

Building relationships with policymakers: Evaluating what works in rural and urban settings

¹Brown School, Washington University in St. Louis ²Wright State University ³Missouri Foundation for Health ⁴Saint Louis University

Nikole Lobb Dougherty¹
Chris Robichaux¹
Tanya Montgomery¹
Jessica Drennan²
Amy Stringer-Hessel³
Cheryl Kelly⁴
Jessi LaRose⁴

Background

In 2005, the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) established the Healthy & Active Communities (H&AC) initiative to address rising obesity levels in Missouri. In 2009, MFH launched the Promising Strategies (PS) strategy. To be eligible for PS funding, grantees must employ at least one strategy from three domains:

- **Access/Environment:** Creating a healthy physical environment so people can make healthier choices;
- **Community Engagement:** Developing outreach and communication strategies that get people to think about positive change, and that make the healthy choice the default choice, and;
- **Policy/Economics:** Advocating for healthy policies so people are encouraged to make the healthy choice.

Challenge

Successfully advocating for healthy policies require grantees to develop and maintain relationships with policymakers.

Research Question

What are the similarities and differences among rural versus urban grantees with regards to approaches used to build relationships with policymakers?

We define a **policymaker** as an individual who has the authority to adopt regulations, policies, or laws at the organizational, community, or state level. For example, the individual could be a state legislator, a city council member, or business executive.

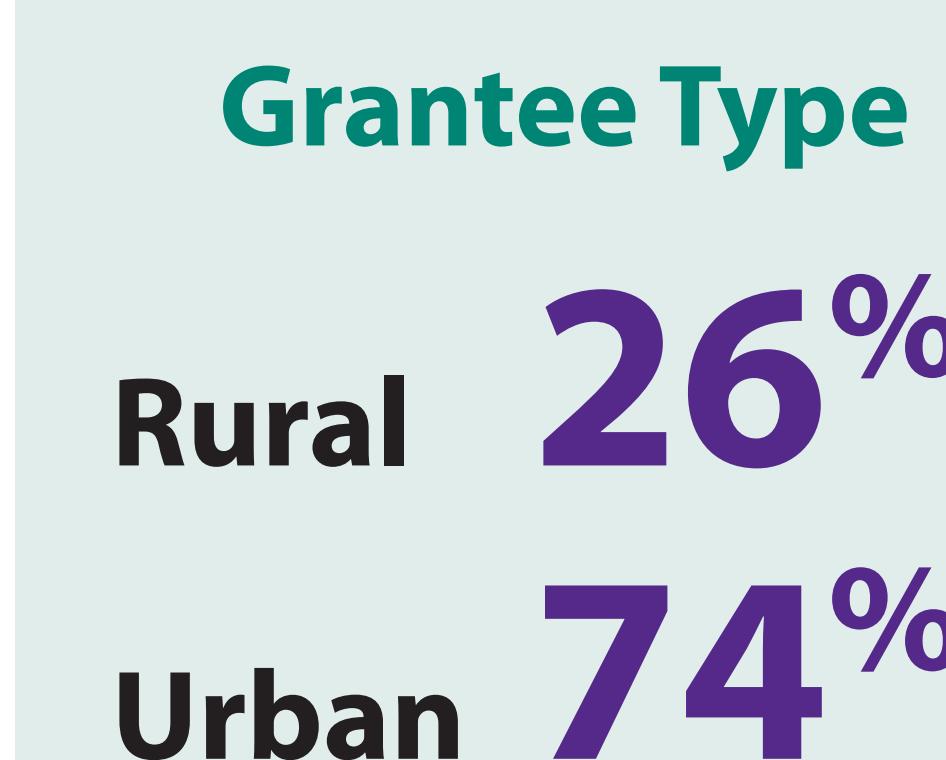
Methods

Data were collected in connection with an ongoing evaluation of the H&AC initiative. Data were taken from:

- The Healthy and Active Programs and Policies Evaluation (HAPPE) system, an online quantitative monitoring system developed to document project activities (e.g contributions from policymakers, policies implemented, number of built environment changes).
- Key informant interviews with project staff.

PS grantees (n=23) were classified as urban vs. rural based on the county where primary project activities occurred, utilizing U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes.

- **Rural:** Outside the boundaries of metro areas
- **Urban:** Central counties with one or more urbanized areas or outlying counties that are economically tied to the core counties as measured by work commuting



Acknowledgements

The H&AC evaluation is fully funded through the Missouri Foundation for Health. For more information go to: <http://www.mffh.org>

Results

To date, **RURAL** grantees have been *more successful in implementing local policies* than urban grantees, e.g. worksite wellness, school wellness, complete streets policies.

- **50%** of RURAL grantees have implemented a local policy.
- **29%** of URBAN grantees have implemented a local policy.

Examples of Approaches to Relationship Building with Policymakers

Relationship Building Approach	Examples
Deliberate and ongoing communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One-on-one meetings• Phone calls/emails• Presentations to policymakers, e.g. City Council, School Boards, Chamber of Commerce• Invite policy makers to project events or sites
Grantee organization or project staff actively participate in local government or businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Project staff are members of various committees throughout the community, e.g. wellness committee at hospital or school• Project staff are employed by city offices• Some grantees organizations are city offices• Project staff are members of local coalitions• Grantee organization is member of local Chamber of Commerce
Policymakers are responsible for implementation of certain project activities during or after the grant cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A policymaker is responsible for the marketing aspect of the project• Grantee establishes agreements with city officials to take over maintenance of built environment changes made in conjunction with project, e.g. trails

Similarities in Approaches to Relationship Building with Policymakers

Nearly all grantees discussed deliberate and ongoing communication as a strategies to fostering partnerships with policymakers.

- **Deliberate:** Grantees reported communicating the need for the project, demonstrating community involvement and support, and identifying shared mission and goals with the policymaker.
- **Ongoing:** Grantees employed both informal and formal strategies, but reported that communication must be frequent to successfully build trust and rapport.

Differences in Approaches to Relationship Building with Policymakers

- Rural grantees were more likely to use a diverse set of messaging techniques when communicating with policymakers, e.g. phone calls, meetings, AND presentations.
- Rural grantees were more likely to have policymakers responsible for implementation of at least one project activity, e.g. project marketing (67% versus 6%).
- Rural grantees were more likely to have project staff actively participate in local governments or businesses (67% versus 18%).

Next Steps

- All data presented here were data collected within the first year of implementation of three-year long projects. We plan to assess the differences/similiarities again at the end of the funding cycle.
- We plan to examine the advocacy activities that lead to policy changes, and if differences exist in rural versus urban setttings.

For more information, contact:
Nikole Lobb Dougherty,
nlobbdougherty@wustl.edu