

State Management Work Group 2.0 | Specialized Rural Strategies

Purpose

The promising practices identified, and tools, templates, and resources shared in this document are the result of extensive research conducted over a three-year period by the State Management Work Group 2.0 (SMWG 2.0). The purpose of the SMWG 2.0 is to assist states in addressing the challenges faced by low-income families in rural communities and the agencies that serve them. SMWG 2.0 members helped identify the information shared here by conducting in-depth research through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. This information was then analyzed to identify common themes to help State Administrators with the implementation of these promising practices. The goal of this work is to reduce administrative burden and improve service delivery, and enhance program efficiency, ultimately improving outcomes for low-income individuals and families, *especially in rural communities*.

What are Specialized Rural Strategies?

Targeted approaches that are intentionally designed to address the unique challenges and leverage the strengths of rural communities. These strategies ensure that rural perspectives are included in statewide planning, enhance access to resources, and promote equitable service delivery across geographically dispersed areas, ultimately increasing their capacity to serve low-income residents.

Promising Practices

1. [**Maintain a robust and well-defined relationship with the State Association**](#) – The intentional, ongoing collaboration between the CSBG State Office and the State Association.
2. [**Develop, coordinate, and share statewide linkages**](#) – The creation and maintenance of partnerships, referral networks, and collaborative initiatives that connect CSBG-funded agencies, specifically rural agencies, with other programs, services, and resources.
3. [**Develop/participate in rural work group\(s\) and/or issue-focused affinity group\(s\)**](#) – The formation or active engagement in collaborative groups that bring together CSBG state staff, eligible entities, and others to address the unique needs of rural communities.
4. [**Provide specific funding to support rural communities \(both state and discretionary funds\)**](#) – The intentional allocation of CSBG resources—whether from state funds or discretionary dollars—to address the distinct needs and challenges faced by rural areas.

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1. ***Maintain a robust and well-defined relationship with the State Association*** – The intentional, ongoing collaboration between the CSBG State Office and the State Association, with clearly established roles, responsibilities, and communication channels, amplifying rural voices in statewide planning and decision-making processes.

States Who Have Employed This Practice:

Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, New York, Montana, North Dakota, Utah, Virginia

Purpose:

The purpose of this promising practice is to maintain a strong collaboration between the CSBG State Office and the State Association to better support the entire Network, with a particularly meaningful impact on rural agencies. By building a strong, trusted relationship, the State Office and State Association can coordinate training, technical assistance, and communication, providing a unified source of knowledge and guidance. By building and maintaining the relationship between the State Office and State Association, states build the institutional knowledge of the Network as a whole and can increase leverage for all eligible entities. This can be specifically impactful for rural entities, as it allows them to increase capacity within their service area. This partnership also enables the network to pursue coordinated approaches to best practices, leverage resources, and navigate challenging requirements together.

Method:

States employing this strategy reported that intentionally cultivating transparent communication and collaboration was key to success. Methods included regular joint planning for training and Network meetings, as well as open and honest discussions about the Network status. It also included direct engagement with the State Association's board and the Network as a whole. States also utilized their State Association to assist with the facilitation of peer-to-peer workgroups/affinity groups or lead other major projects that focus on increasing capacity, especially for rural entities, such as a statewide Community Needs Assessment (CNA).

Challenges:

Challenges in implementing this strategy often involve building trust with a new State Association Executive Director or addressing concerns with the State Association's board. States overcame these obstacles by creating intentional connections with both the board and leadership, engaging in personal-level relationship building, presenting a united front to the network, and advocating for the State Association with eligible entities and state leadership. Over time, these actions fostered mutual trust and strengthened institutional knowledge across the network. The time it takes to build a strong, collaborative relationship was also reported as a challenge. States that intentionally set aside time regularly (i.e.,

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weekly or monthly meetings) to connect with their State Association were able to better navigate this.

Benefits:

The benefits of this practice are substantial. For rural eligible entities, increased leveraging of resources through the State Office and State Association partnership expands opportunities, enhances capacity, and provides more targeted support. Eligible entities benefit from coordinated training and technical assistance and greater consistency in guidance. States, especially those with minimal CSBG funding, credit this partnership as a driving factor for strong ACSI results and a comprehensive approach to Network support. For State Office staff, the relationship provides a collaborative partner to address challenges, share successes, and ensure sustainability through succession planning, ultimately strengthening the network's ability to serve low-income individuals and families statewide, especially in rural communities.

Tools/Templates/Resources

- Connect with [State Offices](#) to learn more (AK, CO, GA, IL, NY, MT, ND, UT, VA).

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- 2. *Develop, coordinate, and share statewide linkages*** – The creation and maintenance of partnerships, referral networks, and collaborative initiatives that connect CSBG-funded agencies, specifically rural agencies, with other programs, services, and resources across the state.

States Who Have Employed This Practice:

Nevada, Texas

Purpose:

The purpose of this promising practice is to intentionally build partnerships, referral networks, and collaborative initiatives that expand access to services for low-income individuals and families—particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce and agencies often operate with limited staff. By connecting CSBG-funded agencies with state programs, nonprofit partners, and community-based organizations, statewide linkages reduce duplication of effort, create “no wrong door” entry points for clients, and ensure that critical services such as housing, transportation, food access, and workforce development are more easily available. This practice is designed not only to improve coordination across systems but also to strengthen the capacity of rural CAAs, ensuring they have the knowledge, tools, and partnerships necessary to effectively serve geographically isolated communities.

Method:

State Offices have pursued multiple strategies to create and maintain these linkages. One approach includes hosting monthly statewide meetings featuring presentations from state and external organizations that share information on programs and resources available to assist community members. Another innovative method involves placement of state staff within eligible entities. This arrangement allows clients to access both state and eligible entities' services in one location, creating a “no wrong door” approach that increases access to services while also building agency knowledge and capacity. The implementation of these linkages relied heavily on relationship building, intentional coordination, and the use of existing meeting structures to minimize added burden. Local agencies were directly engaged in attending statewide meetings and requesting specific information or connections.

Challenges:

While promising, implementing this practice does come with challenges. Building and sustaining linkages requires significant relationship management, coordination across agencies with different priorities, and clear agreements—such as MOUs—to protect data and define roles. For rural communities, logistical barriers such as travel distances, limited

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staffing, and uneven infrastructure can make coordination more complex. In addition, consistent participation in statewide meetings can be difficult for agencies already operating with stretched staff capacity. States addressed these challenges by leveraging existing meeting structures to minimize additional burden, fostering open communication to build trust, and embedding staff workers within eligible entities to reduce access barriers for rural clients.

Benefits:

The benefits of this strategy are clear. For rural communities, statewide linkages expand access to critical resources that might otherwise be difficult to identify or navigate, improving service delivery and outcomes. For local CAAs, the partnerships build staff capacity and increase knowledge of available programs, while for the state, the model reduces facility costs, provides reliable points of service, and enhances the reach of state-administered programs. Overall, the practice demonstrates how intentional linkages can strengthen the entire CSBG network by fostering collaboration, reducing barriers to access, and ensuring that rural populations are not left behind.

Tools/Templates/Resources

- [Developing Linkages Compendium](#)
- [NV - NCAA Monthly Awareness Calendar](#)

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- 3. *Develop/participate in rural work group(s) and/or issue-focused affinity group(s)*** – The formation or active engagement in collaborative groups that bring together CSBG state staff, eligible entities, and other stakeholders to address the unique needs of rural communities.

States Who Have Employed This Practice:

Illinois, Kansas, New York, Wisconsin

Purpose:

The purpose of this promising practice is to create collaborative spaces where CSBG state staff, State Associations, eligible entities, and other partners can come together to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities. These groups—often facilitated by State Associations or the statewide CAA network—provide a structured, but flexible forum to share practices, identify emerging issues, and ensure rural voices are represented in broader decision-making processes.

Method:

States implemented rural work groups and affinity groups as a response to rural needs identified by eligible entities, who recognized the value of having dedicated spaces to focus on rural challenges and priority topics. State Associations or the statewide CAA networks typically facilitated the groups, inviting both government and non-government partners to participate. The process was intentionally informal to encourage engagement—meetings were scheduled on a regular, ongoing basis and membership remained voluntary, usually with at least six participants per group. No formal policies or procedures were required to launch; instead, states relied on relationship-building, collaboration, and the willingness of agencies to engage in open dialogue. Over time, these groups became ongoing forums for deeper discussions, sharing practices, and addressing policy issues that uniquely impact rural communities.

Challenges:

Challenges included ensuring consistent engagement as well as navigating how to incorporate inclusive practices and initiatives within existing guidelines. These were addressed through intentional outreach to encourage participation, open communication to ensure all voices were heard, and a commitment to adapting discussions as new priorities emerged.

Benefits:

The benefits of this practice have been substantial. Rural CAAs report that the groups improved collaboration, created stronger connections across the network, and fostered a greater perception that all perspectives—particularly from smaller and more isolated communities—are valued. Participants gained a clearer understanding of the varying needs

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within rural areas, while states benefited from more proactive identification of policy and program issues. By providing a dedicated forum for collaboration and problem-solving, rural work groups and affinity groups have enhanced communication, strengthened relationships, and supported more effective responses to the challenges facing rural communities.

Tools/Templates/Resources

- Connect with [State Offices](#) to learn more (IL, KS, NY, WI).

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4. *Provide specific funding to support rural communities (both state and discretionary funds)*

- The intentional allocation of CSBG resources—whether from base state funds or discretionary dollars—to address the distinct needs and challenges faced by rural areas.

States Who Have Employed This Practice:

Delaware, Kansas, New Mexico, Vermont

Purpose:

The purpose of this promising practice is to intentionally direct CSBG resources, including both state and federal discretionary dollars, toward addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities, such as geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and reduced access to services. Funding is distributed in ways that allow rural eligible entities to address locally identified priorities, such as housing, food access, transportation, workforce development, and crisis intervention. States also provide technical assistance, capacity-building support, and, in some cases, adjust funding formulas or develop competitive scoring strategies to prioritize rural proposals, ensuring that smaller and geographically dispersed communities are not left behind.

Method:

States have employed a variety of methods to provide targeted funding for rural communities, balancing flexibility with accountability to ensure resources address both immediate needs and long-term priorities. In some cases, smaller allocations are set aside to encourage innovation, strengthen partnerships, and support coordination among providers that rural eligible entities rely on. Rather than relying solely on competitive processes, several states base funding decisions on ongoing relationships and identified needs within rural areas, ensuring that dollars flow directly to where they are most impactful. Discretionary funding is often used flexibly to support housing and homelessness programs, respond to emergencies or natural disasters, and enhance training and technical assistance for rural eligible entities. Some states, however, employ a structured competitive process for a portion of discretionary funds, such as a 5% set-aside distributed through a two-round grant cycle open to nonprofit organizations statewide, designed to promote innovation, expand grassroots efforts, and strengthen poverty alleviation initiatives. In addition, allocations have supported technology investments, such as software platforms to help CAAs maintain compliance with organizational standards and manage boards more effectively. Together, these methods ensure rural CAAs have access to both stable resources for core needs and flexible funding to innovate and adapt to the distinct challenges of their communities.

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Challenges:

Challenges in implementing this approach included limited staff capacity at both the state and local levels, inadequate or unpredictable funding, overlapping service territories, infrastructure barriers, and data gaps such as underreporting of rural needs. States addressed these challenges by coordinating closely with rural eligible entities, offering targeted technical assistance, piloting scalable programs in isolated areas, and refining allocation methods to prioritize rural disadvantages in funding decisions.

Benefits:

The benefits of this practice have been significant. Rural communities have gained increased access to critical services, improved transportation options, and strengthened local economies through workforce and innovation initiatives. Investments in infrastructure and mobile service delivery have enhanced community resilience and self-sufficiency, while collaboration among agencies has helped minimize duplication of work and resources. For rural eligible entities, dedicated and flexible funding has allowed them to respond more effectively to both persistent challenges and emerging crises, ultimately improving outcomes for low-income individuals and families living in rural areas.

Tools/Templates/Resources

- [CSBG State Funding Formulas with Rural Factors](#)
- [CSBG State Funding Formulas](#)
- [CSBG State Discretionary Funds](#)
- [Strengthening Rural CAAs through updated CSBG Funding Formulas](#)