



Social Marketing in Rural and Frontier Communities

What is Social Marketing?

Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing principles for social issues rather than for profit. Described as the marketing of behavior change that benefits society, social marketing seeks to change people’s knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs so that they eventually change their behavior. You can use social marketing strategically to support your efforts to implement, expand, and sustain the system of care approach.

Social marketing strategies can be used to:

- Raise awareness of mental health needs of children, youth, and young adults
- Demonstrate that systems of care improve outcomes for youth who have serious emotional disturbances and their families, and provide an excellent return on investment
- Develop community support to create, expand, and sustain your approach in states, communities, tribes, and territories
- Create a shared vision of what your approach can achieve and how its partners can work collaboratively to implement this vision

Social marketing follows a strategic process that includes setting goals; identifying key audiences; developing messages targeted at these audiences; identifying “channels” for communication; developing and disseminating materials; and implementing activities and events.

To learn more about the social marketing process, refer to the “[Social Marketing Planning Guide \(PDF\)](#)” which provides detailed information about the strategic process for social marketing.

Common Challenges in Rural Communities

The most successful social marketing efforts reflect a deep understanding of the intended audience’s attitudes and beliefs. Effective social marketing also considers what is preventing an audience from taking certain actions (barriers), as well as what might motivate them (benefits). While all rural communities are different, many face common challenges related to accessibility, availability, and acceptability of seeking care.¹ Some of these common challenges include:

- Limited access to remote areas and lack of transportation
- Limited financial resources
- Limited technology

¹ This tip sheet was developed with the help of rural system of care communities, as well as information from the following study: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2954890>

- A wide range of cultures and beliefs across large geographic areas
- Scarcity of media outlets
- Scarcity of primary care providers, child and adolescent psychiatrists, and mental health providers (especially bilingual providers)
- Siloed services and limited collaboration between systems
- Historical skepticism around accessing services and supports through health institutions
- Lack of awareness and understanding of the need to treat children and youth with mental health challenges
- Prejudice and discrimination against people dealing with mental health challenges
- Lack of privacy due to close social networks

Common Opportunities in Rural Communities

While there are many challenges to reaching rural audiences, there also are unique characteristics that serve as opportunities for social marketing efforts. Strengths of some rural communities that can be leveraged for social marketing may include:

- Tight-knit communities that understand the importance of helping neighbors
- The commonality of word-of-mouth communications
- Existing collaboration and informal communication networks
- Agencies and organizations that are willing to partner, such as the Cooperative Extension System
- Natural community leaders who are easily identifiable (because of the smaller community) and willing to partner
- Audiences that may be more likely to read traditional print publications (such as local newspapers, local magazines, or church bulletins)
- Media coverage may be more accessible because of lower competition (compared to urban areas)

Who Are Your Natural Allies?

In any community, there are natural allies who are more likely to be interested in and motivated to be champions of your work. Social marketing efforts should begin with those natural ally audiences. Every community is different, so you will want to do some research and exploration to identify who your natural allies are.

Some examples of natural allies in rural communities may include:

- School leaders
- Faith-based organizations and communities
- Agricultural organizations such as The Grange, 4-H, or Agricultural Extension
- Local health departments
- Barber/beauty shops
- Families and youth involved in services
- Retailers and gas stations
- Local juvenile services
- Community champions/natural helpers

“Use those partnerships, and find those informal powers in the community. It doesn’t always have to be the mayor, or somebody who works at an agency. Find a grandma! Find someone who is very involved in the community and knows everything that’s going on and get them on your team.”

—Ashley Lincoln, MSW, evidence-based intervention specialist, Cherokee Nation Hero Project

Getting to Know Your Audience

Every state and community is different, so in order to avoid making assumptions about your audiences, you must talk to them. Understanding your audiences is a critical part of the social marketing process. Talking to each audience and considering their views not only shapes your social marketing strategies, but also helps to gain your audiences’ trust. You can do this in rural communities by:

- Arranging time to listen to families and youth
- Talking to community leaders
- Asking questions and learning about people in other agencies
- Understanding audience challenges from their perspective (not by making assumptions)
- Asking what it will take to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors

“Families really are the experts, so ask them ‘What do you want to see in regards to messaging? What do you think about this? Is this easy to read?’ Really getting their input and opinions has helped us be successful.”

—Ashley Lincoln, MSW, evidence-based intervention specialist, Cherokee Nation Hero Project

Craft Compelling Messages for Rural Audiences

Once you have identified and analyzed your audiences, you can craft social marketing messages that seek to change perceptions of barriers and emphasize benefits. Some types of messages that communities have successfully used to do this include:

- Messages that use the terms social/emotional health and well-being in place of mental health
- Messages that promote hope, health, and wellness, such as:
 - Recovery is possible.
 - Help is available.
 - Getting help for your child can help the whole family.
 - Emotional wellness is part of overall health.

“When we worked with youth in the Houston area, what we heard from them was that they wanted a message that talking about mental health was OK. ... However, when we talked with youth in our South Texas region, we heard very different things ... they wanted our messages to not be about mental health — that wasn’t a word they connected to — but they wanted to share the message that you could have a good future.”

—Molly Lopez, PhD, Texas statewide system of care project leader

Tips for Rural Social Marketers, from Rural Social Marketers

There is much to be learned from social marketers who have worked with rural systems of care! They recommend these nine key tips for working with rural communities:

1. Take advantage of traditional print campaigns (newspapers, bulletins, and magazines), billboards, and local, trusted media.
2. While outreach materials can be very useful, person-to-person messaging is often even more effective.
3. Use natural partnerships to the fullest.
4. Make yourself accessible and get to know your audience by physically going to the area to interact with them.
5. Find natural champions within the community and engage them as channels.
6. Use cultural brokers to convey your message, including peer messengers and family leaders.
7. Connect with existing leaders and innovators.
8. Use technology to connect with remote partners or audiences when possible.
9. Remember, families are the experts in their own care!