



Outreach Strategies for Marriage and Relationship Education in Rural communities

How-to Guide
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Background

Over the past 150 years, the United States has shifted dramatically from a rural and dispersed society to one that is more urban and densely populated.¹ Nearly 80% of the current U.S. population is located in urban or suburban areas² with slightly more than half of those urban residents living in these states – California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Ohio.³

The Census Bureau defines an “urbanized area” (UAs) as having a population of at least 50,000 people and a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile. This differs from “urban clusters” (UCs), which have between 2,500 and 50,000 residents and a population density less than 1,000 people per square mile. There are more than 450 urban areas in the United States, but they represent just a small portion of the total land mass. The rest of the country is, effectively, rural.^{4,5}

The Census Bureau’s classification of “rural” consists of all territory, population and housing units located outside of UAs and UCs. About 20% of U.S. residents live in rural areas, many of them surrounding urbanized areas or urban clusters. In a number of counties between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, the population density can be as low as one person per square mile. And that does not even consider the largely unpopulated wilderness areas of Alaska and the Rockies.

Providing relationship education in rural communities takes planning, preparation and manpower. The following guide will help you plan for successful program delivery as you embark on implementing services in a rural area.

Location of Services

Consider the location of the communities you wish to serve with your programming. While many “urbanized areas” are clustered along the coasts or the Great Lakes, “urban clusters” can be found scattered throughout rural America. For rural residents, the best opportunity for offering a workshop might be found in the next county over, in an urban cluster.

Residents of rural areas often have to drive to get to stores or restaurants. A 30-minute drive might seem unattractive in suburban settings, but it may be a normal part of life in rural areas. Look at a map of the area, and spend some time exploring. Identify where people go to shop or get services. Rather than focusing on spreading workshops across the entire area, identify the locations that serve as hubs for the area to which you can draw participants. Couples may prefer to drive into the next county for a relationship workshop, since they may already be driving that route for work, shopping or medical care.

Furthermore, in many cases, the public makes little, if any, distinction between relationship education and relationship or marriage counseling. In small towns or tightknit communities, this misconception can inhibit attendance. Services held in a larger, neighboring community where participants perceive there is more anonymity may be more attractive to people and therefore worth the drive.

Understand the Community

You may want to use state and federal resources (i.e. census information, state vital statistics, etc.) to get a snapshot of the population you wish to serve. Understanding the general demographics of the area will help you target your program delivery more specifically. For example, if there are only

2,500 residents of the county you wish to serve and only 35 children were born in the previous year, offering programs tailored for expectant parents may not be the most efficient use of your program funds and staff time. However, these new and expectant parents can be reached through workshops offered to the greater community, including couples who may have older children.

The culture of the community is also of great importance. Talking with community leaders or other local service providers can inform you of the local culture. Make sure you understand the difference between a small town and a rural community. The two have their own unique cultures. A truly rural community will be grounded in some kind of land-based activity, such as farming or raising livestock, and, as such, the culture and rhythm of that community will revolve around the cycles of agriculture. This will greatly affect the structure and timing of your program. For example, just because a mid-August workshop date works for your schedule doesn't mean it will for a rural populace. This is one of the reasons for establishing local community support teams, which will be described later in this Guide. They will help you understand the groups with which you want to work.

Identify Key Stakeholders

Identify persons of influence in the communities you wish to serve. Some communities will have an individual or group of individuals whose stamp of approval is needed before anything new can be successful. This might not be an officially recognized individual or group, but a respected member or members of the community whose backing you will want to seek. Speak with these people early in the process and find out how they view your program and approach. They can help connect you with other key leaders in

the community and provide guidance on how to successfully structure and market your program.

Equally important to identifying key stakeholders to endorse and guide your program is identifying individuals who can create barriers or even halt your efforts. Misperceptions about the organization you represent and the services your program is providing can lead people to oppose participation and negatively influence others. For example, a member of the faith community might view marriage as something that should be addressed within the context of religion. He or she may take issue with the fact that your organization may not be faith-based and might object to a church's participation in your activities. Opposition from one church could influence another church's decision to participate.

Rural areas tend to be more "church going" than urban areas.⁶ This may be especially true of the South, which has more church-affiliated residents as compared to the Northeast or the West (83% compared to 76% and 71% respectively).⁷ In rural areas, pastors play an important role in the community. Although pastors are often among the first line of support for families in rural areas, they may not fully embrace your program in the beginning. It takes time and effort to connect with pastors. You are likely to find church staff or members of the congregation acting as gatekeepers, buffering the pastor from unsolicited callers. You will want to find out who these individuals are and first work to ensure that they understand your program and are supportive of your efforts in the community. Obtaining support from the gatekeepers may result in being connected with the pastor more quickly, and it will help you to have someone advocate for you.

Become Familiar with Existing Resources

You will also want to identify existing agencies and community resources — particularly those that work with families and can serve as natural partners for your program. Schools, childcare providers, churches, food banks, neighborhood centers and social services agencies may be excellent locations for recruitment as well as referral sources. Appendix 1 provides an example of a “Relationship Action Plan” which can be used to identify resources within the community and help you explore how your program can collaborate prior to reaching out to the organization or individual. Some of the key stakeholders you have already identified may be affiliated with these agencies and organizations and can help you learn about the agencies’ goals as well as the services and programs they provide.

When you understand an existing program’s mission, pressing needs and challenges, you will be able to discuss how your program aligns with those overarching goals and how the two can work together to address these needs and/or overcome current challenges. For example, schools are a resource in most communities and may be a central point of activity in rural communities. You may want to meet with the school superintendent, principals or teachers to discuss how services could be offered to parents and students in an effort to improve parent participation, the school climate, reduce absenteeism, etc. You will want to be prepared to talk about the challenges faced by the students and their families as well as the pressures placed upon teachers and faculty. Think through how your program can provide support to the school in order to engage in a mutually beneficial partnership.

Develop relationships with agency leaders to help you identify the needs and challenges within their organization as well as those of the families they work with. For example, talk with pastors about their congregations, speak with judges about the families they see in court, connect with doctors or hospitals regarding the needs of families in their care and contact the chaplain for the local police or fire department to inquire about the challenges faced by first-responders. Illustrate how your services can help meet a variety of needs within the community while also helping organizations meet their goals. This strategy is an effective and non-threatening way to build support for your program from within the community.

Develop Local Support Teams

Implementing an effective relationship education program in a rural community can be challenging — especially for individuals who are not from the community. A great deal of trust and support is needed from within the community itself, and this can take a long time for outsiders to develop. Establishing a local support team is one way to build trusting relationships within the community and to help get workshops up and running. A local support team’s primary responsibility is to assist in preparing for and promoting relationship education workshops. A program in rural Missouri developed a series of promotional videos (see Appendix 2) to provide community members with an overview of what a “Community Action Team” (or local support team) can contribute to the program. The videos explain why local supporters are important for the success of relationship education workshops as well as specific ways that individuals and churches can get involved.

Support team members serve not only as resources for your program planning, but also as

community advocates for the services you wish to offer. When assembling your support team, pay attention to the ethnic and cultural makeup as well as any class or economic divides within the community you are targeting. Ensure that your team represents this diversity.

Utilize support team members as consultants when structuring your program and creating advertising messages. Seek their advice regarding an effective program design, frequency of services (i.e. weekly, monthly, one-day event – remembering that participants may have to drive long distances to access your program), whether online resources are appropriate and what messages will resonate with the community. Local support team members can also provide valuable information about the types of messages that may not be well received by the community. For example, one program produced a marketing piece that read “healthy romance is good for you and your children.” While the program had intended to promote the benefits of healthy relationships to children, the message received by the community was completely different. The target population of parents thought that “healthy romance” was an advertising euphemism for “good sex” – and felt it was not appropriate for their children – and therefore were not inclined to participate. If members of the community had been consulted, this message could have been revised to reflect its true intent and may have resulted in couples attending the workshop.

Local team members can also guide you when scheduling program services based on community activities. You will want to be aware of important local sporting events, hunting seasons and other community festivals and avoid scheduling services on those dates. You may want to think

about coordinating your services to help “kick off” important events in the community. This may help draw attention to your marriage education workshop while also promoting the community events.

Keep in mind that the individuals you reach out to in the community are likely to be involved in many different activities. To attract support team members more effectively, you will want to indicate the expectations you have of the team. The following steps to engaging community members in your efforts are adapted from the book “Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard.”

1. Be specific about your goals and what you want to accomplish. This includes outlining the specific activities team members will be asked to participate in as well as a timeline for the duration of their participation. Start small by explaining what is needed to conduct the first workshop (i.e. how long the planning phase will be, the target number of participants you envision for this event, etc.)
2. Use meaningful stories to connect. A story or an example, preferably local, that is emotionally charged and related to your program, is a great way to make your program’s goal personal for potential support team members. Knowing local statistics is important should someone ask, but it will be the stories you tell that connect with most people.
3. Lay the path and provide necessary tools. Give the support team members specific goals, guidelines and objectives. Set short-term goals for activities and completion dates for these activities. Provide them with the materials they need, and tell them exactly what you need them to do. This step involves focused actions on the part of the support team to help you reach your goal of implementing services.

Create Marketing Messages

It is not enough to have a great program with a catchy slogan. Marketing involves much more than creating a logo and advertising upcoming workshops. When developing a marketing plan in rural communities, start by thinking about how your program relates to the population. Why are services needed? Who would benefit from participating? Think through how marriage and relationship education is different from marriage counseling and dispel any misconceptions the community may have by articulating these differences in your messaging.

Additionally, make sure your messaging reflects the values and “voice” of the community. The “Hitched & Happy: Relationship Tools for Good Ol’ Boys” script, provided as Appendix 3 is an example of a program intentionally marketing to a rural population. The advertising makes references to duct tape and tools, uses the term “workshop” instead of “class” and was designed to visually appeal to men in southern Missouri. There was positive response to this marketing piece because the references and the tone mirrored the community. Another example of a successful marketing piece for rural communities is provided as Appendix 4.

When you determine how your program relates to the community and what types of messages will be well received, you should identify the best media and/or venues to deliver your messages. Identify local newspapers, newsletters and other print media that the community relies on for information, and consider the costs involved with running print ads. Consult with your local support team as to whether social media and other internet-based marketing strategies should be utilized. Identify popular radio stations and other sources that reach

the entire community. Keep in mind that some people may be wary of attending services in their local community for fear of revealing family issues to others. Be sure to advertise using media from the communities surrounding the location of the workshop as well.

You may also want to determine who the major employers are in the region and focus your efforts on the employees of those businesses. Marketing to small, family farms might prove less effective than connecting with the human resources director at a local business. Local chambers of commerce can help you identify the major businesses in the region.

Include any other supports you offer in your marketing materials such as food, transportation assistance and/or childcare. These may be barriers to attendance in rural communities. If you plan to offer assistance, be sure to make this known in the marketing messages you produce.

If your efforts are not working, it is helpful to know as soon as possible. Engage in early and frequent evaluation of your program’s outreach efforts. Make sure you provide opportunities for your participants to say where and how they heard about your program. Your facilitators could gather the information in class, or you could include surveys in your application process. If participants can sign up online, you may want to consider including a required field that asks how registrants heard about the program.

Conclusion

Relationship education often is an underprovided resource in rural communities. While there is a notable need for marriage and relationship education services, there are unique challenges and considerations to establishing these programs.

Understanding the communities and anticipating the planning, preparation and manpower involved with implementing services will lead to more successful programs and more individuals, couples and families accessing needed services.

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Appendix 1: Relationship Action Plan

RAP (Relationship Action Plan)

Date: _____

Contact Information

Name: _____

Title: _____

Agency Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____

Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Web Site: _____

Secondary Agency Contact: _____

Referred By: _____

Relationship to Referral: _____

Service Information

Services Provided: _____

Clients Served: _____

Additional Description: _____

Demographics: _____

Years of Service: _____

Sources of Funding: _____

History with your organization, if any: _____

Mission of Organization: _____

Key Issues: _____

VALIDATION OF PROSPECT (Prior to Meeting)

Identify Initial Interest in Meeting/Building a Relationship:_____

Identify Gaps in Services: _____

Clearly Identify Objectives of Partnership:_____

Uncover Anticipated Barriers:_____

Other Relationship Development Possibilities:_____

Select Action Plan or Agenda for Follow Up:_____

Ask for Referrals: _____

Appendix 2: Community Action Team Recruitment Ideas

The following videos were produced with the intent of creating community action teams and recruiting churches as host sites for relationship education workshops.

Building Community Action Teams

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4g8D0e7Lii0>

This six-minute video provides an overview of what a community action team can contribute to getting relationship workshops established in a community. A brief explanation of the programs is provided, as well as an explanation of why local supporters are important for the success of relationship education workshops. An important component of the video is the inclusion of endorsements by previous participants.

How Can Your Church Work With Operation Us?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWMNO1myEzU>

This five-minute video helps explain how being a “host site” for a relationship education workshop can help churches connect with younger couples and families. The strength of this message is that clergy give specific endorsement based on their experience. Those clergy also represent a number of different denominations.

Could You Help Operation Us as a Host or a Host Couple?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PF3uXTeSTY0>

This four-minute video is intended to help recruit hosts for workshops. These hosts have the responsibility of welcoming participants and making them feel important. This video is intended to help churches and organizations recruit hosts from within their own communities.

Appendix 3: “Hitched & Happy: Relationship Tools for Good Ol’ Boys” Script



RADIO SCRIPT

Client: Operation Us

Title: Hitched & Happy

Length: :60

Date: 08/06/10

(Male Voice – with southern drawl):

Have you recently tried to fix your marriage with duct tape? (Short SFX of tape ripping) They say it works on everything, but you need some different tools to stay Hitched and Happy. A marriage without good communication skills is like using a Phillips screwdriver on a Flathead screw. It won't work. You and your spouse won't want to miss this! It's Hitched & Happy....Relationship Tools for Good 'Ol Boys. These low-cost workshops located in Springfield, Branson, Joplin and West Plains include a complimentary meal. Some nights we've even got folks to watch your kids! Feel free to invite all your married friends and neighbors, but we need to know how many are coming so we don't run out of food. Call 823-3469 or visit operationus.org to register.

(Announcer-fast read): Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90FE0110. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author.

Project offerings by Forest Institute.

Appendix 4: Example of Marketing Piece for Rural Community

Longview Wellness Center (Texas)

Need to Enrich your Relationship?

Free Marriage Education Course in East Texas

VOW

wevownow.com
(903) 232-1700

 LONGVIEW WELLNESS CENTER

A Program of Longview Wellness Center, HHS & ACF
Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Health and Human
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The poster features a man and a woman lying on their stomachs in a grassy field under a blue sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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