

# Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Rural Areas: Challenges & Strategies

Successfully making a change within an organization, such as the delivery of a new evidence-based practice (EBP), is challenging. Over the past decade, there has been an increased focus on how to best implement change in social service and behavioral health systems. However, much of the research has been done in urban areas, leading to a deficit in what is known about the unique implementation challenges in rural communities and how to best address them. This brief summarizes what is known about the implementation needs of rural areas and provides some strategies to address them and increase the likelihood of successful and sustained changes.

Rural areas have been shown to have higher levels of need and more complex needs than urban areas. At the same time, access to social services and behavioral health care has been limited by issues with the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of these services in rural communities. These issues will need to be considered and addressed during any implementation effort:

## AVAILABILITY

Availability is defined here as **having a sufficient number of qualified providers and services to meet the community's needs**. In rural areas, a diverse range of needs must be served by a smaller delivery system, leading to clinicians who serve as generalists or are a "jack of all trades." The same providers may be serving clients of all ages with a wide variety of needs and diagnoses. This may result in the inability to focus and develop skills in any one area or to become proficient in the numerous EBPs that are needed. Rural providers can also feel isolated, as they may have few or no co-workers and a limited professional support network. Provider burnout and turnover are a concern in rural areas as well, with one study showing that 63% of rural social workers had looked for a new job in the past year, a rate higher than in urban or suburban areas. Finally, rural areas often suffer from a lack of resources and funding, making it difficult to provide needed trainings and materials for new programs.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is defined here as **being able to reach the available services or providers**. In rural areas, distance is often a factor in access, with the large geographical areas leading to a physical separation from service providers as well as social and cultural isolation. Other factors, such as limited internet access, a lack of public transportation, limited access to private transportation, higher poverty rates, and insufficient insurance coverage, are often an issue as well. Finally, many rural areas report significant access challenges in winter, when snow may close roads for significant amounts of time and further reduce transportation options.

## ACCEPTABILITY

Acceptability is defined here as the **willingness of consumers to use services**. Stigma about receiving behavioral health or social services is, unfortunately, common in many communities. However, this may play an even larger role in rural communities where everyone knows everyone else in town, leading to concerns about privacy and general discomfort on both sides (e.g., concerns about being seen going into the therapist's office or running into your provider at the grocery store or local school). In addition, Indigenous communities are more prevalent in rural areas and need tailored engagement and outreach, culturally competent services, and treatment adaptations to meet local needs.

**While rural communities have complex implementation challenges not found in more urban areas, many agencies and providers have overcome these barriers to successfully implement new programs. Here are some examples of effective strategies for rural communities to consider when adopting new programs:**

### Careful Program Selection and Preparation

- Selection and preparation are key phases to implementing any change and should be done before any providers are trained in any new program.
- Research programs that address the population and the unfulfilled need using the CEBC and narrow them down.
- Conduct a pre-implementation assessment to ensure the program being considered is appropriate.
- Consider whether adaptations should be made to address local needs.
- Create a plan for booster training, as well as training of new staff.
- Learn more about [Selecting & Implementing Programs](#) from the CEBC!



### Build Partnerships

- Band together with other rural areas or providers to share training costs and set up support networks after training.
  - Consider programs that have Train-the-Trainer models so that you can build local capacity.
  - Work with program developers to see if they are willing to offer reduced-rate training for rural areas.
- Conduct a regional or multicounty needs assessment.
  - Convene meetings of providers and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to talk about needs.
- Connect with a university in your state, even if not local.
  - Look for volunteer support through internship options, evaluation projects, thesis or dissertation work, etc.
- Connect with state or county initiatives regarding mental health awareness, suicide prevention, substance abuse prevention programs, or domestic violence awareness or services to access resources.
- Co-locate mental health and substance abuse services with physical health services at local clinics, community health agencies, and tribal centers.

### Supporting Staff

- Ensure that your agency policies and practices are trauma-informed and address the secondary traumatic stress needs of staff.
- Establish support networks for staff by offering video or audio calls on a regular basis that are facilitated by a supervisor or clinician.
- See if your [agency qualifies for loan forgiveness and reimbursement programs](#) to attract staff to the area.
- Assist with locating housing for staff by developing relationships with local rental housing providers and realtors.
- Offer online continuing education options to reduce out-of-area travel while retaining staff.
- Conduct a periodic staff survey to examine satisfaction and engagement and develop a plan to respond to deficiencies.
- Review any existing turnover data and staff surveys.
  - Conduct exit interviews with staff to examine and address reasons for departure.





## Dealing with Distance

- Rotate staff to more remote areas or set up a satellite office.
- Investigate task-sharing options – are there tasks that local allied health professionals and paraprofessionals can do?
  - Example: Use a transportation provider for visits instead of the case-carrying social worker.
- Provide an agency automobile for longer trips or daily required travel.

## Increasing Reach through Telehealth Services

Telehealth is the use of electronic information and communications technologies to provide and support health care when distance separates participants. The use of telehealth services exploded nationwide during the COVID-19 epidemic, and it continues to be a valuable option to address availability, accessibility, and acceptability concerns in rural and frontier areas, especially for specialty providers whose availability is more limited. In addition, telehealth allows staff to be remote as well. Rather than being limited to the workers located in, or willing to relocate to, your community, hiring remote staff allows for access to a larger pool of workers to address local needs.

### Telehealth Considerations:

- Examine the availability and reliability of wireless/wired networks in your area.
  - Provide broadband access sites in local community centers, libraries, schools, etc.
  - Look at state and federal funding programs to address the “digital divide” that is common in rural areas.
- Determine how comfortable your community is using telehealth options.
  - Address complexity concerns or anxiety regarding technology use by including technology training in the treatment itself.
  - Provide basic tech support and outreach to the community on your telehealth platform.
- Ensure that your funding source will cover all aspects of telehealth services.
  - Determine whether there are any different policies or procedures that need to be followed for billing or reimbursement for telehealth services.
- Develop policies and procedures to address privacy and security concerns when using and delivering telehealth services.
- Hiring, supervising, and retaining remote staff requires specific attention and planning.
  - A recent [Western Regional Children’s Advocacy Center \(WRCAC\) Issue Brief](#) provides a helpful summary and suggestions, including strategies to recruit qualified professionals from afar (who will work remotely), tips for interviewing and selecting a candidate you may not meet in person, remote onboarding, issues in supervision, and strategies for retaining remote staff, including helping them manage secondary traumatic stress.



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