base

Strategies for philanthropies and government agencies to help to build an evidence base of what works to improve health and equity in rural communities include:

- Support local program evaluation and data collection strategies.
- Increase research and evaluation capacity, fund evaluations for rural programs, and provide opportunities for technical assistance.
- Identify measures of success and impact that consider rural context by using community-based participatory research strategies.
- Incorporate qualitative data collection methods in assessments and evaluations as a complement to quantitative data to document program processes and outcomes.
- Utilize developmental evaluation strategies⁸ to study and document the way relationships in rural communities form, prior to beginning work and change over time to demonstrate changes in community capacity.

Conclusion

Through this project, we identified several recommendations to help guide the efforts of philanthropies and government agencies to engage with and support rural communities to improve health and equity. Philanthropies and government agencies may be able to adapt existing program activities to benefit rural communities, and may consider other focused approaches to strengthen and empower rural communities to partner and collaborate on solutions to locally-identified priorities.

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 framework⁹ and the social ecological model,¹⁰ 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. 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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