

Engaging Youth in Rural Communities

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TIPS FOR WORKING WITH RURAL YOUTH

- Invest time in opportunities for in-person interactions.
- Involve rural youth as experts, thought leaders, and partners in the work.
- Assess the community's needs, resources, strengths, assets, and values.
- Convey the importance of the program in meeting the needs of residents and explore opportunities for ongoing engagement (i.e., incentives that align with needs and interests).
- Leave a legacy of enhanced capacity and sustainability through the project implementation.
- Engage a variety of stakeholders. Harnessing the collective power of local leaders, partners, and community members, including those who experience the worst conditions for good health, is key to making change.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

There are approximately 4 million adolescents living in rural communities across the United States (Semega et al., 2020). Teens in rural communities are more likely to face barriers to accessing healthcare and to have mental health crises than non-rural teens (Ferdinand et al., 2015; Steelesmith, 2019). However, rural youth are also more likely than other youth to report living in supportive communities and sharing a daily meal with their families (USDHHS, 2015).

Teens in rural communities have higher rates of childbearing than teens in urban communities, and the declines in teen birth rates have been less significant in rural communities compared with urban communities (Hamilton et al., 2016). The disparity in teen birth rates between rural and urban counties persist across racial and ethnic groups.

The strategies included in this tip sheet offer ideas for developing partnerships and overcoming challenges engaging rural youth.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING PARTNERS

As in other communities, engaging partners in rural communities is important for reaching youth. Because rural communities are more geographically distributed than urban communities, transportation to programming can be challenging. Thus, partners are important for being able to offer group programming to youth throughout the community. Partners might include schools, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and other youth-serving organizations.

- **Understand your partner's context and decision-making structure.** For example, if working with a school, determine the various individuals and groups that will need information about your program to implement it in the schools. This might include school principals, teachers, school boards (or Board of Trustees), and others. Work to meet with these groups so that you can provide first-hand information about your program and discuss the request from the partner. This might involve attending School Board meetings or other meetings on the school calendar.
- **Consider partnerships with existing community programs such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H Clubs, Juvenile Justice Diversion program, and juvenile detention facilities.** The goal of these partnerships is to offer programming in a location where youth are already gathered and engaged. This can reduce transportation barriers and allow partner sites to offer more skills-building opportunities to their youth.
- **Identify and participate in existing community partnerships.** For example, if there are monthly meetings or opportunities to connect with other social services or community-based organizations in the community, identify staff to attend and participate in those meetings.
- **Identify opportunities to share information about the program back with key partners at the end of each program year.** For example, this could include sharing data or feedback or having youth present what they have learned through the program. If your program includes community service learning, showcase the community service that was accomplished through the project and recognize the youth involved.
- **Develop materials that you can share with community partners and that they can share with each other.** These materials might include flyers or brochures about the program.
- **Commit to working in the community and be present as much as possible—not just during programming.** Be consistent and humble in your commitment to build trust.
- **Remember to recognize and appreciate the partners you have made.** This might include sending thank you notes or doing something to help a partner organization.
- **Identify strategies to provide parents and caregivers with information about your program.** For example, you might offer information about your program at events where parents and caregivers are in attendance such as youth sporting events, faith-based events, or other community meetings.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF YOUTH

Recruiting and retaining youth in rural communities might be more challenging than in other areas, particularly for out-of-school time program providers because of limited transportation options for youth. PREP grantees have used the following strategies to recruit and retain youth in their programming.

- **Raise your program's visibility.** You could do this by offering branded items that youth find interesting at other events or in physical locations that youth frequent along with flyers at outreach events. Consider engaging extracurricular coaches to get buy-in to help recruit youth into the program. Ask to co-advertise your program in sport recruitment packages. Participate in existing events that include youth and parents such as back-to-school night. Request to include your program flyer in back-to-school paperwork shared with families.
- **Ensure that the implementation team reflects the community in terms of lived experience or approaches their work with cultural humility.** When possible, select and engage community champions—teachers, guidance counselors, parents, or community members—to help share information about and implement your program. Familiar, respected champions may increase buy-in and support of your program.
- **If possible, offer programming around a time during which you could also offer a meal.** This could be during the weekend or after school. You might also offer programming during a lunch period at school. Students attending rural schools often qualify for free or reduced lunch, so the meal might be provided by the school, which could cut down on your having to provide meals for the students from your own budget. The lunch period might offer a solution for offering a program if during class time is not feasible.
- **Partner with young people to help identify challenges or barriers and develop solutions.** This could be through a youth advisory group or through focus groups. Offering youth an opportunity to have a voice in their community can be powerful.



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