



Context Matters:  
Recommendations for Funders & Program Developers  
Supporting Implementation in Rural Communities

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This white paper explores how funders and program developers can partner with rural communities to achieve improved outcomes for individuals and families.

## Introduction

46.2 million people live in rural communities in the United States: approximately 15% of the total population (USDA, 2016). Rural communities in the United States have struggled for decades with declining employment opportunities and the subsequent health and wellbeing challenges linked with resulting poverty (USDA, 2016). While research and policy have increasingly focused on the importance of using data and evidence to guide the implementation of effective health and human services, little attention has been paid to the challenges of effective implementation in rural areas faced with the twin burden of high need and limited resources (Smith, Adimu, Martinez & Minyard, 2016).

This white paper explores how funders and program developers can partner with rural communities to achieve improved outcomes for individuals and families. Research on implementation of health and human services programming over the past decade demonstrates that achieving outcomes requires not just effective practices or strong communities, but three aligned and interdependent implementation components.

**Figure 1**



The first component is the Effective Innovation. Effective innovations are programs or practices rooted and informed by research evidence. Much health and human services research is focused on generating these innovations. The second component is Effective Implementation. Effective implementation is the translation of the research-based innovation in the real world with fidelity. (Greenhalgh et al, 2004; Fixsen, Naoom, Friedman & Wallace, 2005; Chambers et al 2013 Waltz, Powell Et al, 2015). The third component is Enabling Context. Enabling context is the environment and capacity within a community and system, including policy and socio-economic factors, that make it possible to implement the innovation. (Wandersman, Duffy, Flaspohler et al, 2008; Damshroder & Lowery, 2013) To achieve socially significant outcomes, all three components must be present. Missing any one component can compromise the entire model.

In rural communities, these three components are difficult to build and sustain. Funders and program developers must adopt new and creative approaches to implementation in order to address the complexities of the rural environment. This white paper draws upon lessons learned in several rural and frontier National Implementation Research Network projects in order to provide recommendations for implementation in rural communities. First, we will provide a summary of challenges and opportunities that impact implementation in rural communities. Next, we examine how rural communities' challenges hinder their ability to develop and sustain capacity to implement effectively in the current funding climate. Finally, we present four recommendations for funders and program developers to leverage rural communities' strengths in order to support implementation efforts.

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## Implementation in the rural environment: Challenges & opportunities

### **Rural Communities: Challenges**

Rural communities are burdened by the twin challenges of higher burden from poverty and poor health, and fewer human and material resources with which to address that burden.

Individuals in rural communities experience higher rates of mortality and morbidity than individuals living in other communities. Rural residents die earlier, experience higher rates of chronic health conditions, and are more likely to engage in high-risk health behaviors than suburban peers (Eberhardt & Pamuk, 2004). Children in rural areas are significantly more likely than suburban or urban children to be poor, to be overweight or obese, and to experience adverse childhood events (U.S. DHHS 2015).

Many health disparities that rural residents experience are caused by limited access to resources. The United States Census Bureau defines rurality as low population density (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). But rural communities are also characterized by physical isolation from centers of power and limited access to physical, economic and cultural resources (Mol & Spaargaren, 2006). Rural residents face limited access to individual-level resources such as income, wealth and education; for example, median earnings are lower and the poverty rate is substantially higher in rural as compared to non-rural communities (USDA, 2016). Rural residents also face limited access to structural-level resources such as services, facilities, and funding; for example, rural communities have fewer health and mental health care providers



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per capita than other areas (NRHA 2012). Rural communities are also less likely to have access to neighborhood amenities, such as parks or libraries, or public infrastructure, such as public transportation or broadband internet (U.S. DHHS, 2015; Grubestic T.H. & A. T. Murray, 2004).

### **Rural Communities: Hidden strengths**

Despite the resource challenges itemized above, rural communities have great strengths that defy easy quantification, including deep seeded relationships and fierce tenacity. Families often take the place of institutions, providing critical resources in times of need (Hofferth, S.L. & Iceland, J., 1998). Rural communities have strong cultural traditions and keen ownership over their unique history, local institutions and traditions. These characteristics endure alongside communities' needs and are often overlooked by external partners (Averill, 2003). Funders and program developers must leverage these strengths in order to develop and sustain implementation capacity and create an enabling context for implementation in rural communities.

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## **Challenges building and maintaining capacity position rural communities at a disadvantage**

Rural communities face challenges building and maintaining the capacity necessary to implement effectively. Capacity is the set of knowledge, skills, and abilities required to deliver an intervention or program (Flaspohler, P. et al., 2008). In rural communities, fewer opportunities exist for individuals and organizations to develop capacity because of limited access to resources like higher education. In rural communities, capacity is also difficult to sustain. Rural residents who develop capacity through education or training often move to higher population areas with greater employment opportunities, or are promoted rapidly to positions of great responsibility and overburdened because of limited staffing.

Limited capacity poses an especially severe challenge to rural communities in the current funding environment. With dollars scarce, many funders have shifted from directly addressing resource deficits to funding delivery of evidence-based practices. Competition for such funding often hinges on the capacity of the applicant to execute the evidence-based practice. Because of their limited capacity, rural communities are at a disadvantage in these competitions, even though their need may be among the greatest.



**RURAL COMMUNITIES FACE CHALLENGES BUILDING AND MAINTAINING THE CAPACITY NECESSARY TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVELY.**

Rural communities are less likely to implement evidence-based programs than urban or suburban peers (Dotson et al., 2008). Our work in rural communities suggests that this disparity may be because evidence-based and evidence-informed programs are more likely to be successfully implemented by communities and agencies with higher capacity and greater resources. In competitions for funding, funders and policy makers make decisions based on applicants' history and perceived competence, as these factors render investment less risky. Furthermore, program developers face more challenges in supporting implementation and require more resources in these communities because they must build general capacity in addition to innovation-specific capacity.

Bias toward funding implementation of evidence-based practices in better-resourced communities fails to serve rural communities with greatest need.

Ultimately this bias may increase rural disparities.

Developing strategies to address this bias in funding is

essential to meeting the needs of rural communities and reducing rural disparities.



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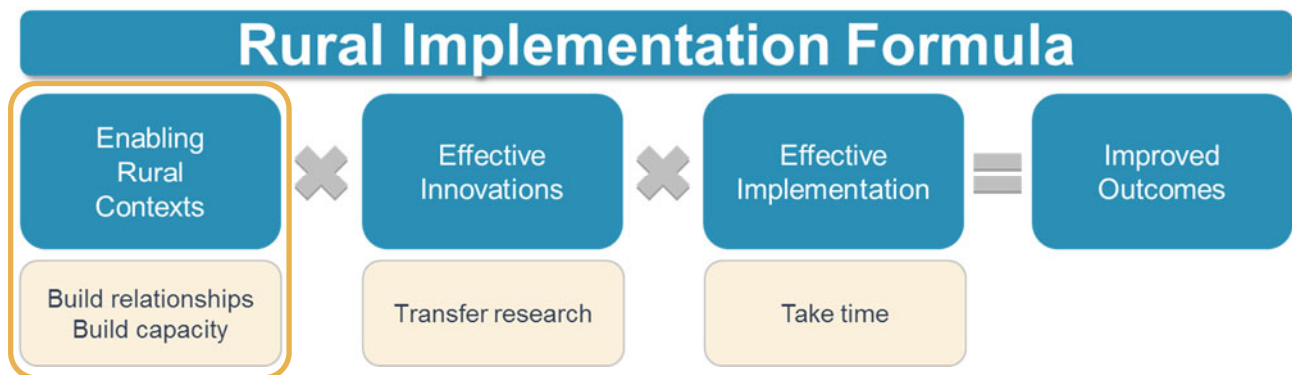
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## **Recommendations for funders & program developers working in rural communities**

Below we present recommendations for how funders and program developers can refine their practice to better serve rural communities. These recommendations are grouped by the three components in the framing implementation formula, which we have revised in order to make it more relevant for rural communities by shifting the third component, Enabling Context, to the forefront in order to emphasize its importance. (Figure 2)

Our recommendations come with a caveat. Rural communities are often 'done to' rather than 'done with'. This white paper is directed at funders and program developers. The absence of recommendations for rural communities is not oversight; nor is it meant to imply that rural communities are passive recipients of good deeds propagated by well-meaning institutions. We understand that the balance of power between funders, program developers and rural communities is heavily slanted away from the communities who are in need. Therefore, the responsibility for changing the current way of work lies first with the institutions that possess power to fund and maintain infrastructure to deliver services. Funders and program developers must collectively shift their practice in order to better support rural communities and their capacity.

## Recommendations: Enabling Context



1

Leverage rural communities' strengths by investing in relationships as an implementation asset.

Perhaps the greatest resource funders and program developers can leverage in rural communities is the strength of relationships. Rural residents may not live in close proximity. But, by and large, rural actors know the people in their communities intimately. For rural agencies and organizations, community needs have names, rather than numbers. Effective implementation strategies draw upon relationships to forge networks of formal and informal support for health and human service programs (Glisson, C. & Schoenwald, S.K., 2005; Glisson et al., 2010).

Close-knit social ties in rural communities can also pose challenges. Credibility in the rural context comes from connection to the community rather than from a degree or an institutional imprint. Rural residents may first ask, "Who do you know here? Who are you related to? Who can vouch for you?" before asking "What expertise or degrees do you have?" External actors, like funders and program developers, typically do not have local connections to provide them credibility. Additionally, they can enter a community unwittingly carrying the baggage of historically fraught relationships with state and funders.

- *Funders and program developers need to cultivate strong, respectful and positive relationships with rural communities before implementing their own agendas.* Funders and program developers must seek to understand the landscape and history of local communities, and identify and use opportunities to be visible and engaged in those communities. Being present and engaged in dialogue requires time and resources. In eastern North Carolina, communities emphasized great appreciation for program developers who visited them in person to provide training and technical assistance. This

approach required more time, energy and resources on the part of the program developers but was rewarded by improved communication and effective adaptation of the interventions being implemented.

- *Funders and program developers can develop transparent communication with rural partners by providing clear information, acknowledging barriers openly and inviting feedback and input.* Program developers must make available what is known and unknown about the efficacy of their models in the rural context. It is unethical to promise results that cannot be achieved as doing so can intentionally or unintentionally exploit rural communities by positioning them to make decisions with financial implications without full knowledge. Funders must also support and acknowledge program developers' efforts to take risks in sharing openly about known strengths and limitations of their models without penalizing them.
- *Finally, funders and program developers can incentivize and use teams as a sparkplug for implementation.* Rural relationships and traditions of collective resource sharing lend themselves naturally to the use of Implementation Teams: groups of stakeholders who provide an accountable and sustainable structure to guide an implementation effort. (Greenhalgh, et al., 2004; Fixsen et al., 2010). Funders and program developers should provide resources to support sustained use of Implementation Teams in organizations and communities and cultivate Implementation Team capacity through team-based professional development.

## 2

### Fund and build creative individual and organizational capacity in rural communities

Funders and program developers can better serve rural communities and contribute to reducing rural disparities by making capacity building part of their agenda or program. Successful implementation depends on capacity. Building and sustaining capacity is the foundation of implementation practice and requires resourcefulness and creativity in rural communities.

- *Funders and program developers can support development of general and innovation-specific capacity.* Organizations must have strong general and innovation specific capacity in order to deliver new practices and programs effectively. (Flaspohler et al 2008; Livet and Wandersman 2005) Funders and program developers can support strengthening general administrative practices through funding overhead allocations and technical assistance, recognizing that fewer staff and lower capacity makes supporting innovations difficult for

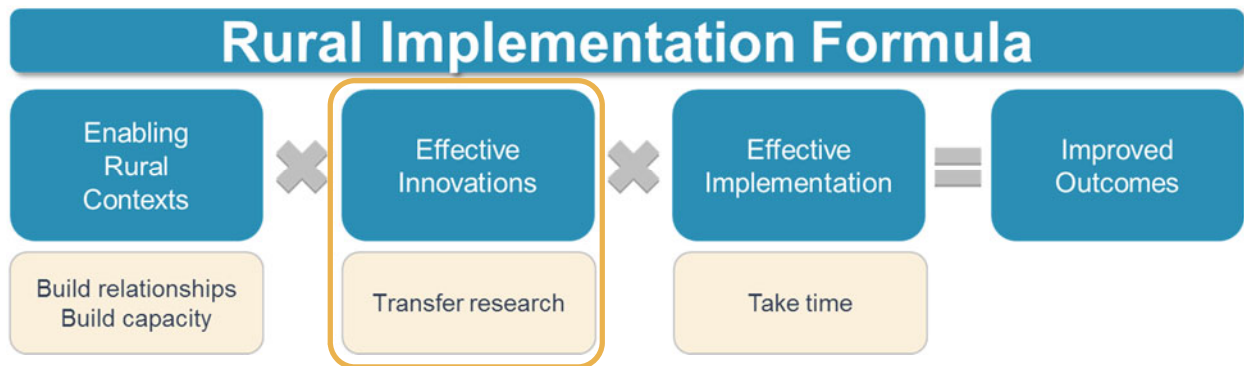


rural organizations. Similarly, funders can work with program developers and communities to create new approaches for building individuals' capacity to deliver programs effectively.

- *Funders and program developers can partner to cultivate rural actors' and organizations' capacity to learn from and adapt their practice.* General and innovation specific capacity alone are insufficient to ensure sustainability of a new innovation. Rural organizations must be 'learning organizations' in order to survive: they must possess the ability to thoughtfully evolve their programs and practices in response to information and data about the changing implementation landscape. A rural agency must be capable of assessing whether a program is achieving outcomes and then asking and answering the questions, "Why? And what changes must we make to improve?" Learning organizations have both analytic and adaptive capacity:
  - *Funders and program developers can build rural organizations' analytic capacity: the ability to gather information and identify patterns in implementation and their environment.* (Sorgenfrei & Wrigley, 2005). This may require concrete resources, like technology or data systems, or technical assistance to support 'soft skills', like data management or analysis. Funders and Program developers can model attitudes of collaboration and learning for rural partners by sharing data about need, outputs and outcomes readily.
  - *Funders and program developers can support rural organizations' capacity to use data about themselves to improve their communities.* This represents a radical shift in traditional power dynamics between rural communities and those who fund, train and monitor them. Typically, rural communities have decisions made *for* them. Funders determine what strategies will be implemented before rural communities have an opportunity to fully consider their own needs and evaluate options. Program developers enter as experts bringing knowledge to rural actors. Regional service providers can be unaccustomed to sharing information with local colleagues. The ability to analyze problems and identify necessary changes for improvement shifts this status quo by positioning rural organizations as equal partners, who can advocate for what they need using data. Funders and program developers can grow adaptive capacity in partners by modeling and promoting collaborative innovative thinking and strategy in response to new understanding. (Sussman 2004) This may take the form of a funder's support for continuous quality improvement methods through funds for training and coaching, or a program developer's sharing tools and new practices to incorporate data reflection and improvement into ongoing supervision.



## Recommendations: Effective Innovations



3

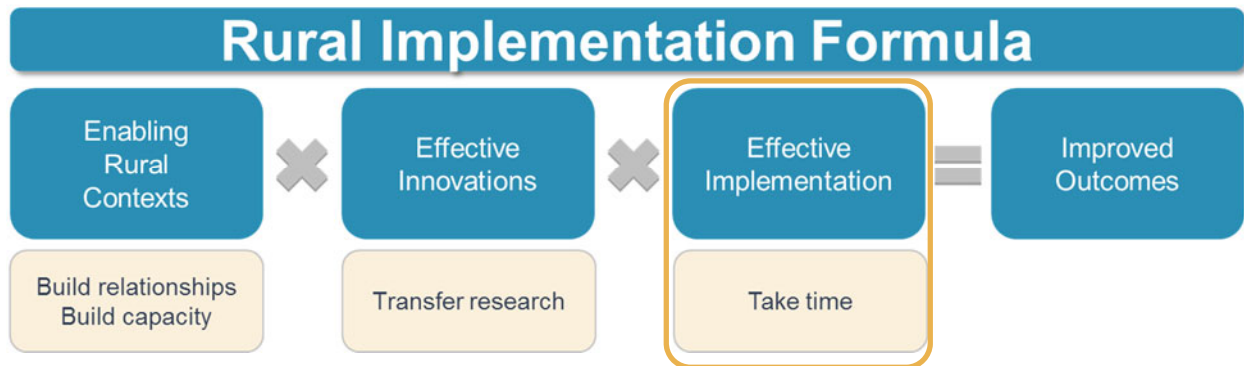
Partner with rural communities to translate research-based programs and practices to the rural context.

Few innovations are developed and tested in rural settings. There is frequently little information about which evidence-based or evidence-informed program can achieve outcomes in the rural context. Rural communities often make choices to implement programs that are unknowns, or failing to find an evidence-based program that aligns with their need and context, create their own or borrow from other similar communities' home-grown initiatives. (Smith, Adimu et al, 2016)

- *Funders and program developers must collaborate with rural communities to co-create evidence-informed practices and models that are usable and effective.* Funders must support model replication, translation and evaluation of evidence-based or informed innovations in rural communities. Additionally, funders can identify programs developed by and in rural communities and seek to better understand the core components and outcomes of these interventions through research
- *Rural communities need formal, frequent and supported communication with program developers so that they can understand and test what adaptations are possible within the scope of understood evidence.* When rural communities experience implementation challenges, their inclination is often towards rapid adaptation of the intervention. This is understandable given historical context: rural communities are self-reliant by necessity. They rarely have access to 'experts' who can support adaptation appropriately (Perez et al., 2016). Rural communities need formal, frequent and supported communication with program developers so that they can understand and test what adaptations are possible. This will allow communities to benefit from innovations' core components while also learning what must be modified or adapted in rural settings. It is critical that this

communication be promoted by both funders and program developers not in response to rural communities' 'inadequacy' but so that all partners can learn together about what it takes to successfully implement an innovation in rural communities.

### Recommendations: Effective Implementation



4

Funders and Developers can support extended implementation timelines.

Implementation takes time and proceeds through stages defined by best practices for the development and sustained use of Implementation Teams, infrastructure and data (Meyers, D.C., Durlak, J.A. & Wandersman, 2012; Aarons, G.A., Hurlburt, M. & Horowitz, S.M., 2011; Metz, A., Naoom, S.F., Halle, T. & Barlety, L., 2015). Stage-based implementation is important regardless of context, but it is particularly critical in rural communities where funds must be used as judiciously as possible to assure outcomes.

- *Funders and program developers must develop new expectations for the time necessary to implement programs and adjust funding structures and expectations accordingly.* Fully implementing a well-defined new program or practice typically takes two to four years. (Metz, A., Naoom, S.F., Halle, T. & Bartley, L., 2015). Our experience in rural communities, where funders and program developers must support the development of implementation capacity, translation of the innovation and effective implementation, indicates that this time line should be extended. The necessity of building strong relationships and trust identified earlier requires additional time. When possible, both funders and program developers can make long-term commitments to rural communities to ensure implementation is not rushed.
- *In particular, funders and program developers must support rural communities' need for additional time and support for the early stages of implementation.* Exploration of need, fit

and feasibility must address aspects of proposed innovations that will require contextualization and translation for a rural community. Funders can proactively identify unique rural infrastructure needs, such as robust budgets for travel, and partner with program developers to meet these needs. Once a program or practice has been selected for implementation, program developers can work with rural communities and funders to explicitly identify and complete activities to fully install the new model in a community.

- *Funders and program developers can provide anticipatory guidance to community members about the timeline necessary to scaffold a program for success.* The ‘slow burn’ of intentional diagnostic and planning work can be frustrating in the face of great need and the sense of a ticking clock with time limited funds. Funders should support intentional exploration by allowing sufficient time and resources for rural communities to adequately assess program fit and feasibility and can avoid rushing rural communities to expend funds or quickly identify innovations to implement without contextually relevant evidence.

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## Conclusion

The purpose of this brief is outline the challenges of and opportunities for implementation in rural communities and identify recommendations for funders and program developers to shift their practice in order to improve health outcomes. If funders and program developers desire to truly close the gap between research and outcomes in all communities, they must abandon a uniform traditional approach to implementation that disregards the unique context of rural communities. Equal treatment in this area reinforces long standing inequities that perpetuate rural communities’ disparities. Funders and program developers must commit to developing equitable practice that acknowledges the valuable assets in rural contexts and leverages those strengths in funding and capacity building strategies that are responsive to the different needs of rural communities.

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