

Engaging People with Disabilities: Strategies for Rural Health Departments



Rural America is as diverse as its people, reflecting the unique geography, culture, and history of each location. In 2016, approximately 46 million people lived in rural areas of the United States, accounting for about 14% of the population.¹

People in rural areas have fewer resources and opportunities available in their communities, so local health departments are an important resource, serving as the frontline providers in many rural jurisdictions. It is important that health departments serving rural areas ensure their programming is inclusive and accessible for everyone, including people with disabilities.

While rural Americans account for a relatively small percentage of the total U.S. population, they represent a higher proportion of people with a disability: 17.1% of rural Americans report a disabling condition compared with 11.7% of urban-dwelling Americans.² The higher rates of disability persist across gender, race, impairment type, and all age groups. Further, veterans and people in poverty living in rural areas report higher rates of disability than those in urban areas.

Rural living can pose unique challenges for people with disabilities. For example, rural residents in general have difficulty accessing healthcare.³ Due to their decreased likelihood of being insured, lack of access

to transportation, and need for more frequent medical attention,^{4,5} rural residents with disabilities may be doubly disadvantaged by the limited healthcare services available in their communities.

Additionally, adults with disabilities living in rural areas typically rely on services that are more informal and less specialized. They must travel farther and pay more for those services, and they tend to receive lower quality care than their urban counterparts.⁶

Local health departments play a crucial role in filling resource and service gaps that face rural America. Here are five approaches health departments can follow to promote the health and well-being of people with disabilities who live in rural areas:

Five Strategies for Rural Health Departments to Engage People with Disabilities

- 1. Engage people with disabilities in program planning and evaluation.** The best strategy to accommodate people with disabilities is to ask about their health needs and increase their involvement with local health department programming and planning.⁷ In rural areas, people with disabilities value the opportunity to contribute to their community, as this contributes to their sense of well-being. Engaging people with disabilities in program planning and evaluation ensures inclusive and accessible programs and the well-being of those who participate.
- 2. Collaborate with non-traditional healthcare partners.** Many people with disabilities have difficulty navigating the environment and are at risk of social isolation. Churches and faith communities remain an important institution in rural communities, so engaging pastors or church elders during program planning can help local health departments reach a

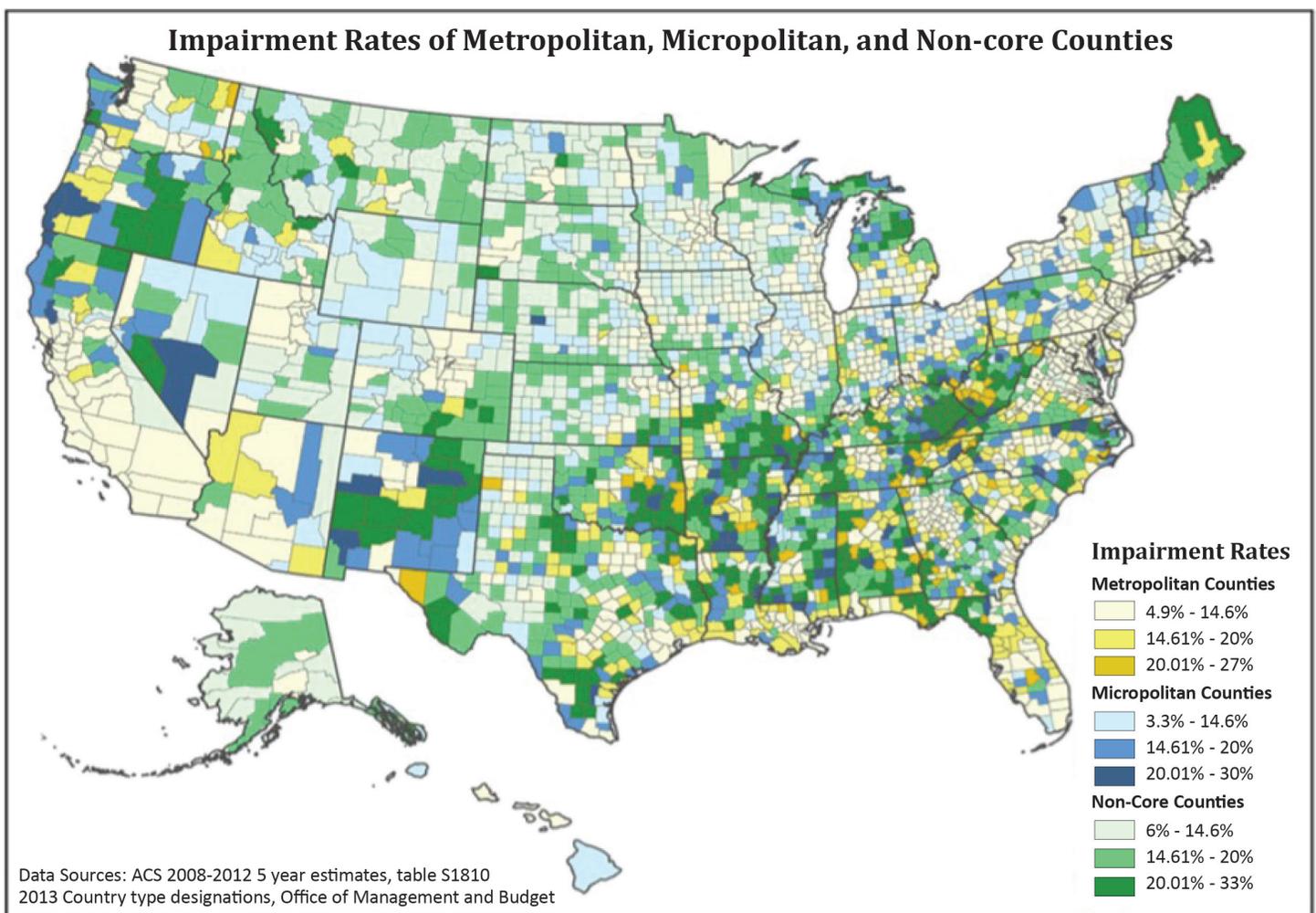


broad audience. For example, churches often have home visiting programs for members who have difficulty going out, so churches can help local health departments reach people in need.

3. **Create opportunities for meaningful interaction.** In rural areas, opportunities for interaction with peers are more limited than in urban areas, so peer support groups are an important source of social engagement for people with disabilities. Local health departments can ensure social interaction is available to people with disabilities by developing peer support programs or partnering with organizations.
4. **Capitalize on the rural environment.** Many people, including those with disabilities, choose to live in rural areas because they value the calm environment and connection to nature. Local health departments can take advantage of the outdoors by creating

opportunities for social interaction and exercise for people with disabilities, such as a walking group at a local park or town square, even for those who may use a wheelchair or electric scooter for mobility.

5. **Engage with other rural local health departments.** NACCHO established a Rural Health Section to better serve local health departments serving rural jurisdictions. Through the Rural Health Section, NACCHO members and partners use multidisciplinary and programmatic expertise to articulate a high-level strategy for advocacy, goal attainment, structural system requirements, resources, and approaches to improve rural health. Each quarter, the Rural Health Section hosts a webinar to discuss topics of interest. Learn more here: <https://www.naccho.org/membership/advisory-groups/naccho-rural-health-section>.



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Resources

Understanding the Population of People with Disabilities

- NACCHO Fact Sheet: *What Local Health Departments Should Know about the Population of People with Disabilities*: https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Fact-Sheet_General-Overview.pdf
- NACCHO Guide: *Strategies for Successfully Including People with Disabilities in Health Department Programs, Plans and Services*: <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Strategies-for-Inclusion-Guide-updated-Dec-2017.pdf>
- NACCHO Statement of Policy: Health and Disability: <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/08-02-Health-and-disability.pdf>

Education and Training Resources for Health Department Staff

- Health and Disability 101: Training for Health Department Employees: <https://www.pathlms.com/naccho/courses/5037>
- ADA Hospitality: At Your Service: <http://www.adahospitality.org/at-your-service>

Disability Population Statistics

- Disability Counts: <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/geography/>

Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities

- University at Montana: <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu>

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[FACT SHEET]

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Learn more at <http://www.naccho.org/programs/community-health/disability>.

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