

# Rural Evaluation Brief

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The Walsh Center  
for Rural Health Analysis

NORC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

## Building Partnerships with Philanthropies: Emerging Strategies for Rural Communities

Organizations in rural communities are implementing programs to improve community health and well-being. Philanthropies are important partners that can help rural programs achieve their goals. Philanthropies provide resources to individuals and organizations, in the form of gifts, grants, technical support, capacity-building, in-kind donations, and community development and strategic planning.

While estimating the total share of grantmaking in rural communities is challenging, research suggests that only a small percentage of foundation grants are dedicated to rural communities. Specifically, in 2015, the Economic Research Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a study on grantmaking trends in rural communities. This study found that rural organizations received, on average, 5.5 percent of total domestic grants from large foundations between 2005 and 2010. From smaller foundations, rural organizations received 7.5 percent in 2005 and 7 percent in 2009.<sup>1</sup>

There are several possible reasons for this disparity. First, rural organizations may lack access to philanthropies. It can be challenging for a small and rural community to build relationships with philanthropies if they are not located in the same geographic area. A second issue is that rural organizations serving a small population may not be able to demonstrate the level of impact needed to attract philanthropic investment. A third issue is that rural organizations may lack the resources needed to prepare a competitive grant application or specialized skills in areas important to philanthropies, such as data collection, analysis, and evaluation.

### Key Findings

- This brief presents emerging strategies for rural communities seeking to build partnerships with philanthropies.
- It is not necessary to develop a complicated strategy to build a partnership with a philanthropy. Fundamentally, the process begins with building personal relationships.
- High-yield, underutilized strategies are to meet philanthropy staff at meetings, workshops, and conferences. If that is not possible, another way to connect is to send an email with an introduction about the program and follow up with a phone call.
- Rural program leaders also invite philanthropies to visit their communities. Site visits provide an opportunity for rural program leaders to tell the story of the program and its impact.
- Rural programs should explore whether philanthropies have specific requirements about the types of programs they fund or expectations related to program impact.

The Rural Philanthropy Toolkit is available at:  
<https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/philanthropy>

The Health Resources and Services Administration’s Federal Office of Rural Health Policy funds rural communities as part of the Section 330A Outreach Authority grant program to address unique health care challenges and increase access to health care services. The Section 330A grantees have built partnerships with different types of organizations, including philanthropies. Their experiences, and those of other rural programs that partner with philanthropies, may help rural programs seeking to build and sustain partnerships with philanthropies.

### ***The Purpose of the Project***

This purpose of this project was to identify emerging strategies that can help rural communities build successful partnerships with philanthropies. In particular, it focused on identifying strategies for preparing to build partnerships with philanthropies, conducting outreach to philanthropies, and establishing and sustaining partnerships with philanthropies. While these practices are not research-tested, they hold promise based on the experiences of rural programs and philanthropies that have implemented and recommended them. This project culminated in the Rural Philanthropy Toolkit, a web-based toolkit that compiles emerging strategies and resources to support rural communities seeking to build relationships with philanthropies across the United States. The toolkit is hosted on the Rural Health Information Hub (RHInfo) website: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/philanthropy>.

### ***Methodology***

Researchers at the NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis developed the Rural Philanthropy Toolkit. NORC reviewed the literature to identify strategies and resources for rural programs seeking to develop partnerships with philanthropies. NORC also conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with nine rural program leaders that have partnered with philanthropies, including one Section 330A grantee. The interviews focused on rural programs’ experiences developing and sustaining partnerships with philanthropies. Rural program leaders also suggested resources to include in the toolkit. NORC conducted discussions with experts and leaders in rural philanthropy to validate the emerging strategies described in this toolkit. NORC conducted the interviews between February and July 2018.

The Rural Philanthropy Toolkit is organized into seven topic areas or “modules.” The modules are: 1) introduction to rural philanthropy, including an overview of philanthropic giving in the United States and unique challenges that rural communities face, 2) models for preparing for and establishing partnerships with philanthropies, 3) a program clearinghouse of rural programs that have established partnerships with philanthropies, 4) implementation considerations, 5) evaluation considerations, 6) sustainability strategies, and 7) dissemination strategies.

Next, emerging strategies are presented in three areas: 1) preparing for partnerships with philanthropies, 2) approaching philanthropies, and 3) establishing partnerships with philanthropies.

### ***Preparing for Partnerships with Philanthropies***

Before conducting outreach to a philanthropy, rural programs can prepare in several ways:

***Develop and refine an elevator speech.*** Prior to engaging with philanthropies, rural program staff must be able to clearly and concisely articulate the program’s goals. Rural program staff and philanthropy leaders emphasized the importance of developing an elevator speech, a concise overview of the program that can be shared with philanthropies. This overview should 1) describe the problem that the organization or program will address, 2) explain how the organization will address the problem, 3) discuss the difference the organization will make if the program is successful, 4) describe what will happen if the program is not conducted, and 5) share why the organization is uniquely suited to address the problem. This overview is not a pitch about the program’s specific funding needs, but rather a compelling summary of the program’s unique strengths and ability to make an impact in the community.

***Build relationships with organizations with similar interests and missions.*** Rural programs have strong partnerships with other organizations in the community. Partners may include health care providers, emergency medical services providers, first responders, school districts, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations, among others. Rural programs need to highlight the collaborative nature of their work. These partnerships can give rural programs greater credibility when applying for different opportunities, and help them make a greater impact in the community or region.

### ***Maintain a positive presence in the local community.***

Rural programs that have successfully established partnerships with philanthropies noted the importance of maintaining a positive presence in their local community. When considering whether to invest in a program, philanthropies may conduct a community visit. During this visit, philanthropies may meet with community stakeholders to understand how well a program is integrated in the broader community. Rural program leaders should consider the following questions: How supportive is the community of the program? Do people know about or use the program's services? What type of relationship does the program have with other stakeholders in the community? Philanthropies supporting small and rural communities pay close attention to the organization's relationships with other stakeholders and may see these relationships as a predictor of the sustainability of the program and its activities. A program with community buy-in and engagement is more appealing to philanthropies because the program and/or its activities are more likely to be sustainable.

*"Make sure that [the program] you are trying to get funded aligns with the goals of the foundation. You can have a great program, and if it is not an area [the philanthropy] likes to fund, it will not be funded."*

*- Rural Program Leader*

***Identify philanthropies for outreach.*** Rural programs need to identify philanthropies that may be appropriate partners and may wish to connect with their community foundation as a starting place. If the foundation is not an appropriate funder, they may be able to refer the organization to other funders. Many states also have a nonprofit association, a membership-based organization that helps nonprofits by providing trainings and resources. Nonprofit associations can facilitate connections to people throughout the state, which can be helpful, particularly in large states where it is challenging to identify funders across a large geographic area. Other stakeholders who can help rural organizations identify appropriate philanthropies for outreach include board members, community champions, and local partners such as public health agencies. Rural organizations may also consider contacting their State Office of Rural Health, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, or U.S. Department of Agriculture, among other agencies, for information about similar projects and suggestions for philanthropic partners.

***Identify common areas of interest.*** Rural programs should learn about the philanthropy's interests, history of grantmaking activities, and past projects. It is important to review the philanthropy's website and publications to understand its funding priorities, departments, initiatives, and strategies—paying close attention to the language that the philanthropy uses to better tailor the program's own message. Philanthropies often list previous grantees on their websites or in annual reports, which can provide insight into their priorities. Other ways to learn about the philanthropy are to identify upcoming meetings where the philanthropy will be represented or review publications that reference the philanthropy in journals or newspapers. The authors of these publications, or people who are quoted, may be important people to reach out to.

### ***Approaching Philanthropies: Where to Begin?***

Rural organizations have long relied on state and federal funding to support their programs. The process for seeking federal funding is generally well defined and largely organized around solicitations for proposals. In contrast, the process for seeking funding from philanthropies may vary and can be more complex. Fundamentally, the process begins with building a personal relationship with the philanthropy. This relationship-building can require a significant investment of time. Rural program leaders noted that it can take years to cultivate a relationship with a philanthropy. They described high-yield, underutilized strategies and traditional strategies for developing relationships with philanthropies.



***High-yield, underutilized strategies.*** One highly effective yet underutilized way to initiate a relationship with a philanthropy is to meet philanthropy staff at a meeting, workshop, or conference where they are speaking on behalf of an issue. If it is not possible to meet philanthropy staff at a meeting, another way to connect with them is to send an email with an introduction about the rural program, and the ways it could align with the philanthropy's current work. After sending this email, it may be appropriate to follow up with a phone call. Philanthropy leaders noted that email outreach in advance of a phone call is helpful and gives them time to learn more about the program. The philanthropy may or may not respond to the inquiry, but this type of outreach can be an important first step.



Rural program leaders also invite philanthropies to visit their communities. Site visits provide an opportunity for rural program leaders to tell the story of the program and its impact and help the philanthropy understand how they can contribute. An in-person visit is an opportunity for the philanthropy to see the program in action, understand the community context, speak with community stakeholders, and learn about how the program addresses the community's needs. Rural program leaders may also invite philanthropies to attend an event in the community.

**Traditional strategies.** Philanthropies may issue a request for proposals (RFP) on their website. In this case, rural programs can apply with or without an existing relationship with the philanthropy. Many philanthropies do not issue RFPs or consider unsolicited requests for funding. However, relationships with philanthropies may lead to an invitation to prepare a proposal. There are many resources that describe best practices for writing grant applications, including the RHIhub's guide, *Applying for Grants to Support Rural Health Projects*.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Establishing Partnerships with Different Types of Philanthropies***

For rural organizations that have never partnered with a philanthropy, reaching out to a state, regional, or local foundation can be a great place to start. Rural program leaders noted the importance of connecting with community foundations in particular. Community foundations are public, philanthropic organizations that provide grants to communities in specific geographic locations. These entities serve as a repository for assets and resources that are donated by individuals, families, and businesses and that are set aside for the benefit of a community. Community foundations play an increasingly important role in improving the quality of life in rural regions and other areas around the country.

National foundations are private foundations that may be independent, family, or corporate. These foundations range widely in asset size and priorities, and often have larger endowments than foundations at the state or community level. National foundations may have more funds to invest in rural communities, but they may not have the local connections and deep ties to specific rural areas that regional foundations have. However, this is not always the case, as some national foundations have regional offices or staff located near the rural communities they serve. While many national foundations historically have not had a rural focus, in the past decade, there has been a shift to invest in rural communities.

Rural organizations may also explore opportunities through health conversion foundations, also known as health legacy foundations or hospital conversion foundations. Health conversion foundations are typically established when a nonprofit health care entity converts to a for-profit corporation. The health care entity can meet

*"A really good place to start is a community foundation in the area. They are a way to tap into resources in the community that may not be visible. They are interested in helping organizations get good projects done."*

*- Rural Program Leader*

federal requirements regarding the sale of tax-exempt entities by creating a new foundation that preserves the value of the nonprofit for the public's benefit. Health legacy foundations in rural areas can be important philanthropic partners for rural organizations. Over 80 percent of these foundations primarily serve one local community or county, which can provide a consistent source of funding for rural health programs.<sup>3</sup>

Rural programs may also consider working with Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), private-sector organizations with a primary mission to serve economically distressed communities and individuals with low incomes. CDFIs serve all 50 states and U.S. territories and work to leverage funding from a variety of sources, including federal grants, private financing, corporations, and other sources of capital. These funds are made available to local organizations that can use these loans or grants to make investments that will generate community wealth. Rural programs interested in working with a CDFI can begin by identifying one that serves their geographic region.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Implementation Considerations***

Rural programs must be ready to develop relationships with philanthropies. While there is not a formula for readiness, the program needs to have staff with time to conduct outreach to philanthropies. Outreach is a significant task that may not yield immediate benefit to the organization.

Rural programs are often understaffed, and outreach to philanthropies may take time away from important program activities.



When preparing grant applications, rural program staff should review the philanthropy’s giving guidelines. Philanthropies must align grantees’ goals with their own mission and goals, and they may have specific requirements about the types of programs and organizations they can fund. Additionally, it is important to understand if the philanthropy has requirements or expectations related to program impact (i.e., number of people served). A program may be very successful in a rural community but inherently serve fewer people because of a low population density. To address this challenge, rural programs may choose to partner with similar programs in other rural communities across their state or region to demonstrate the combined impact of the program(s).

*“One of the biggest challenges that we face is attracting attention as a small community. But, with highly concentrated efforts, you can show results quicker than you might be able to elsewhere. Small communities are a great place to test [a program] and then see results that can then be replicated in larger communities.”*

– Rural Program Leader

Finally, persistence is important. Rural program leaders described that it is challenging to build relationships with philanthropies. Philanthropy leaders may not return calls or emails, or may respectfully decline to meet with rural program staff. Additionally, rural programs may not receive information about why a grant application was unsuccessful. It is important to thank philanthropy staff for their time, and move on to the next opportunity, retaining the possibility of a relationship in the future.

### ***Sustainability Strategies***

Rural organizations invest time and resources into building relationships with philanthropies. However, no single philanthropy will be a partner in perpetuity. Rural programs that have developed relationships with philanthropies noted several sustainability strategies:

- ***Fulfill grant expectations and build trust.*** One of the most important ways to sustain a partnership with a philanthropy is to fulfill the expectations of the grant and achieve positive outcomes. Additionally, trust, honesty, and open communication—specifically, ensuring that the philanthropy is aware of any changes to the project—are critical to sustaining a positive relationship.

- ***Stay in contact with the philanthropy.*** During the grant period, it is important to stay in regular contact with the program officer. When appropriate, rural program leaders should share updates or success stories (for example, “we had 1,000 people attend a workshop you helped to fund”). Even after the grant has ended, philanthropies like to hear about the impact of the programs they have funded. Additionally, rural programs should ensure that they have more than one contact at the philanthropy in the event their point of contact leaves the philanthropy.
- ***Be aware of the philanthropy’s current priorities.*** The foundation’s priorities may change over time. It is important to visit the foundation’s website and review its newsletters and publications in order to understand its current priorities.
- ***Discuss sustainability with the philanthropy.*** Rural programs can discuss sustainability with the philanthropy, and potentially utilize their funder’s knowledge and expertise to learn about other funders and to strategize for growth and sustainability.

### ***Innovations in Rural Philanthropy***

Rural program leaders described several notable innovations in rural philanthropy. First, philanthropies are embedding program staff in rural communities to focus on regional community-building. Philanthropies are also providing technical assistance to help rural programs strengthen their grant applications—for example, by working with rural program staff to strengthen their evaluation and sustainability plans. In the event they are unable to help, philanthropies are connecting rural programs to other philanthropies and making “warm introductions” to these funders. Finally, rural program leaders described that the philanthropies they have established relationships with understand the nuances of their rural communities.

This Rural Philanthropy Toolkit is intended to provide resources to help rural programs articulate their unique assets to philanthropies, and to support rural communities in developing meaningful and sustainable relationships with philanthropies.

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*To access the Rural Philanthropy Toolkit, visit:*  
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