

# REACHING RURAL COMMUNITIES



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# INTRODUCTION

Rural areas across the country are full of diverse people who value trust and close relationships. More than 90 percent of the land in the United States is considered rural. Unfortunately, these areas tend to have higher rates of poverty and fewer public services than urban areas.

You and your organization can help by developing a rural tax credit outreach strategy to connect people with the potential benefits of tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC). These tax credits can provide money back at tax time and could make a significant impact on rural individuals and families.

Rural places each have their own strengths and challenges that make rural outreach distinct. Secluded or spread out communities mean that people or organizations looking to do outreach in these areas need to get creative. Lack of modernized public transportation and infrastructure may add an extra layer of difficulty.

Luckily, there are diligent people and organizations all over the country working hard to overcome rural outreach barriers. Outreach in rural communities must be built on trust, collaboration, and the use of a variety of outreach strategies.

This guide highlights insights from discussions with rural partner organizations. Use it to help you develop strategies for your rural outreach efforts.





# INSIGHTS FROM RURAL PARTNERS

## Be aware of outreach challenges specific to rural areas

Be mindful of the digital divide. Since broadband services tend to be more limited in rural communities, your team will need to use a variety of tactics to overcome it. Despite problems with the digital divide, the internet is still a helpful way to connect rural communities – so be sure to diversify your strategies.

Some rural areas have more resources than others; know the capacity of your community and work with what you have. Keep in mind that what's successful in one rural community may not work in another location. For example, mobile VITA sites may be helpful for some areas but may face connectivity challenges in others.

Transportation limitations are also often more prominent in rural areas, so consider how to include more remote residents in outreach. For example, phone trees can be used to connect with a broad and widespread audience.

Be aware that rural communities tend to have older populations. Consider visual and audio accessibility in your efforts. Have patience with the learning curves of both your team and community members throughout outreach efforts.

Rural areas have varying degrees of political and economic power. Poverty and lack of public services are major issues. Many residents may feel disconnected from state and federal governments, so focusing on local organizations can help engage the community. For example, highlighting local volunteers engaging in free tax preparation services can help keep the focus on the community.

Push back against the negative narratives from outsiders about rural education, culture, etc. Find ways to highlight and use the unique strengths of the area. For example, if youth sports are popular, be present with outreach materials at games.



# Community leadership is essential

Recruit committed, strong, and local community organizers. Finding and keeping volunteers can be a challenge in any area, so be sure to cultivate these relationships. If possible, provide stipends for local leadership support.

**Build** your team with members of key local constituencies. The best community organizers and strategists come from within community niches. Think about farmworkers, ranchers, parents, etc.

**Develop** deep connections with community leaders in various sectors like church, school, politics, industry, etc. Find the right people to talk to for making important connections and gathering information about the community. These are essential allies in a rural setting.

**Ground** yourself in the community. Learn the culture and be integrated in local events and spaces. Be sure to listen to comments shared in meetings and informal conversations. as you do this work to help identify more outreach opportunities.

**Recognize** that people in rural areas often have great ideas for solutions to their problems. Instead of sharing your plan for what to do, hear what residents would like to see in their own community.

**Invite** community members into spaces to share their insights, input, and expertise. Ask questions and develop a plan to work together. Share what happens after the listening session and follow-up! Don't go in as experts - come in as listeners .

*“People tend to be prescriptive – they need to have an open mind. Ask: what would really work for your community? Who would be most helpful?”*

*Paheadra Robinson,  
Southern Rural Black  
Women’s Initiative*



# Understand the diversity of rural populations

Despite common misconceptions, rural areas include wide sociodemographic diversity. Acknowledge the similarities and differences between racially diverse communities and tailor your messaging to include underrepresented groups. For example, poverty can impact different groups in different ways - learning about and developing messaging around those differing impacts can help keep content relevant.

**Establish** opportunities for person-to-person outreach. Members of key constituencies can be helpful for overcoming wariness and distrust. For example, farmers can help engage other farmers which can help show that you and your organization are a trusted partner.

**Engage** in inclusive intercultural work, including leadership from different constituencies to work together. This will help strengthen local capacity and solidarity over time.

**Consider** the language accessibility of your outreach materials. Check the readability score of your materials. A third grade reading level is suggested to maximize reach. You might also try using regional lingo to create relatable messaging.



# Recognize the need for organizational adaptability

***“What’s the campaign, what’s the constituency – what strategy is going to work best?”***

***Kristin Ostrom,  
Oregon Rural  
Action***

Get critical about your processes and always seek improvements. Staff meetings are an effective way to evaluate progress. Discuss how you might reach a variety of goals with your team, and debrief after events to determine successes and challenges.

If possible, have staff participate in trainings to enhance their skillset. Outreach, organizing, and cultural awareness trainings can help strengthen your team and build a more solid coalition of members.

Recognize that rural outreach takes time and effort, especially relationship building. Find and nurture relationships with more volunteers than you think you need. Don’t be discouraged when this process becomes difficult. Fail fast to learn fast!

Accept and incorporate feedback from the community to make your efforts more effective. Make sure you and your team work to keep ego out of the process and are open to changes and new ideas. Stay flexible and adaptable!

# Gaining the community's trust is important

Advocates must build credibility (organizational and personal) among community members. Work to become part of the social service ecosystem among community members and leadership. You and your team want to be known as trusted people working on tax and financial issues in the community.

Residents may be skeptical when people come in from outside the community offering to “help.” Many have heard this before and may have suffered from the short-sightedness of outsiders. Trust, consistency, and patience are key factors in building relationships with rural communities. Strengthen your presence by maintaining outreach efforts and free tax preparation services each year.

## More tips

- Provide food, coffee, raffles, or other incentives at community meetings to encourage greater participation.
- Partner with everyone who is willing to partner with you. Build a variety of relationships; you never know what solutions will depend on what constituency.
- Be intentional about accessibility! For example, you may translate materials or provide interpreters to ensure that everyone is able to understand the information.
- Be creative. Don't be afraid to reach out to organizations or groups working in other rural areas to brainstorm ideas.
- While faith communities are often integral to building rural relationships, be aware of their differences. These groups may be more or less involved depending on the area of the country. Don't be afraid to ask local leaders about the involvement of faith communities.
- Find and engage community gathering places that residents frequent such as senior centers, schools, city hall, community centers, gyms, grocery stores.



# SPECIFIC OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Here are some tried-and-true methods used by rural organizers to reach their communities.



## Direct to Individuals

- Every Door Direct Mailers ✉
- Emails and newsletters
- Local newspapers
- Phone trees
- Door hangers



## Community-Centered

- Inserts for church, school, and sports bulletins
- Flyers at barbershops & hair salons
- Announcements during church or at community events



## Generalized

- Cards placed on windshields during sports games
- Tabling at games, community centers, and events
- Bus wraps and billboards
- Interviews on public radio and the local news
- Social media, especially Facebook!



# FINAL THOUGHTS



Tailor your messaging for different community demographics. Identifying and speaking to the specific interests of residents is helpful for building your team and successfully conducting outreach efforts. For example, you may develop messaging that addresses particular issues related to local industries.

Understand what it takes to do rural outreach: time, relationships, conversations, setbacks, funding, and staff.

Get feedback on your outreach strategies through conversations, intake forms, or surveys. This and other local data are useful for long-term development and for grant applications.

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We would like to thank our wonderful rural partners for taking the time to answer questions and discuss best practices for rural outreach. Click the logos below to follow their work!



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