RTC:RURAL—Research that Leads to Solutions for Rural Americans with Disabilities

RTC:Rural connects research to practice and policy by developing evidence-based solutions that respond to the unique needs of people with disabilities living in rural communities.

By conducting research across health, employment, and independent living domains, we uncover relationships among personal and environmental factors that influence quality of life. We build upon our research agenda with the input of disability stakeholders who help us understand our findings in the context of their rural community experiences. Our projects integrate such disability stakeholder collaboration along every stage of the research continuum to develop solution-focused results that are both relevant and appropriate for intended rural audiences.

**Geography of Rural Disability**

Our geography analyses are essential to our integrated research agenda and lay the groundwork for our health, employment, and community living research.

- Our analyses of national datasets show that rates of disability are higher in rural areas: 17.7% in the most rural counties compared to 11.7% in urban counties.
- Preliminary results indicate that there are over 3.6 million households with individuals with disabilities located beyond a 65-mile reach from the services and supports available at a Center for Independent Living (CIL).
- Our Disability Counts Data Finder provides an accessible online tool where individuals and service providers can easily obtain disability data for the counties they serve.
- Our map series, Disability across America, illustrates the diversity and trends of disability across regions.

**Health and Rural Disability**

Rural people face health and wellness challenges such as access to healthcare and preventive medicine. We work to identify and address these barriers with our health and rural disability research agenda.

- Using Current Population Survey data, we found a rural disability penalty: rural people report disability at rates that are similar to those of urban people who are 10 years older.
- Building on our research about secondary health conditions, we developed a continuum of health promotion programs to meet people at different levels of independent living skills. These include Living Well with a Disability, Working Well with a Disability, and Healthy Community Living, a dynamic online program.
- We developed, tested and disseminated the Rural Options after Discharge—Model of Active Planning (ROADMAP), a program to facilitate better access to healthcare and support services in rural communities following hospital discharge.
Rural Community Living

Our rural community living research focuses on the accessibility of rural environments and their ability to promote community participation and quality of life.

- Of rural households including someone with a mobility impairment, we found that 59% have a stepped entrance and 91% who live above the main floor in an apartment do not have access to a working elevator. To address this, we are testing a home usability program that assists people in evaluating and adapting their homes.

- We developed two methods for assessing the accessibility of rural community infrastructure and found that 36% of rural businesses and civic venues were not accessible to wheelchair users.

- People with disabilities report uneven access to community event venues, and identify needs for convenient parking and places to rest.

- We partnered with the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) and youth advocates to develop and implement the Advocacy Skill Building Toolkit to support the leadership development of youth with disabilities.

Employment in Rural America

Our employment research responds to identified rural barriers such as limited economic opportunity, choice, and access to services for people with disabilities. We develop and test employment and delivery options appropriate in resource-constrained environments.

- We analyzed consumer data collected by Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies and found that approximately 2% were self-employed, a rate well below non-VR consumers who have disabilities (11.8%) and people without disabilities (9.7% in urban and 11.7% in rural areas). To increase VR capacity to support self-employment, we developed the VR Self-Employment Guide, an online website to assist consumers and counselors to work together through the self-employment process.

- Our research with VR agency informants found that 86% who use job development contractors indicated gaps in services to rural locations that could delay case progression. Furthermore, 75% agreed that incentives for serving rural cases were necessary to increase service availability in rural areas.

- Our survey of 1,432 VR counselors about their ability to counsel consumers on online job development tools found that nearly 40% of VR staff were blocked from using relevant social media sites at work, and of those who could, almost half felt unprepared to assist clients with certain online job search competencies.

- We developed our Telecom Toolbox website and blog as a resource for the development of counselor and consumer competencies in online communication and job search strategies.

Looking Ahead

Our community-based approach to research holds promise for addressing emerging and persistent issues faced by rural people with disabilities. Through a shared understanding of rural contexts, we work to engage regional and national disability leaders by discussing how emerging policies impact rural communities, fit within the national agenda, and prepare for changes coming in the future.

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