“We’re all sitting at the same table”: Challenges and Strengths in Service Delivery in Two Rural New England Counties

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Background & Purpose

- Initially: how low income rural residents make ends meet in different communities, and what services exist to support them
- Clear that geographic and local cultural constraints shape service delivery
- How do constraints operate in different rural communities, and how do providers structure programs to address barriers?

Regional Characteristics

<table>
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<th>“Clay” County</th>
<th>“Union” County</th>
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<td>- Adjacent to large metro area</td>
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<td>- In-migration of retirees &amp; vacationers</td>
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<td>- Service and tourism-based economy</td>
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<td>- Remote with ongoing population loss</td>
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<td>- Declining natural resource-based economy</td>
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<td>- Persistently high poverty</td>
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Data & Methods

- Service providers: cold calls for semi-structured focus groups (3 in Union; 2 in Clay; N=2–7/each; x=79 minutes)
- (Low Income) Residents: contacted us (fliers and recruitment through providers) for interviews (N=29/each county; x=50 minutes)
- Total N=85 participants
- Analyzed in NVivo 10 (emergent themes → broad categories → refined categories)

Related Publications & Acknowledgments


Key Results

Low Aspirations & Lack of Trust Complicate ‘Buy-In’

“Sometimes I think people are scared to leave. People are scared to change. You know, it’s what they’ve known their whole life and sometimes even the horribleness of the known is better than the unknown.” – Union County Provider

“Old-time New England families don’t want to ask for help.” – Clay County Provider

Community Characteristics Influence Interagency Collaboration

“I’ve been doing this work for about 20 years, and I think when I first started, providers were competing against each other. There was plenty of money...so you needed people to put in your programs. And we’ve come full circle, which makes sense. We don’t have the resources that we used to have, so now we’re maximizing resources and we’re leaning on each other, and we’re all sitting at the same table talking about what we can do to make things better.” – Union County Provider

“Let’s look at what’s creating a low standard of living here and find out what people want to do about it. In other words, you know, we don’t have the answers. They have the answers.” – Clay County Provider

Maximize Pragmatic Efforts & Focus on Grassroots Programming

To Stretch Resources and Build Trust

“For people who have significant industry experience but they don’t have a credential or education, we’ll work with them to develop a portfolio of their experiences... and so we’ll give them [college] credit... because we want to create the lowest cost, fastest degree path that we can.” – Union County Provider

“Let’s take a look at what’s creating a low standard of living here and find out what people want to do about it. In other words, you know, we don’t have the answers. They have the answers.” – Clay County Provider

Conclusions

- “Rural” characteristics like low population density can both benefit and hinder service delivery infrastructure.
- In Union, a greater degree of economic homogeneity fosters interagency collaboration and trust, paving the way for grassroots efforts and innovation.
- In Clay, retiree in-migrants dilute local ties, while a lack of a community center and intra-county politics stunt collaborative development and collective vision.
- Policies and programs serving rural populations can benefit from consultation with local experts to incorporate specific contours of community and its residents.

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