Rural Community Living Development logo
People and Houses

Rural Community Living   
Development Peer Mentoring Curriculum and Resources

January 2023 DRAFT

The Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities

Some things to know about these resources before you get started!

* This curriculum was created by peers for peers in the Independent Living community with the assistance of researchers at the University of Montana’s Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities!
* It will eventually be an online resource for anyone to use, but currently it is still a work in progress!

Some of the resources and activities are already available online

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# 

# Curriculum Introduction

This curriculum contains activities you may do as you think about outreach, as well as questions that might provide an opportunity to think about organization strengths, and community efforts that may take a long time.

# SECTION 1: Get Learning

In this section, you will find resources that help CIL staff develop a sense of self of themselves as rural outreach workers and gauge their ability and the ability of their organization to do the work. Also included here is an overview of Independent Living (IL) or Community Living values. For some this will be new and for others it will be a brief review.

## Key Points

* CIL staff who are ready to do rural outreach are interested in, committed to, and willing to engage with rural community members and consumers.
* CIL organizations who are ready to do rural outreach have administrators who are willing to let staff commit time to rural outreach, have reasonable resources available, and sometimes already have some connections to build on.
* CIL staff working with rural communities need to have rural cultural humility.
* Before you start engaging with people in your rural service area, it is helpful to use some strategies to get to know the area demographics, resources, and norms.
* Rural cultural humility is important in building healthy relationship with people in your rural service area.
* Meeting people where they are is key in increasing awareness about independent living values.

## Getting to know yourself and your organization

Before you begin your rural outreach and networking, it can help to think about your readiness to do this work, including how comfortable you are with rural culture and your organization’s ability to support your efforts. In this section, there are several activities to increase your self-awareness.

### Your personal readiness

Identifying problems in a community and wanting things to be different is something most of us have done. Envisioning positive community change and taking an active role as a change maker, however, takes another level of interest, commitment and engagement. Change makers are those individuals who want to take action when they see something that needs to be done in their community. While there are many ways community members can be involved in change initiatives, it’s important to self-reflect and assess not only your passion to do the work, but also your capacity.

People who are effective in doing rural outreach and networking tend to be people who are very good at wearing multiple hats. Because there are fewer people, you will often find that individuals who are well-networked in rural places are involved in community in many different ways. For instance, the woman who runs the food pantry might also be a member of the Lions Club, serve as a volunteer for Meals on Wheels, and also is her church’s treasurer. Similarly, CIL staff have described that while they might specialize in housing in an urban setting, in rural places they may have to put on a different hat in response to what is needed (maybe it is transportation).

Some questions to consider before you decide to do rural outreach are: How comfortable are you with reaching out to strangers? To calling on people you have worked with before? Do you enjoy traveling into different communities and meeting with different types of people?

**Activity: Assess Your Skills and Strengths**

**Use the** [**Assessing your Skills and Strengths Worksheet**](file:///C:\Users\justi\Downloads\Activities\Assessing%20your%20skills%20and%20strengths%20worksheet_RCLD.docx)**!**

What strengths do you bring to do rural outreach? Complete this assessment to recognize what skills you bring and potential things you may find challenging.

### Is your CIL ready?

Most CILs struggle to have the resources to serve everyone in their service area. There has historically been a “do more with less” approach to funding and staff time when it comes to serving people with disabilities. Funding may be needed for space, supplies, staff salaries, and outreach and engagement and activities. Thus, you might want to have a staff discussion about whether or not your center is ready to invest in rural outreach.

**Mentor Discussion: Questions to ask about your CILs readiness to support your rural outreach efforts**

Staff are an important resource to rural services integration programs. Staff requirements, roles, and responsibilities need to be clearly defined at the outset of a program. Staff may require specific trainings or certifications to participate in a services integration program. Knowing your strengths and weaknesses as an organization can help you assess if your organization is ready to support rural outreach efforts.

Make a list of organizational strengths and weaknesses for working in this community.

* Do your Executive Director and other supervisors value increasing the reach of your services into rural areas?
* What resources do you have to commit to the project? Does your center have resources to support you traveling to meet with people in person, or to purchase equipment such as laptops or cellular service that might be needed?
* What connections do you already have? What projects, programs or events has your CIL participated (or hosted) in the past? Are you part of any local community groups that are already established?
* What do you already know about service gaps in your rural service area? For instance, do the youth in your rural service area attend Zoom game nights, but very few older adults with disabilities engage in your services?
* Do you have the right people for who you are trying to reach? Do you have someone on staff from that community? Do you have staff who share peer characteristics of members in the community you are targeting such as identifying as Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), Hispanic/Latinx, or age groups or shared experiences? Do you have people with diverse experiences such as experiencing homelessness, violence, or other trauma who feel comfortable connecting with others in similar situations?

## Your rural service area

Now that you have determined that you are ready to do rural outreach and networking and that your organization supports you in these efforts, in information and activities in this section will help you gain the knowledge and skills needed to get to know your rural service area. These include using existing online data, learning about how people are already connecting, scanning the community for existing resources and networks, and strategies for joining these existing groups.

### Know before you go

Getting to know your service area really well takes commitment and resources. You will need to devote time to understand the rural areas, the commonplaces individuals gather, and learn what programs currently exist.

Before you head out to meet folks in your rural service area, you can use existing data to better understand who lives and works there.

Here are some simple tools to use to gain an understanding of the demographics and disability in your rural service areas:

* <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>
* <http://disabilitycounts.org/>
* <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/> (no disability data)

**Activity: Using the Disability Counts Website**

1. Click this link [www.disabilitycounts.org](http://www.disabilitycounts.org)
2. Select the Disability Data Lookup Tool
3. Choose your state
4. Choose the counties you would like to focus on (these may be a combination of rural and urban counties to make comparisons)
5. Choose variables you are interested in such as the Disability Poverty Rate or the Veteran Disability Rate
6. Submit your choices to view the statistics

For example, after selecting two neighboring counties in Montana (Ravalli, a rural county and Missoula, an urban county), we can compare the disability rates for veterans between those counties.

## Having rural cultural humility and independent living values

Working in rural places is different than working in urban places and rural communities tend to have their own culture and norms. It is important to approach this work with humility and open curiosity. One challenge you may face is that rural people tend to be less trusting of people outside their community. There are many reasons for this, but here are a couple for you to consider when you face resistance or resentment when trying to work with rural folks.

* Historically, rural places have not been well compensated for their contributions to the construction of and maintenance of urbanization. For instance, rural communities are almost always the first to have hospital funding cut in favor of centralizing health services in urban centers, despite the raw materials extracted from their communities to build the urban health infrastructure.
* In addition to generally exploitive historical policies that favored urban people and places, rural Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) have experienced additional oppression being forced to live in rural places not of their choosing and long being denied basic civil rights and access to community-building resources

### Community norms and culture

Before reaching out, it is valuable to understand what the local norms and customs are in your rural service area. Navigating local language and cultural norms can be tricky! It is important to have cultural humility when approaching partners whose backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences are different from yours. Here are some questions to think about to help you be more prepared to respectfully connect with others.

* What are some common experiences that connect or divide community members to each other, such as farming, festivals, religion?
* Are there deeply rooted traditions or cultural norms around community living experiences, such as what food is appropriate or certain behaviors like smoking?
* What kinds of geographic or environmental barriers to participation exist? Are their travel difficulties or weather conditions to be aware of?
* How difficult has it been to recruit local professionals related to community living?
* Who are the “hard-to-reach” local populations? For example, are there migrant farmworkers in the community? What is the harvest schedule?
* How do community members view certain professions such as doctors or government officials?

Regardless of how much you learn about a community ahead of time, it is still important to enter those first engagements with a high level of curiosity and openness.

Put in the time to know your audience and gain awareness of your region’s culture, so that your mannerisms and approach match what is appropriate for the community you are trying to serve.

Consider the importance of language. Work to understand how power dynamics and the history of disability culture can help you to speak respectfully and in an empowering way. For example, what are beliefs about person first language (e.g. person with a disability) vs. identify first language (e.g. disabled person).

**Activity: Assessing Community Dynamics**

Sometimes it is helpful to reflect on common barriers and challenges that can arise in doing rural outreach and networking. Below is an activity adapted from the Engaging Your Community Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action that can help you think about these factors. You can reflect on the components independently or in a group.

**Mark True or False on the statement’s accuracy for your community:**

1. There are adequate public dollars available to address issues.   
    **True** **False**
2. Issues related to community living are the responsibility of our local community.

**True  
 False**

1. There are people in the community ready to take the lead addressing issues related to community living.

**True  
 False**

1. Collaboration and interdependence will be important in addressing these issues.

**True  
 False**

1. Strategies and tools exist to develop plans and to work together to address independent living needs for people with disabilities.

**True  
 False**

1. Community involvement is not dependent on just a few organizations.

**True  
 False**

1. Our community embraces diversity – ethnically, economically, racially, or in other ways.

**True  
 False**

Each true answer can be scored as 1 point. Higher scores mean that your community is more ready for a collaborative approach to addressing community living issues for people with disabilities. What is your score?

### Some thoughts on Independent and Community Living Values

Not everyone is familiar with the concept of independent living or the values that come with it. Some people find it helpful to familiarize themselves with the Independent Living Movement and history of Disability Rights.

Here are some resources you might find helpful:

* Disability history: The Disability Rights Movement - <https://www.nps.gov/articles/disabilityhistoryrightsmovement.htm>
* UMASS: The History of Disability Rights in the United States - <https://www.umassp.edu/inclusive-by-design/who-before-how/history-disability-rights-united-states>

If you like to read or listen to books, many activists and community members recommend “Being Heumann: An unrepentant memoir of a disability rights activist.”

#### Meeting people where they are

A good space to start discussing IL with other community members is to meet them where they are at. Start by building a connection around hobbies, personal interests, the community interests. Who are some of the people that they know or serve and what are some goals for those communities? How are they similar to goals the disability community has?

It is also important to recognize that community members may have different experiences with disability. Some may have a disability, some may have loved ones, neighbors or colleagues with a disability, and others may not have given disability much thought before. Creating a space for communication for people with disabilities is important. Invite people into a conversation around shared experiences. You may want to discuss disability as more than a diagnosis and explore disability as a culture and a rich community to identify with that has a common history and values. Try to be mindful during these kinds of discussions to avoid “tokenizing” anyone with a visible disability in the room. It is their right to decide they do not want to explain their disability or speak on behalf of disability as a whole. This discussion may also be a good time to model inclusive language such as avoiding words like handicapped or differently abled. You may also find opportunity for gentle education if it seems appropriate such as the history around the “Spread the Word to End the R (retard) Word” campaign. The idea is to create curiosity rather than shame.

It is also important to note that language, labels, and disability identity is fluid. For example, some people prefer the term disabled person which is identity first. Others may prefer person with a disability, which is person first language. At the end of the day, using the language that the person with the disability themselves uses to describe themself or prefers is ideal.

**Mentor Discussion: Gauging Your Knowledge of People with Disabilities in Your Community**

* Who do you know with a disability? What has been your experience with disability?
* How has this community come together to help people living in the community in the past?
* Who can you reach out to for more information about this?

Now you can make a plan to reach out to people or organizations in your community.

Perhaps in this rural community, they haven’t thought a lot about disability because an individual with a disability is just a community member or congregation member and not necessarily different. Find ways to get to know their community values, who they are as a community, and how their values may be like some of those in Independent Living.

Example: Dori grew up in a rural community in South Carolina as a person with a visible disability. She and her best friend always talked about the same hobbies they had and what they could do together. They played at each other’s houses and at the neighborhood playground together. The two girls found they were more alike than different. They were community members and friends, and disability didn’t change that.

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." – Margaret J. Wheatley

# SECTION 2: Get Started

In this section, you will find resources and concrete ideas for getting started in your rural outreach. Everyone experiences barriers when they are starting to do rural outreach in areas they have not worked in before. This can happen at a one-on-one level or in groups and here will provide some additional strategies for overcoming these barriers or challenges.

## Key Points

* CIL staff may face challenges at the individual level such as reaching out to contacts that never return your call or interacting with someone who is distrustful of outsiders.
* Sometimes challenges occur in group settings such as coalition meetings or other community gatherings.
* Strategies for overcoming barriers include:
  + Having a clear idea of how to describe your organization and services is helpful when entering into new conversations.
  + CIL staff can bring helpful perspectives on improving accessibility in the community.

## Strategies for getting started

Before you get started, it is important to know that many CIL staff and nonprofit professionals are “doers” who are eager to get things done! You may get frustrated with the pace of change or how slow it can be to collect the needed resources and supports. Some might feel like they are not doing enough. It can be helpful to remind yourself and others that in projects like these, things build over time. You have to start somewhere!

You can begin to find out how people are connecting by reaching out to well-connected individuals in the community and asking them how they find out about activities or community resources. For example, are there civic organizations such as the Lions Club or more informal gatherings like book clubs or knitting groups? Is there a local newspaper? Do people put notes in the local utility bills? How much do people rely on word of mouth or social media?

**Community Effort Idea: Have coffee with a connected person**

Find someone who is connected in the community. This might be the local grocery store owner or the volunteer that runs the food pantry. Give them a phone call, introduce yourself and ask to have coffee with them! Ask how they have been able to reach out and connect in the community.

**Community Effort Idea: Ask a rural consumer**

Ask a consumer how they found the resources they found. This can give you an idea of the events that are best to attend and the best way to advertise online (e.g., with social media).

**Community Effort Idea: Attend a community event without an agenda, with a consumer**

Ask a consumer if you can join them for an event. Leave the brochures at the office and attend as a listener. The consumer might want to introduce you to other consumers there. It’s important not to give them a pitch, but instead to listen openly about their thoughts and concerns.

## Finding existing networks

A network is a group of individuals from organizations, businesses, and government offices who interact with each other, usually around a common issue or goal. Coming together allows for members to pool resources, identify gaps in services, and support each other’s efforts. This can improve services, build new systems, and increase the resiliency of the rural services.

There are many existing rural networks, although not all exist in all rural areas.

* State transportation providers
* Housing coalitions
* School systems
* College and outer schools
* Food banks and pantries
* Churches
* Special interest groups (e.g. knitting or fishing groups)
* Offices of Aging and Disabilities
* Relay for Life or other community-wide events
* Counseling centers and offices, small community clinics (e.g. Offices of Areas of Mental Health)
* Public health departments and health care providers
* Rural health coalitions
  + Definition: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/networks/1/definition>
  + Examples: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/networks/3/program-clearinghouse>

What does institutionalization look like in your community? Are there nursing homes? Group homes? Prisons? Where do people with disabilities live?

**Community Effort Idea: Join existing networks**

Who and what would be most beneficial to engage with? Here are a few tips!

* Think outside of disability-specific events (e.g. homelessness coalitions or the Chamber of Commerce).
* Ask community and organization leaders what meetings or events they have going on and if you can join, even to just sit and listen.
* Collaborate on grants with other organizations (e.g. for food pantry funding or for county transportation funding)
* You can also seek out non-traditional community commonplaces, such as a laundromat or a bar!
* Consider the financial background or resources of who you are meeting with – for example, someone might not feel comfortable meeting at a restaurant or coffee shop because of the cost. Consider having first meetings at libraries, parks, or community centers where there is not a cost involved.
* Some communities have senior lunches or other free food events that you can attend!

It is a great idea to keep track of the connections you have made and the networks you are working with. This “Network Rolodex” can come in handy for future projects. You might also have the opportunity to help connect other centers with the connections you have made to help your community work more collaboratively!

## Barriers and challenges

Some potential barriers to anticipate is that people have limited time and finances to contribute to your efforts. As a newer person doing outreach, you may also feel a lack of reach, especially at first. You may also encounter different perspectives on Independent Living, shelter workshops, and the value of institutionalization. As a disability advocate, you may also experience some political pushback to changing how things have “always been done” a certain way and this can especially be tough when working on accessibility. Many rural places have developed trust between organizations and individuals over many years. Naturally, they will want to protect these relationships which could be threatened by change. Sometimes, this leads communities to be “change resistant” to avoid causing problems.

## Solutions

Some common solutions for overcoming barriers and challenges are to remain involved, stay focused, be flexible, emphasize working together, embrace diversity, find compromises, and maintain optimism. Remember, building relationships takes time!

### Feeling prepared

One solution to overcoming barriers and challenges involves feeling prepared to talk about yourself and your organization.

### Initiating relationships

Because many people in rural places have had their trust broken by outsiders, initiating relationships in a professional and genuine way is important. If possible, bringing some enthusiasm and positivity to the contact can help smooth over some of the awkwardness that sometimes comes with initiating a relationship that did not emerge organically. Being professional also means being upfront about what you hope to achieve or if you are unsure, being genuine about the uncertainty too.

Contacting someone without any prior experience with them or a “warm handoff” from someone else can be intimidating! Sometimes it is easiest for people if you send an email with some information ahead of time and let them know that you will be calling to chat more. In other circumstances, people prefer just a phone call and then a follow up email with more information.

Sometimes it can take a number of attempts to get a relationship initiated. You can think of this like planting seeds. Not every seed will take hold, but if you plant enough, usually at least one will bear fruit.

It is also important to have realistic expectations about varying perspectives on disability, disability rights, and independent living. Not everyone you reach out to will understand or agree with the independent living philosophy.

One affirmation that might be helpful in the pursuit to build a non-organic relationship is “positive, persistent pursuit”.

Sometimes your work around addressing independent living needs in your rural communities will intersect with sensitive topics and experiences such as abuse, neglect, or violence. When this happens, a more nuanced approach to engagement can be helpful. It is important to think about the way you phrase things, starting small and finding common ground. For instance, everyone has the same goal of bettering the lives of people with disabilities. You can start there and think about how to work together to make that happen!

#### Show your intent to build enduring partnerships

This work takes time. Communicate to community members how you and your organization plan to stay involved in the community for the long term. Show them your commitment to work with them for the long haul by generating ideas to continue the work even as the outreach is getting started.

Bring along more staff if possible and build organizational relationships in addition to personal relationships that show organizational commitment to the project so that if a particular person must leave the community, the process can go on.

One way to show commitment is to establish a schedule of meetings that demonstrates your intent to stay engaged and follow up consistently between meetings by email or phone. You can also begin to share resources like potential funding opportunities. This effort is very worthwhile because it tells the community members that the work of is a priority and is being taken seriously. Finally, be responsive to the values and needs of various community members.

### Bringing a voice for accessibility

As a CIL staff member, you are likely thinking about accessibility on a regular basis. Below are a few initial tips on accessibility and meeting people where they are. It can be helpful to think about what this really means to you and your organization.

Physical needs: Remember to think about accessible spaces, above and beyond structural. For example, some people will need a meeting space with less sensory stimuli or space to be able to move around during the meeting. This could mean meeting individuals at the laundromat, at bars, at church events, or other non-traditional meeting places. Finding a meeting space can be a compromise, and it might be helpful to meet consumers where they are comfortable.

Psychiatric, mental, and emotional needs:  It is important to understand the stigma that can be associated with having a disability. It is also crucial to know that in the past, consumers might have trusted a center to help them, and then might have had their services fall through the cracks, breaking that trust. This could be a reason consumers do not reach out for help.

What does it mean to come in without an agenda? The focus of coming in without an agenda is taking a back seat to focus on listening. This might mean finding an event that consumers are attending and showing up without brochures, pamphlets, or a sales pitch for your center. Instead, it is important to listen to the concerns that are being voiced. It might be a good idea to carry a few business cards in case a conversation strikes organically, and an individual is interested in connecting with you.

How do you do this when you do come with an agenda? In this case, it might be helpful to attend an event with a consumer that trusts you and the work you have done. You won’t be making the introductions, but can allow the consumer to connect you with those they think could benefit from your services.

Who is the right person to attend these events? It might be someone who has experience with the population you are meeting. Having someone involved from the same culture, same geographic location, or same experience in dealing with the disability as those you are attempting to meet can be a great way to build trust and connection. Other times, it could be someone who has taken the time to grow in their cultural humility.

#### Translate pamphlets, brochures, and other materials into languages spoken in your community

Go beyond translating with Google. Make sure that the language being translated is one that the community will be able to understand and connect with.

#### Being disability aware

Ensure that the locations of your activities, whether indoor, outdoor, or on the internet, are accessible for individuals with varying disabilities (e.g., physical, mental, intellectual, etc.).  Here is a checklist tool that can be used to help assess the accessibility:

<http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/resources/community-assessment-for-accesible-rural-events/>

Ensure that any web communications are accessible to all with closed captioning and other aids. It is easy to check for the accessibility an online document. Microsoft Word has a “Check Accessibility” feature in the “Review” tab, which can tell you if certain formatting features are not accessible.

**Activity: Elevator Ping Pong and Elevator Speeches**

**Use the** [**Elevator**](file:///C:\Users\justi\Downloads\Activities\Elevator%20Speech%20Template.docx) **Speech Template!**

Doing outreach is easier when you have a good sense of your own organization, missions, and goals. One way to accomplish this is to develop “Elevator Ping Pong” statements which are less about telling a 60 second story about what you do (an elevator speech), and more about inviting intrigue and interest for the sake of starting a conversation. Once a conversation has been started, then the longer project pitch and ask is shared. The Ping Pong focuses on the end result and not the process.

For example, you might state with a statement like this:

“I am [your name] from [CIL]. I keep people from having to go into nursing homes.” This kind of statement invites intrigue, like “Why?” or “How?”, that leads into the work of a CIL and what they do and then the specific project outcome goal, which is to connect people to community and resources that support IL. After these types of exchanges, you can then get into a longer explanation (like an elevator speech) about your organization.

Take a minute to think about the one statement you might want to make to start a conversation with someone you would like to partner with, say the local librarian.

Next, if you have never had to develop something like an elevator speech before, this might feel overwhelming. Here are some quick tips for creating and practicing your elevator speech.

Elevator speeches are:

* **Specific**: 2-3 brief key points or goals you want to communicate
* **Short**: 30-60 seconds long, the length of an elevator ride (thus the name)
* **Practiced**: Do a few run throughs through with coworkers or practice in private
* **A call to action**: What are you asking for? Information? Help? Resources?
* Consider ending with an open-ended question to stimulate a conversation

Here are a few steps you might take:

1. Ask a colleague! Does anyone else have a practiced elevator speech they use? Ask if you can use theirs and then tweak it to make it work for you.
2. Spend just two or three minutes brainstorming about what you think your goals are – writing them down, typing them up, or making an audio recording.
3. Once you have a good list, review them and think about what the top most important goals are and how you might talk about them. For instance, if your goal is to better reach your rural consumers, what are some smaller goals you could focus on? Meeting other service providers with the same goal? Meeting with community-based organizations that are already connected with rural consumers? Learning more about what others are doing? Partnering with existing organizations in the community to hold rural office hours?
4. Combine your top two or three goals with a brief introduction and an open-ended question
5. Practice on your friends and coworkers!

# SECTION 3: Start Action

In this section you will learn strategies for setting goals, figuring out what resources you already have and what additional resources you might need, as well as how to use the RCLD resource database to find resources created for rural places through research.

## Key Points

* CIL staff need strategies for recognizing a goal related to improving the lives of rural people with disabilities and steps for making that goal happen.
* Depending on the size of the goal, CIL staff need ways of knowing what resources already exist and what additional resources are needed to meet a goal.

## Setting rural outreach goals

Once you have made some connections, how will you identify goals and work towards them? Sometimes this happens in formal settings such as coalition or committee meetings. Other times it is more informal and based on the interests and responsibilities of those involved.

Sometimes goals are easy to identify, but if they do not come easily, one way to think about the needs of people with disabilities is to consider what is sometimes called “functional needs”.

### Functional needs for community living

Below is a list of functional needs. When you are talking with others in the rural community about addressing the needs of people with disabilities, are there certain functional needs that keep coming up?

* Independent living skills training
* Housing (affordable/accessible)
* Home modification/repair
* Accessible health care
* Home health care
* Personal assistance services
* Transportation options
* Employment opportunities
* Food security
* Peer support
* Mental health care
* Opportunities for community engagement (e.g., community organizations, activities, etc.)
* Access to technology
* Accessibility
* Parenting and childcare supports
* Equal and appropriate education
* Emergency preparedness

## Finding resources

How will you know what you need to accomplish your goal? Sometimes it is hard to know what you need for something you have never done before.

**Mentor Discussion: Rural Community Capitals**

One way to think about finding resources is to use The Community Capitals Framework to think about different types of assets that exist in the community and what you might need. The types of assets or capitals needed vary by the goals of the project.

**Community Capitals Framework**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Capital Type** | **Description** |
| Natural Capital | Environmental features such as rivers, green spaces, or the soil |
| Cultural Capital | Shared beliefs and activities that reinforce those beliefs such as beliefs in working together or community festivals |
| Human Capital | Skills, abilities, and knowledge of community members such as leadership, ability to access resources, or carpentry |
| Social Capital | Relationships between people and organization such as close ties that build community or weaker ones that create bridges |
| Political Capital | Ability to influence standards, rules, or regulations in the ways that government officials, church leaders, or longtime residents can |
| Financial Capital | Financial resources available to invest such as bank loans, grants, or donations |
| Built Capital | Physical infrastructure such as sewer systems, telecommunications, or sidewalks |

You can make a list of everything you think you will need to complete your community living goal and then begin talking with community members about the list. Think about each Capital and what might be needed reach your goal. For example, what would you need to bring the Living Well in the Community health promotion program to an under-served rural community in your service area?

* Built Capital: accessible and convenient meeting space
* Social Capital: community member connection to local counseling services, local connections to reach under-served community members
* Human Capital: CIL staff who are interested in learning to facilitate and implement the program

### Using the RCLD Resource Database

Once you have set a goal, you can begin finding resources and programs that may address those needs. This involves balancing what is desirable with what is possible. We have compiled a list of resources at <https://rcld.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/> you can use to decide about a specific project to pursue. You might find others to work in a small groups to share the work. Consider the following questions in your decision process.

1. How well could this resource address the needs in our community?
2. What is needed to use this resource including personnel, space, expertise, etc.?
3. What additional supports would be necessary to use this resource?
4. What would be a reasonable timeline for using this resource to improve community living?

On this website, resources are categorized by the functional need categories we discussed earlier. When reviewing a resource, click “More Details” to find out additional information, such as funding required, staff required, and the reading level of the materials.

Some resources might simply be tips and might require adaptation to develop into a program that might address a community living need. We have attempted to rate how easy it might be to use each resource. In general, these ratings are based on our overall experience implementing community living resources, rather than on our experience with implementing a specific resource.

You may want to print a copy of the resource list to discuss with community members and have a way to click on the links to get more information for resources that are of interest to the community. The goal is to find a resource to implement that is appropriate for the community and the need. Staff from the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities are available to provide training and technical assistance to community members to support implementation of many of these resources. Contact information to reach training staff is included with the resources.

### What do you already have?

When looking for support remember to look inside and outside the box! Outside support comes in many shapes and forms. It could be in-kind donations such as someone donating their time and expertise, space to meet, or a local grocery store donating food, beverages, or items for a fundraiser.

Support could be agencies agreeing to send out your information to their consumers and supporters. It could come in the form of actual money, such as your local bank giving money towards your project.

One thing you already have is experience! Every community member has experience working on different projects. Ask people to share what they have already tried or what has already been done in the past that was successful.

**Activity: Start with who you know!**

**Use the** [**Community Resources Worksheet**](file:///C:\Users\justi\Downloads\Activities\Community%20Resources%20Worksheet.docx)**!**

Think about who you already know! It is helpful to reflect on what resources you and others have – sometimes people do not realize what they have until they are asked about it! Take about 15 minutes to complete the Community Resources Worksheet for your community as best as you can.

Once you have completed an activity like the one here, you might want to have a conversation about who to leverage and when. Sometimes you will want to have a broad approach, reaching out to as many folks as possible, and sometimes you will need a targeted and personal approach to get what you need. Consider the topic, people served, and who are you trying to reach. Who can bring it all together?

To make the most of your rural community networks, it is helpful to stay up on where people are at. It is not unusual for nonprofit staff to move to other organizations.

Some strategies for staying up-to-date include:

* Inviting people to your board meetings
* Providing disability awareness sessions or workshops
* Attending other meetings such as the city council, NAACP, 100 Black Men of Rome, Latine groups, NAMI, Chamber of Commerce, or energy companies

In addition to this activity, you may want to consider applying for opportunities for raising awareness or donations such as being selected as Nonprofit of the Month by a local business.

### Creative funding ideas

Finding funding is one of the most challenging aspects of nonprofit work. The top five sources of funding for nonprofits are grants (local, state, and federal), individual donors, membership fees, charity crowdsourcing sites, and foundations (<https://charity.gofundme.com/c/blog/nonprofit-funding-sources>). Some of these options require special skills like grant writing, hours of work, and bigger populations. Sometimes these things are not available in rural communities, so rural folks get creative! CIL staff who have had success with funding highlight that creative solutions are rooted in the community context and the specific independent living need you are trying to address. It really depends on the region, need, and what the local “hoops” look like.

For example, Diane Haldane, an IL specialist in Harrisburg, Virginia shared that community clubs and organizations like the Optimist Club, Kiwanis, the Lions Club, or the Rotary Club can be good sources of small amounts of support. Try connecting with members of these types of clubs and asking about what kinds of things they support and what the process is for applying for money. It might be as easy as attending a meeting and telling the members about your work and community goals!

Quick tip! Partnering with mental health providers in your rural service areas can help you get access to different funding streams, as they can bill for services in a different way than CILs!

### Building a budget and logic model

Once you know what you will need and what you already have, you might find it useful to build a budget. You can work with community members to identify time, money, and other resources that already exist and what you still need to find. For bigger projects, another tool that can be useful is the “logic model.” Logic models allow you to systematically lay out what resources they have and need, what activities they hope to accomplish, and the expected short- and long-term outcomes related to the activities.

**See the RCLD online resources for an examples and** [**template budget**](file:///C:\Users\justi\Downloads\Activities\Budget%20Template_RCLD.xlsx) **and** [**logic models**](file:///C:\Users\justi\Downloads\Activities\Example%20and%20Template%20Logic%20Model_RCLD.docx)**!**

### What if the gap is too big?

What do you do if the gap between what you have and what you need to implement your goal is too big? When this happens, it might be time to encourage everyone to keep connecting with others and getting more feedback from the community, empowering them to look for and find their own answers.

For example, in rural South Carolina, there were big gaps in transportation services for people who could not access the fixed routes or use paratransit. If you work in a rural place, this probably sounds familiar! Dori Tempio, Director of Community Outreach and Consumer Rights at ABLE SC, worked with others to bring in alternative transportation services that were operating in other parts of the county. It took a lot of meetings and listening to concerns and other ideas to get to this solution, but once you find the right people that care about making something happen, they will come together and put in the effort!

Remind everyone that no individual can have all the answers. These kinds of challenges are opportunities to learn and grow! Do not be discouraged!

### Being open to what comes to you

Sometimes opportunities arise unexpectedly, don’t dismiss these just because the timing might be wrong.

For instance, in Southeast Georgia, CIL Assistant Director Christina Holtzclaw found out about an opportunity to have the CIL be part of a Mural project featuring nonprofits by starting a conversation with a rural Chamber of Commerce. Nothing might not come of it right away, but she calls these “half-baked ideas” that she keeps in mind as she continues to work towards better serving rural consumers. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we can practice “shifting nimbly” in the face of uncertainty. Staying open to novel opportunities will help you develop this important skill.

## Organizing to get things done

Using time efficiently is important when you are working with busy nonprofit staff and community leaders. Some tips for organizing:

* Assign tasks: assign clearly defined tasks to those who are willing to help
* Set deadlines: make sure deadlines are reasonable and attainable
* Divide and conquer: create subgroups or subcommittees to tackle specific issues and report back to the group

For a bigger project, you might want to divide it into phases. For example, at Independent Living Resource Center on the Central Coast of California, Brian Hollander worked with a variety of different partners to address the needs of rural people with disabilities who rely on electricity-based medical equipment during routine and unplanned power shutoffs and disasters. They developed a three-year plan to create needed resources.

Year 1: Developed a partnership with one power company in a demonstration project, during

which data on need and efficacy was collected.

Year 2: Implemented what was learned in the first year and focused on bringing in a second

major power company, as well as additional community partners.

Year 3: Created multi-year, renewable contracts with power companies and community partners

for the sustainability of the program.

Each year adds additional aspects of disaster planning and response. For example, the second year added creating emergency response plans and responding to all power shutoff events, regardless of the source.

### Navigating tension

Sometimes tension in rural organizing can arise. Here we talk about two common tensions around money and reputation.

#### Competition and scarcity

Money can make people weird. When funds are scarce, or held at artificially scarce levels, community members can feel like they are pitted against one another. A sense of competition can get in the way of progress and it is important to be aware and transparent about how people are feeling. Remember to meet your collaborators where they are. Ask questions and engage with community members about how this has worked in the past. By staying open and highlighting what each organization brings, you can avoid duplication of effort and know where growth is still needed. A compassionate approach will enable folks to come together.

One strategy for helping orient group members who may be feeling competitive or threatened is to focus on meeting the needs of consumers. No one organization can provide all the things and from an IL perspective, consumers deserve choice and the ability to access multiple resources. By working together, you can challenge the siloing of services and work collectively to integrate services – creating more opportunities!

In an IL approach we say: “Instead of fighting over the same piece of pie, let’s start advocating for the whole darn thing!”

#### Organizational and individual reputations

In rural communities, reputations can really impact progress. When organizations have good reputations, people are more likely to trust them and want to work with them. When organizations have a poor reputation, especially when it comes to upholding IL values, it can be difficult to know how to work together.

One strategy, which may emerge organically, is to work first with organizations that are more aligned with IL values and then model these values for other organizations. You can do this by using person first language, ensuring and celebrating accessibility features for all, and continuing to meet people where they are in the process.

Think about building a big tent so that everyone can participate and can also create enough space between folks who may not want to work closely together. Remember, everyone does not need to love each other! They just need space to work together on a common issue.

### A note on disability representation and accessibility

It is important make sure people with disabilities are represented in broader community groups and on your subcommittees. Try to have representation of many different disabilities, visible and invisible. An often-excluded group are people with disabilities that impact their ability to communicate. Be sure to plan for assistive technology needs and set up your meetings in a way that allows for space for everyone to share.

By bringing together various perspectives, you can make better decisions about what accessibility features to use. Remember to ask people what they need in order to participate!

# SECTION 4: Keep Going

As relationships and goals change, keeping momentum can be hard. One way to keep folks engaged is to purposefully document and communicate successes. This can lead to conversations that lead to future relationships and goals.

## Key Points

* CIL staff need strategies for documenting the outcomes of the rural outreach activities.
* CIL staff need ways to communicate the outcomes to other CIL staff, community members and organizations, policy makers, and other decision makers.

## Why evaluate?

Evaluation is helpful for documenting impacts and outcomes of your work and for communicating the work you did – an aspect of sustainability! This will help you set and achieve future goals. This section provides some background on evaluation and some helpful tips and tricks for adding evaluation to your rural community efforts to address community living needs for people with disabilities.

Some common reasons to evaluate are:

* To gauge understanding
* To gauge efficacy
* To understand the impact of what we are doing
* Access more resources (e.g. funding, in kind)
* Build more partnerships
* Reach more individuals
* Improve project processes

While evaluation helps determine success, the definition of success is up to you and those you work with. It important to ask yourselves, “How will we know that we have been successful and what evidence do we need to show others that we made a difference?”

## Who is your audience?

How you evaluate your work depends on your audience. Who do you want to communicate the outcomes of your project to and why? Telling consumers about the outcomes of your project is very helpful for continuing to generate interest in the project and recruit future participants. People in your local community may have resources that they can put toward the project that can help continue its development and make it a regular feature of your community. Regional, state and national governments and organizations may have resources they can allocate for the continued success of your project. It’s a good idea to keep these different audiences in the back of your mind as you begin to consider potential community living projects and the outcomes they would like to track as they develop and implement a project.

How you show that the project made a difference depends a little bit on the target audience you want to reach. Local and regional audiences may be moved by stories and pictures. State and national audiences might also want to see change that was measured with numbers (e.g., number of visits to the fitness gym). You may present stories or brief presentations to local and regional audiences, but regional and national audiences may be moved to action by fact sheets and reports in addition to stories and pictures. How you show that a project was successful depends somewhat on which audience you want to reach.

## Exploring the definition of success

From the very beginning, how you evaluate depends on how you define success. In fact, you may have multiple definitions of what makes a project successful. The criteria that you set to define a successful project will shape what evaluation strategies you use.

**Mentor Discussion: Learning from past successes**

One way to investigate what you define as success is to think about examples of community efforts that were successful in the past. For example, in one rural Montana community, a high school student had a car accident that left him unable to use his legs. A group of men who work in construction donated their time and materials to build a ramp to the front entrance of the high school gym.   
  
Thinking of your own examples, try to answer the following questions.

* How did you know this was successful?
* Who had to be involved?
* What activities or circumstances were critical in making it happen?
* What outcomes or experiences changed?
* What can be replicated and how?

Below are some examples of success criteria:

* Increased awareness of a problem and solutions
* Improved outcomes (health, participation, access to affordable housing)
* Increased services delivered
* Structural changes (system, services, infrastructure, built environment)
* Increased/improved relationships
* Increased program participation
* Increased access to other services (health care, food benefits)

## When to evaluate

Evaluation comes at all stages of a project. Thus, the time to start thinking about evaluation comes at the very beginning of a project. As you connect with others in the community, it is useful to start defining and brainstorming project goals and success criteria. However, you will need to also be open to change, as evaluation is a continual process.

* Evaluation may lead to changes in what success looks like
* Revisiting goals and objectives periodically and be open to shifting objectives
* Balancing shifting needs and objectives with longer term project goals

Without buy in and trust, it can be difficult to get people who are willing to participate. This makes gathering valuable data from your evaluation challenging.

With discussing evaluation often and maybe even assigning someone to help keep evaluation at the forefront of your conversations, your will have a better sense of what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done.

## Evaluating as you go

Evaluation in rural communities needs to harness rural relationships, recognize that small town connections are assets, and build buy in and engagement embedded in rural culture. Some factors you might want to evaluate as you go are things like inclusivity, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability. Here are some questions you can consider in your regular peer mentoring check-ins about your rural outreach efforts:

* What do you need?
* What do you want from this process?
* What were your expectations for this and how does that align with what is happening?
* Who is engaged? How have we expanded the conversation? Who is missing?
* What could be done to improve your experience?

## Evaluating project outcomes

To evaluate project outcomes, you first need to know what end result you are hoping for. Consider the community living need you are working on. For example, maybe you have decided that transportation is a major barrier to community participation and health because people with disabilities are not able to get to social activities or their doctor’s appointments.

Again, how will you know you have been successful? In the above example, what success criteria would you want to target? Increased community participation? Increased attendance of people with disabilities at community events such as high school basketball games or church picnics? Improved health? Increased participation in preventative health appointment? Use of the existing transportation system increased? The key here is that the outcomes need to be specific and measurable.

### Gathering and organizing information

It’s important to have a plan for gathering information (for example, data about Paratransit ridership, success stories, or key informant interviews) in an organized way. Who is going to lead the evaluation process? How you will store and maintain the outcome information. Will you use an online tool like Google Docs or Dropbox to share files or is one person going to store the materials on their computer and share out via email or hard copies?

Spending some time at the beginning thinking about what needs to be done before, during, and after the project can help you stay on track. What kinds of information already exists, what tools will you need to develop to collect new information, and when is this information available to be collected?

### Getting the “right” information

While this curriculum is not designed to get into the nitty gritty of how to perform evaluations (there are some great resources linked at the end of this session for those who want to dive deeper), it is important to ponder how you can ask the right questions to get to the information you want? For example, after doing some work with Paratransit to improve rider experience, how will you know if ridership increased or if the rider experience was improved? Who do you need to reach out to and what questions do you need to ask? Do they already collect this information? Do you want specific stories about using Paratransit or do you want some numbers to demonstrate the impact of your efforts?

### A note on inclusion and accessibility

Strong evaluation uses a culturally competent framework. To do this, you can reflect on your cultural self-awareness through reflection on your background and lived experiences related to rural communities and disability. Our personal histories influence the biases we bring to the table or the assumptions we might make about others. Everyone has their own history and biases. Self-awareness is a good way to avoid the pitfalls of prejudice and discrimination that come from assuming other people think the same way you do or share your values.

Evaluation that involves the community helps to ensure that the project is relevant and appropriate. When considering evaluation activities and topics, it is helpful to reflect on the information you gathered when you were getting to know your rural community during the rural outreach and networking session. Knowing the community and culture means knowing the meaning behind certain things or places.

For example, one CIL staff found she needed to reframe her Healthy Community Living Workshops as classes because of the negative meaning of workshop (as in sheltered) for many people with disabilities. If you are putting together a survey or interview questions, consider testing out your materials and language first with a trusted community member. Get feedback and be open to that feedback!

It is also important to build/create spaces that are safe for feedback via multiple formats. This is something you are already probably pretty good at! However, accessibility can be applied beyond disability accessibility! Ask people what is best for them and make a legitimate effort to address those needs. You may want to check in on:

* Language
* Distance
* Technology
* Timing and scheduling

How an evaluation is framed also matters, individuals may be intimidated by a survey or a written assessment. You can address some of this by asking folks up front, what is the best way for them to communicate information to you? How do they want to engage in the evaluation? Framing an evaluation more like a conversation may make things more comfortable.

## Building on your strengths

Regardless of the type of evaluation you decide to conduct, the process comes easier when you identify and utilize your strengths and build evaluation strategies based on those strengths. For example, do you have a connection that has skills in creating videos? Or someone who is a database wizard and loves to crunch numbers? Or maybe someone else loves to engage with community members, collecting stories and information related to your efforts. As you settle on your evaluation approach, use what you have!

# SECTION 5: Get Meeting

Sometimes CIL staff will be involved in organizing and leading small and large meetings. Regardless of the size of the group, you will want to foster healthy group dynamics. The first part of this section has some helpful information on some ways to do just that! The goal of the second section is to provide tips on holding a large townhall-style meeting. However, some tips for smaller meeting types and other information venues are given. Here you will find resources on making meetings accessible and includes strategies on how to encourage healthy group dynamics.

## Key Points

* Rural outreach peers need skills for fostering healthy group dynamics.
* Rural outreach peers need to know how to create accessible meetings.

## Group Dynamics and Communication

Whether you are in a formal or informal group setting, interactions and behaviors of the group members create a collective group dynamic. The dynamic is not the same for every group and how you experience the dynamic can vary from really great and productive to really negative and destructive. Here we provide some guidance on some ways to foster healthy dynamics.

### Diversity and including consumers

The strongest and most effective groups include many kinds of people who represent those who live in the community. These include people of race, gender, age, amount and source of income, political affiliation, religious background and disability status, to name a few. Consumers are at the heart of the work you do. Additionally, as many people you interact with may not know about independent living philosophy and services, you may need to explain what “nothing about us without us” means.

Many communities have people with disabilities who are engaged and well known in the community. You may have identified these individuals during your outreach or you may need to network with local service providers to identify them. By having people with disabilities present in group discussion, they can tell their success stories of living in the rural community and highlight things that have worked well. Be sure to think about ways you can support this.

### Listen carefully and look for strengths

An IL informed process includes respecting peoples’ values and choices as the groups come together. Listening assures that you are becoming aware of the community’s values and perspectives which allows you to meet them where they are. This means suspending your own judgement about where they should be in understanding disability and working with them to take the next step for community living. Using a positive and affirming approach will help the group identify strengths and next steps.

Doing this kind of work with communities can highlight differences in peoples’ values. You will likely encounter people who have different values from you and each other. It’s important to be tolerant and model tolerance for different values. Use these differences to explore how folks can work together despite their differences.

This project is meant to be positive and focus on strengths. It is ok to talk about past challenges, but it is important to keep the group moving in a positive direction. Whenever possible, help the group avoid getting stuck in talking about past failures.

**Community Effort Idea: Possibility Thinking**

One way to get people talking about positive aspects of their community is through “possibility thinking.”

You can suggest that people in the group identify community strengths that contribute to community well-being and success such as developing like parks, services, or new businesses.

Remember, people bring their skills and experiences as assets for addressing the needs of community members. Listen for the skills people bring and highlight them for others. Assets can include both knowledge that people have about the community or community living resources.

**Community Effort Idea: Appreciative Inquiry**

If you have a more formal group working together to address disability issues, you might consider an appreciative inquiry activity.

For this activity, people pair up and face one another. One person is the interviewer and the other tells a story. The person telling a story talks about themselves or someone they know who is living with a disability in the community. The other person asks questions to learn as much as possible about the resources this individual uses for community living. After 5-7 minutes, the two switch roles.

When all pairs have finished, spend the next 20 minutes or so hearing a brief version of these community living stories. Have the interviewers relay the stories to help keep them brief. Based on these stories, spend another 10 minutes making a list of resources in the community that seem to work well for people.

### Strategies for building trust

Groups can build trust through many different avenues. Here we highlight the use of ice breakers and celebrating accomplishments.

Learning about each other can be one of the most rewarding parts working with others. For example, beginning to know whether people prefer tea, coffee, water, or wine can begin to establish trust and safety with both being different and sharing differences. An effective way to do this in formal meetings, is to start every meeting with an “ice breaker.” These are intended to get people talking, but have an even more important benefit of helping community members get to know each other.

**See the RCLD online resources for a** [**list of ice breakers**](file:///C:\Users\justi\Downloads\Activities\Ice%20Breaker%20List.docx)**!**

As groups of people work towards common goals, they often break them down into smaller tasks. To build trust and enthusiasm, these can be acknowledged and celebrated. For example, if a young person suggests they could speak with the school principal about hosting a table at the career fair for disability services, celebrate this accomplishment when the person reports back to the group. You can also create less formal opportunities for celebrating, like going to the local coffee shop after the ending of an Independent Living Skills Training.

### Strategies for positive communication in groups

We identified several strategies for encouraging positive communication in groups from an IL perspective. These include modeling and encouraging vulnerability, making sure everyone is heard, challenging the status quo, and asking pointed questions.

#### Model and encourage vulnerability

Those who are taking leadership roles in a group meeting can facilitate open and curious communication by modeling vulnerability. This might mean being willing to express that your ideas are not necessarily right and would benefit from other people’s input. It might mean being willing to say you are wrong upon hearing the ideas of others. It can mean using humor and being willing to laugh at yourself. When leaders can be vulnerable, other group members can do the same and the this develops a culture of humility.

#### Hear from everyone

Different people may communicate differently. Some people are very direct and like to say what is on their mind while others like to work their way up to making a point. People even use different words for the same thing, like handicapped or disabled. Early on, as a diverse group forms, it is good practice to check in with everyone about how communication is happening in the group.

More formal meetings can be structured to encourage everyone to participate. For very active groups, this may involve “queuing up” people (i.e., Maggie, then Tim, then Joyce) to encourage people to talk one at a time. Take into account communication disabilities and provide accommodations for people to participate. This can include “previewing meetings,” which introduces people to the meeting agenda, or collecting ideas about agenda items prior to the meeting. Also, for meetings using video technology, you might allow users who do not want to be on camera to turn it off. In face-to-face meetings, you can provide note cards for people to communicate in writing if they do not want to speak up.

#### Challenge the status quo

When the stage is set for curious communication, people are able to engage critical thinking that challenges the way things are or have always been done. Curious communication invites people to share diverse ideas for the group to explore. This is the groundwork of innovation.

#### Ask pointed questions

Pointed questions seek to learn about differences that otherwise may not be apparent. For example, perhaps there are groups in the community that provide transportation for their members who don’t drive. You might ask, “How do people who don’t drive get to your church?”

### Dealing with Conflict

In group settings, it is important to acknowledge and affirm differences. Differences between people is a strength when those differences are affirmed, respected, and valued. Respecting differences and learning about them is the key. Differences of opinion should be heard for the sake of learning rather than for the sake of persuading. It is normal for people to have disagreements about what should be done and how it should be done. It is important to talk about these disagreements when they arise to seek peaceful resolution.

**Community Effort Idea: “Yes, And”**

Conflict can be caused by separate, competing sets of ideas. The more someone’s ideas are challenged, the more they will often “dig in” on their position, closing the doors on positive, effective communication.

The Improv game, "Yes, And," forces people to avoid rejecting others ideas, and, instead, to find a way to go with the flow. "Yes, And" is the opposite of "No, But."

As a group you can practice using “Yes, And” with a small activity, and then try to carry it into the way your group communicates into the future.

Start with a simple concept (it may even be silly) in order to break the ice. The point is to add information to the conversation rather than reject information.

For example, Person A states, “Corgis are cute dogs.” If person B says, “No, but poodles are cute dogs,” they are rejecting Person A’s statement. Poodles also being cute doesn’t have to take away from the cuteness of corgis. So, using “Yes, And” principles, Person B would instead say, “Yes, corgis are cute, and poodles are cute, too.” Both can be true.

#### Use discussion “pauses” or a brief break

When a quick resolution to a disagreement does not happen, you may want to put that topic on hold so that the meeting can continue and get to other important topics. However, the group will need to return to the topic in another meeting and potentially engage in conflict resolution.

#### Reach out to individuals between meetings

You may want to touch base with individuals following meetings where a disagreement came up that was not immediately resolved to let them know they are being heard and valued in the midst of challenging differences. This can soothe group members who might be upset.

#### Tool for resolving conflict

The Community Toolbox from the University of Kansas has many useful tips and strategies for resolving persistent conflict (<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/provide-information-enhance-skills/conflict-resolution/main>). They have tools for understanding the nature of the disagreement and how people who disagree can find ways to communicate, brainstorm possible solutions, and come to agreement.

Note that finding resolution can be stressful, especially when the stakes are high, and both sides are not equally motivated to reach an agreement. The party with the least to lose can make negotiating difficult by stonewalling, not showing up, and threatening to end the resolution process. To be at your best for negotiating, you can prepare yourself for these possibilities and handle them with grace. Strong emotions create difficult circumstances for reaching agreements. To the extent each party manages its stress level, objective outcomes that work for everyone can be reached.

Now that you have some more tools in your toolbelt for working in groups, the following section goes into some of the details to keep in mind when organizing large accessible meetings in rural places.

## Logistics for Organizing Accessible Meetings

In this session we will discuss small-group and larger community-wide outreach events and methods to gather information and identify community living barriers and supports that fit the values of a community. This session is meant to be a general guide. Often in rural areas you will need to get creative in finding suitable options and may need to make difficult decisions around venue, format, or other choices depending on cost and availability of resources.

You may need to communicate to your community the options that you had and the reasoning behind some decisions (cost, trade-off between accessibility features, and so forth) to provide transparency and build trust.

You may need to hold multiple events to take advantage of different choices, but this may also difficult due to staff availability and the resources it takes to hold large-scale meetings. This can also be difficult due to community possibly feeling excluded – perhaps a meeting was held at the local library that has a wide-open room that is good for wheelchair access but overly bright lighting. It is ultimately up to you and the people you work with to make the best choice when it comes to selecting venues or meeting styles that work in your location.

### Meeting planning

First you will need to decide what kind of gathering you want hold and what the purpose of the gathering will be. Is it information gathering? Sharing about a specific issue? Mobilizing for a targeted action (e.g. advocacy around a local law or barrier)? Or something else?

Questions to ask yourself:

* What is the topic you want to talk about?
  + Is the topic broad – such as discussing barriers to community living for the disability community?
  + Or narrow – such as informing the community about a new local ordinance that will make changes to sidewalk access?
* Why are you having this meeting? What would successful outcome be?
  + Having a lot of attendees?
  + People feeling their voices were heard?
  + Getting a number of people to sign up to action alert on an issue?

#### A note on doing research

Is there more information you need to gather on this topic before you are the ready to have meeting? You might need to do less research if it is an information-gathering meeting, or might need to do more if it is to mobilize around an action item.

* Example: What are reasons for to pass a law around housing accessibility? Who are its opponents and what are the barriers to passage?

You may need to learn more about your community, or refer to what you have discovered in other sessions such as Rural Outreach and Networking Strategies. In researching, you may identify more stakeholders, potential allies or opponents. Are there other people who may be good to have on your planning committee? Others you need to make sure to invite to your event?

* Example: Builders & city planners for housing issue, state transit board if transportation, healthcare workers for health issues, and more

### Format

Your objectives, staffing capabilities, timing limitations, and budget will constrain what kind of meeting or event you are holding. However, with those in mind, think back to what a successful event would look like as you decide what kind of event to hold.

Example large meeting formats:

* Panel briefings or discussions
* Media roundtable
* Policy panel
* Conferences
* Resource/education fairs with presenters
* Community events
* Public forums that are scheduled public community meetings that are open to everyone

Other meeting types:

* **Focus groups**: Gatherings limited to a specific stakeholder group – examples: older adults, students in transition, Medicaid recipients, Paratransit riders
* **Door knocking**: Going door to door in the community, informing people about your group and asking for input on important issues
* **House meetings**: Organizing small gatherings of people for the purpose of discussing issues
* **One-on-one interviews**: In person, over the phone, using a web platform or other venue

You will also need to decide how often you will want to hold different meetings. Is it a part of a series or a one-off event? To meet your objectives is it better to have many small meetings across an area, one centralized big meeting, or a mixture of events?

Finally, some factors to think about when considering format - Is your event in person? Online? Mixed? Each type of event will present challenges and opportunities with who is able to participate and how.

### Budgeting for a meeting

Finding money to support meetings can be challenging. Below are some ideas for brainstorming.

* How much money can each organization chip in? Can you meet objectives with that amount?
* As you get to the next phase – Setting up a meeting – are there resources or staffing you can get for free or reduced cost to fit your budget, or will you have to scale back?
* Are there other sources of funding or meeting components that you can get donated or borrow from stakeholders?
* Plan to document all expenditures to both help plan future events and to show funders costs of doing various types of outreach
* Make sure to calculate cost of staff time when finalizing budget

### Setting up a meeting

Place, date, invited parties/speakers, moderator/facilitator, access, preparing key members, staffing, preparing materials.

### Access

Planning accessibility features you will want your venue to have and back-up plans if some features do not function as intended is important. We recommend making a list. Below are some general tips to think about.

Physical meeting access features:

* Zero-step path of travel
* Short path of travel from parking/drop-off area
* Accessible parking (may need to bring & signs to mark)
* Signs indicating accessibility features and paths of travel
* Inclusive seating for wheelchair/mobility device users (not separate from other users)
* Sight lines to speakers for all participants
* Accessible doors (with button, lightweight, etc.)
* Signs with number to call if access feature (door, etc.) stuck or not working or staff assisting with access
* Adjustable lighting
* Adjustable volume
* Elevator if on separate floor - You will also want to have a plan if elevator/lift does not function or if it is too small for mobility devices
* Space for travel in-between seating areas (wide spaces for mobility device users)
* Remove potential travel barriers like potted plants, wall-mounted items without indicator underneath, chairs or furniture in path-of-travel
* Location with good access to public transit or roadways
* Hearing/Audio Induction loops
* Certified-ASL interpreters
* ESL or other language interpreters
* CART captioning
* Accessible sign-in sheets/person to assist people who cannot physically use pen
* Nametags with low-vision accessible contrast & large font
* Adjustable tables/surfaces for people in various heights of wheelchair
* Accessible bathrooms and other amenities
* Space for service animals
* Quiet space people can excuse themselves to
* Scent- and allergen-free environment
* Common considerations are exclusion of certain foods (peanuts, others) and no perfume
* Also consider hand sanitizer in use, cleaning chemicals used, other smells or strong things that may be dangerous to people with chemical damage
* Handouts before meetings when possible (if RSVPs) in various accessible formats
* Braille
* Large print
* .RTF electronic documents

Below are some features to consider for digital meetings:

* Captioning
* High-contrast slides
* Image descriptions
* Maximally accessible digital platform (does not require sight to use features)

Designate a clear contact person to handle other accommodation requests ahead of event.

Alternative ways to attend events: call-in number, participate in live discussion or streaming video on social media, email or write-in comments, video conferencing software.

Allow multiple ways to provide input: asking participants to write out questions before hand, place comments/questions into an anonymous basket (especially for sensitive or contentious topics), written question submission (e.g. email, letters) after event.

### Food

Food considerations may include diabetic and vegan alternatives. You may want to consider context with event topic.

* Example: chips and soda may not be good choices for a healthy eating event – mirror tone you are trying to convey.

### Accessibility during COVID

* Masks with clear plastic for lip readers
* Extra personal protective equipment (PPE) for people without
* Low-risk sanitizer

### Place and time considerations

When choosing a place to hold your meeting consider both the inside access of the building, but also transportation access for attendees. Consider the values, traditions and practices of community – knowing how, where, and communication styles of your specific community.

* Examples: some community members may not like meeting at government buildings, some may not like religious settings, and some may prefer those places

When picking a time that works for the bulk of your attendees, consider:

* Does it need to be before or after work schedules?
* During time public transportation is available?
* Avoiding conflict with other events:
  + Local or cultural holidays
  + Local sporting events (e.g. football, rodeos, school-sports, and more depending on region)
  + Other meetings or conferences with similar audience as attendees
    - Disability? Housing? Transportation?
  + Legislative calendar for policy-makers
  + School events
  + Agriculture – harvest times, planting seasons
  + County- and state-fairs

When searching for conflicting events you can check or ask: events calendars, community coordinators, periodicals, local papers, radio, local TV, media outlets, social media, websites, fliers that list community events, newsletters or social media from service organizations, school newspapers, and more. Other time considerations might be:

* Is there time for mingling or discussion before or after your event for people to meet or ask questions?
* Do you have access to the venue before the start-time to set up or are you following someone?
* Is the meeting duration or frequency too much for some participants?
* Can you use Doodle or another scheduling platform to get an idea from attendees (and possible staff/speakers) on availability before event?

### Identifying speakers

You may want to look at stakeholders. Are any of them qualified and comfortable presenters?

Can you get a diversity of voices both representative of your community but also in context of discussion?

Examples:

* Housing – renters, housing authority staff, local government officials
* Transportation – riders, transit agency, policy makers
* Crisis – crisis intervention organizations, disaster preparation

### Identifying moderator

This person might be a trusted community leader or known figure. You may have someone on staff who can do this, but you may also want to consider using a professional event organizer or host.

### Meeting components

Some of the following items may not be necessary depending on the type of event, but consider all the physical items and spaces you may need for your event. There may certainly be more depending on your event.

* Main room
* Break-out Rooms
* Projectors
* Computers
* Chairs
* Tables
* Stage
* Food
* Insurance/liability waiver

### Materials

You may want to prepare packets to distribute to attendees when they arrive.

You can include speaker bios, agendas, evaluation forms and informational materials such as fact sheets about your organization and your co-sponsors/planning partners.

Depending on the topic, you may want to research and distribute information about it and how people can get and stay involved.

You can also use the information that you researched to develop targeted, localized materials that make the issue relevant for citizens of your community.

### Equipment

Is there equipment you can have that can increase usability of venue?

* Additional well-labeled cables to connect computer/projectors
* Portable ramps
* Traffic cones

### Public agenda

Your agenda should be concise, but contain all relevant situation changes.

Example:

**Lakeshore Community Town Hall Meeting**

**April 1, 2020 – Lakeshore Community Center**

12:00 Introductions (in Ponderosa Room)

12:10 Housing Introduction

12:30 Housing Discussion and Q&A

1:00 Lunch Break (in Alpine Room)

1:30 Transportation Introduction (in Ponderosa Room)

1:50 Transportation Discussion and Q&A

2:30 Closing Remarks and Action Team Sign-Up

### Staff agenda

You may want a separate agenda for staff to follow with information that the public does not need to know.

* Example: Food needs to be brought out by 2:00, but cleared away at 3:00. Parking lot needs to be closed 20 minutes after event starts. Staff are doing a mandatory check-in at 11:30 in lobby room 2 during the meeting break. We have 30 minutes after close to clean and lock room before next event begins; lock up by 5:00.

### Lists and documents

You may want to collect attendee contact information for a variety of reasons, including:

* Newsletter sign-up
* Contact info of attendees to invite to future events or for action items stemming from the town hall
* Photo/media release

Regardless of why you are collecting information, think about where the list will be stored after the event that will be accessible to relevant staff. This is especially important if you will not be coming back to the list immediately after event. If there is time, consider entering all the information in a secure location the same or next day even if you aren’t going to be using it for a while – it can be a huge missed opportunity to hold a great community event just to lose touch with attendees and future potential partners!

### Staffing and roles

Staffing your event can come from a mix of paid staff from your organization, community partners, and volunteers. Consider how you will want to coordinate these roles of all your staff given the format of your event – will there be one primary coordinator? Are separate organizations responsible for organizing their own staff?

Be wary of having too many ‘leaders’ – unintentional misinformation can cause confusion.

Roles you may want to designate:

* Overall Event Coordinator
* Volunteer Coordinator
* Accessibility and Accommodations Contact
* Press and Media Contact
* Timer/Moderator – may be separate roles depending on event size
* Technical Coordinator – IT person on staff who can come to event to liaison with venue
* Sign-up list Manager
* Photographer/Videographer
* Notetaker

### Dry run

When possible, have a walkthrough of venue to check for possible access and other barriers or call ahead and try to check for other issues with venue staff.

* Common issues may include
* Lack of accessible rooms
* Technology barriers – cannot use in-house equipment, do not allow personal flash drives, incompatible equipment, older wiring that does not allow plug-ins, sound issues if playing videos

You may want to do a practice run if doing a digital event as well, perhaps even more-so than an in-person event to troubleshoot possible technology issues.

Have all relevant staff test software you will be using, and watch for the following barriers:

* Do you know how to use the captioning and other accessibility features?
* If using an outside captioner, can you add them to meeting?
* Can you describe access features to participants?
* Do you know how to mute/unmute participants? Add speakers? Share screen? Split break-out rooms if using them?
* Is it possible to have a practice date before event for participants (at least those who have RSVP’d) to practice connecting and participating ahead of actual event?

### Backup plan

If a major barrier occurs with your original venue due to accessibility, weather crisis, unexpected conflicts, cost, or other issue is your back up plan to:

* Change venue
* Move event online
* Postpone event
* Something else?

The solution may change depending on type of barrier encountered, but it may be good to discuss alternatives with your planning committee before barriers are encountered so they know what to expect. Also consider possible ‘deal breakers’ for planning committee members? These may change depending on resources of your community.

* Not all buildings may be completely accessible.
* May have to make tradeoffs with cost of space and size or location.
* Not all stakeholders may be able to make it depending on date of event, which may include some planning committee members depending on personal schedules.

## Promoting a meeting

Promoting a meeting involves using a lot of different formats and strategies to reach the most diverse audience.

### Invitation Strategies

Send out RSVPs (and keep a list of potential attendees to plan for numbers!) and reminders to stakeholder and the community through a variety of mediums. You may make personal phone calls, post social media invitations, put up fliers, get into community calendars and other methods of news media and organizations with shared missions. You might also keep a contact list to remind attendees about the event as people inquire and show interest.

You may need to go back to list of organizations from Planning Phase. Organizations that were not a good fit to co-run event can still reach out to their constituents, and sometimes their media contacts depending on capacity.

You may want to ask attendees ahead of time about access and accommodation needs – such as people needing any help interacting with meeting components (communication or physical barriers) as well as side components (food, bathroom, and so on.)

* Will people have PCAs?
* What tasks can staff assist with?
* Will people have transportation to & from event? Later or more rural events may not have public transit options.

### Press\* - depending on event objectives

Depending on your event’s objectives you may want to write a press release, directly invite members of the press to the event, and develop press kits.

You will want to research publication deadlines for various media (newspaper, tv, radio) to get into community calendars or to allow them time to schedule to attend your event.

### Providing information to participants

You will want to provide as much information ahead of time as relevant, especially if there are perks that will increase your event’s appeal such as food or fun activities.

Key information may include:

* Topic, location, date and time
* Available amenities: food, water, transportation options, parking instructions, straws, restrooms, child-care, distance to meeting area, etc.

You may also want to include items of note or things people need to prepare, such as:

* Outside food not allowed in conference room
* Come prepared to talk about experiences searching for housing
* Bring warm clothing for outdoor gathering
* Park next door in lot

### A note on going digital

Things to think about if doing an online event:

* If you are using a digital platform, what information do participants need besides call-in numbers or URLs?
* Is there a pre-training or waiting room participants can log-into before meeting starts?
* Is there a public place they can log-in if they do not have their own machine?
* Alternative connection information? Different instructions for PC or Mac users? Tablet and smartphone users?
* Contact information for someone if they are having technical difficulty?

There are many different online digital platforms and they change all the time. Be sure to consult someone who understands their accessibility before choosing which one to use.

## Holding a meeting

In many instances, holding an in-person or virtual meeting involves several stages, including setting up the meeting, doing introductions, actually conducting the meeting, wrapping up, and having a plan for keeping momentum going.

### Setting up

Once the date of your meeting arrives, all your planning will come into effect. Arrive as early as practical, and set up your room and venue.

Depending on your event you may want to:

* Set up sign-in table
* Set out press packets, agendas, information
* Prepare stage
* Set up computers, displays, microphones, speakers, and other technology
* Arrange tables and chairs
* Place staff or signage at key points, such as entrances, parking areas, and restrooms
  + This is especially important if there are heavy or automatically locking doors or areas of a venue that appear closed when not in use
* Check for access obstructions (potted plants, stray chairs, and so on)

### Introduction

You will probably start with an introduction once people are settled and the meeting begins.

Topics you may want to cover include:

* Meeting topic, speakers, key staff
* Logistical information: exits, emergency evacuation procedures, turn off/silence cell phones, masks/social distancing rules
* Amenities notices (food locations and times, bathrooms, paths of travel, water, others)
* Accessibility instructions:
  + Saying name before speaking to identify speakers to persons with visual disabilities
  + Using microphones
  + No cross-talk so interpreters can work
  + Take a break when needed (any instructions on which doors to use to step out of room)
* Quick agenda overview, noting items of important on agenda
  + Example: Break-out rooms at 10:00, 45-minute lunch on your own at 12:00, etc.
* Speaking: asking questions when needed vs. question period after presentations

### Conducting meeting

Now your meeting kicks off. Meeting components might consist of some of the following:

* Moderated discussion
* Panelists speaking
* Break-out rooms or discussions
* Recording feedback from presenters and attendees

For longer events, you may need check-ins during breaks/pauses with staff or even with attendees:

* Are you following agenda? Going too slowly or too quickly?
* Any hiccups? Modifications that need to be made?
* Chance to rally staff and see if there are any problems you are not aware of.
* Thank staff and volunteers for their contribution so far.

### Wrapping up

Make sure to have a clear end to the event with a thank you to participants, instructions to safely leave the venue, and any potential further action items or communication that can be relayed to attendees.

Then, clean up the venue – you want to be invited back in the future – and do any other closing tasks.

For large events, we suggest hiring cleaning crew if you have budget to do so – especially in venues with large number of attendees or food. Your staff and volunteers will be tired after running an event, and professionals may have cleaning tools that outstrip what you have available.

## Maintaining momentum after a meeting

Debriefing, creating action plans, and using the results from the meeting are great ways to keep momentum going after a meeting.

#### Debriefing

Debriefing with meeting organizers, preferably within two weeks of an event’s end or sooner so it is fresh, helps organizers consider what worked and what did not work. Take compliments and criticisms to heart. No event is perfect.

Another way to add to your debrief is to get feedback from attendees. You may also send out an invite for attendees to share their thoughts about the event, either electronically or even in quick one-on-one follow-ups with select attendees, if you have their contact information. You can also provide a post-survey or similar in handout materials, but these can be challenging to get back as attendees may be eager to get home after an event ends. Even asking a few questions, such as what they liked about the event and what didn’t go well or was confusing can be helpful for future event planning.

Consider storing a summary of things learned somewhere accessible for future staff to reference before they do a similar event. What did you learn? Are certain venues to be avoided? Did a specific format work particularly well? What can be replicated in the future?

#### Action planning

Following debriefing, keeping momentum can also happen through creating an action plan with task assignments and future meeting plans. What are you going do with info you have collected? What information is new? Has anything changed with your issue since the meeting was held?  Develop next steps, whether they are holding additional events or implementing community solutions.

#### Using meetings to build community efforts

Remember to update and stay in communication with your various contact lists as relevant:

* + Attendees
  + Staff and volunteers
  + Speakers
  + Donors or other supporters
  + Other stakeholders