

# Respectfully engaging *with* rural communities



Rural communities can experience adversity at any given time, whether this be:

- drought
- flood
- economic downturn
- loss of a local industry
- limited services
- a recent suicide cluster
- isolation, or
- stretched resources

Positive engagement and stakeholder investment are key to the success of any project or activity. Poor engagement can have a negative impact.

Any adversity could be experienced from days to many years. In challenging times for rural people and communities, it is important that significant consideration is given to how we engage with them.

**This guide has been designed to support people, groups & organisations who work with rural communities**

## Why do we need to respectfully engage *with* rural communities?

- To more effectively meet the needs of rural communities, each of which is unique and complex
- To recognise the value and contribution of rural people and their communities
- To build positive relationships between people, communities and organisations, to create shared understanding, respect and commitment
- To support the resilience and hope of rural people and communities
- To recognise the complex culture and unique needs of Indigenous Australian communities
- Due to a moral/ethical component – i.e. public grants require public input

## Who to talk to?

- Rural Services Support Networks
- Local Health Councils & relevant working groups
- Local Rural Adversity Mental Health Program (RAMHP) Coordinator
- Rotary, Country Women's Association, Lion Clubs etc.
- Aboriginal Land Councils
- Health & Welfare Interagency groups
- Local councils
- Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Rural Resilience Worker
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs)
- Local media agencies

For more resources, information and advice, visit [www.crrmh.com.au](http://www.crrmh.com.au)

# Suggestions on respectfully engaging with rural communities: What to do...



Centre for  
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...before you go

**Be aware** – What has gone on prior to your visit? What is going on at the same time? Be aware of communities feeling used. Try to connect to other activities despite the reality of short funding cycles.

**Plan carefully** – Engagement in rural areas might take more resources and time than in urban areas. Review existing guidelines & protocols from government & other key organisations.

**Partner with the local Indigenous community** – Aim for local Indigenous community participation in all decision-making that affects their lives. Actively support Indigenous cultures. Focus on strengths and build capacity.

**Choose which community carefully** – Do your research. Don't assume rural people have a problem. Talk less, listen more.

**Find out who's who** – Identify & contact local networks. Recognise local culture, strengths & capacities. Know your audience.

**Leave city comparisons behind** – no two rural communities are the same & one size does not fit all.

**What are you offering?** – Be clear how your project/activity will benefit the community, enrich their lives and build community capacity. Be accountable.

...while you're there

**Communicate clearly** – Be clear about your purpose. Use simple & positive language. Share who you are and use existing local networks. Aim for a collaborative partnership with community.

**Rural people are busy** – Give plenty of advanced notice for any activities. Give people more than one chance to engage. Be flexible.

**Be confidential** – Many rural communities are small and anonymity can be reduced, so be respectful and use discretion.

**Take time** – Build solid relationships & connections, don't rush, be genuine and attend local events.

**Consult** – Determine the best time, date, and location for the community – not all towns will be the same.

**Value equity & diversity** – Seek many different voices and perspectives & value them.

**Think outside the box** – To encourage people to come to you, provide transport options or go to them.

**Buy local** – Use local experts and services, i.e. speakers, workshops, transport, catering, venues, media advertising, etc.

...once you're gone

**What will you leave behind?** – What will be your legacy in this community? Share findings & show that you valued the community's input. What opportunities are there for sustainability? Consider follow-up and ongoing consultation within the community.

**Keep in contact** – As well as being respectful towards the community, you never know when you will be back, so maintain contacts and check-in where appropriate.

**Link people** – to local services and supports that are on-going. Avoid just referring them to national & state phone numbers & websites.