RURAL GEORGIA
TRUST & TRANSPARENCY (T2) TOOLKIT

A useful environmental health and justice guide for restoring, building, and strengthening trust and transparency in rural Georgia from Science for Georgia

Written by McKenzie Harpe, a lifelong rural resident, and Master of Public Health (MPH) from UGA.

Rural communities face extensive environmental health and justice challenges that are reshaping the way they perceive and connect with the natural environment. Rural portions of the United States account for roughly 97 percent of the country's land area while also being a vital sources of water, food, and energy. Particularly, in Georgia, rural counties make up 120 of the 159 counties- with 21% of the state's population residing in rural areas. As organizations across the state utilize environmental justice frameworks to strive towards a more sustainable future, a communication disconnect can cause barriers to communication and collaboration in rural Georgia. This toolkit focuses on enhancing two elements- trust and transparency (T2) - with the goal of providing community members, leaders, organizations, and policymakers tools and tips for restoring, strengthening, and building a more sustainable rural Georgia. Rural mistrust cuts across political lines and was worsened by the COVID pandemic.

Before continuing, you may find these articles beneficial to familiarize yourself with some environmental health issues and burdens that residents in rural Georgia and America have faced over the years.

- Albany Residents Respond to Introduction of Natural Gas Pipeline
- Rural America resource
- Americans don't trust each other and it is literally killing us, a study shows

Restore

Before we can begin thinking about ways to build and strengthen trust, we must first focus on *restoring* trust. In environmental science spaces, restoration is typically mentioned when working to revive ecosystems that have undergone degradation, damage, or destruction. While many rural land and water systems could use assistance in achieving optimal recovery and maturation, restoration efforts should also be shown towards the people in these communities, who are integral to their surrounding ecosystems. Because rural communities have already faced historic and modern-day breaches of trust, cultural sensitivities and challenges may oppose the development of authentic, meaningful connections. To approach this fragility, it may be helpful to utilize a rather alternative, yet traditionally impactful method: storytelling. The art of telling stories is vital to human experiences and serves as a timeless strategy for disseminating information between individuals and groups. Here are a few tips and tools to invite collective communities to share their experiences while acknowledging past trauma.

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Story Circles

Story circles can play an integral role in acknowledging how environmental and health burdens have shaped the attitudes and sentiments of individuals in a rural area. Hearing someone recount personal experiences with asthma while living in a factory-polluted area may ignite a deeper understanding of environmental harm than reading a general news article. Furthermore, many rural communities around the world thrive with the use of oral learning and oral traditions which play a unique role in preserving culture, history, and education. Additionally, the use of oral traditions has rich histories among black indigenous people of color, which make up 24% of rural Americans.

- Utilize this resource, created by the U.S Department of Arts and Council to get a general guideline for how to conduct and facilitate story circles: https://usdac.us/storycircles
- Learn how storytelling is advancing and expanding in Rural America: https://letterpresscommunications.com/insights/the-storytelling-advantage/
- Learn how to apply storytelling to current day environmental justice movements: https://www.lcvef.org/blog/storytelling-lessons-from-the-civil-rights-and-environmental-justice-movements-and-how-to-apply-them-today/
- Watch this video of Chicago justice organization, Community Forward, conducting their version of a story circle- which they named 'justice circles' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SipxJonUpo

Build

Prioritizing restorative practices such as storytelling are essential because it allows localities and groups to solely focus on building a community around a sense of shared experiences, rather than urgently attempting to "fix" environmental problems. However, once genuine connection has been established and strengthened, it creates a solid foundation of trust and transparency for expanding into tackling environmental and health concerns.

Sharing is a two-way street. Working through this vulnerable process requires scientists, leaders, and organizations to be transparent in their actions just as community members are transparent with their lived experiences. The following are ways to build trust and transparency in rural communities:

Conduct a Community Needs Assessment:
There are five main components to a community needs assessment
1. Defining the community problem
2. Identifying stakeholders and target audience
3. Community Engagement
4. Data collection and analysis
5. Taking action/Evaluating Process.

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These components enable conceptualization of *what* is important to the community, *why* it is important to them, and specific methods of empowerment for change.

Learn more here:

- Utilize Rural Health Information Hub to learn more about conducting community needs assessment in rural Georgia: https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/rural-toolkit/1/needs-assessment
- The use of windshield and walking surveys allows for observing an area's built-environment. This may be very useful if seeking to identify the neighborhood's proximity to polluting facilities and inadequate infrastructure. This resource expands the importance of such assessments and provides general guidelines for conducting surveys: https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/windshield-walking-surveys/main

Attend local events & seek collaborative engagement

Being present at events hosted and attended by local community members helps to close social gaps that amplify mistrust. For organizational leaders and environmental scientists, attendance may exemplify an empathetic leadership approach, allowing the community to see themselves in their leaders.

Identify appropriate communication channels to disseminate information

Identifying communication channels is highly crucial to ensuring communities are equipped with accurate, evidence-based information. While much of today's information is shared digitally, it is important to acknowledge barriers to internet access in rural communities. Communication channels may include, but are not limited to:

- Local radio
- Local television
- Social media
- Local newspapers
- Community events
- Word of mouth* (While this method may be effective in close-knit communities that exist in rural areas, be cautious of the risk of misinformation)

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Combating Misinformation

Misinformation is everywhere, here is a helpful tool to learn how to combat misinformation in public health communication: https://centerforhealthsecurity.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/2024-07-12-checklist.pdf

The Truth Sandwich" method is one way to both acknowledge what people have heard, the kernel of truth it may have come from, and then guide them to the truth.

THE TRUTH SANDWICH
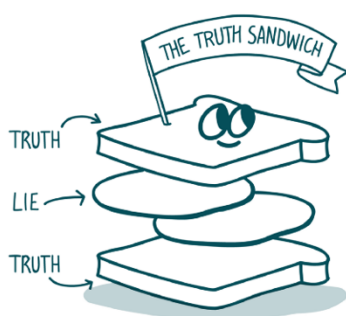
TRUTH
LIE
TRUTH

Never drink bleach.
You may have heard that bleach can kill the coronavirus, but this only works on surfaces — not inside your body. Drinking bleach can cause serious illness and death, and it doesn't cure COVID-19.

1. **Start with the truth.** The first frame gets the advantage.
2. **Indicate the lie.** Avoid amplifying the specific language, if possible.
3. **Return to the truth.** Always repeat truths more than lies.

From **The Truth Sandwich: A Better Way to Mythbust**

Prioritize education in improving environmental health literacy

The environmental health literacy framework is defined as "the continuum of environmental health knowledge and awareness, skills and self-efficacy, and community action." In efforts of building trust and transparency, community members should be knowledgeable on the information being disseminated. Specifically, in rural areas, communities may have lower health literacy rates coupled with limited resources. Here are a few potential ways to improve environmental health literacy in rural areas:

- Expand mandated environmental reporting across the state for community members to access public data regarding proximal toxic exposures and chemical releases. Simply being able to access this information creates transparent communication between environmental scientists, organizations, and community members.
- Integrate environmental health topics into educational curriculum via schools or community engagement (i.e., 4-H for youth audiences)
- Provide agricultural workers with tools to help them conceptualize the relationship between their environment and health. Examples such as this guide help farmers to identify occupational stress and helpful coping strategies: https://www.canr.msu.edu/managing_farm_stress/managing_stress
- Increase public awareness via campaigns (using the communication channels listed above!)

The CDC Foundation has developed a comprehensive guide on effective health outreach to rural communities.

Strengthen

Once intentional progress has been made towards restoring and building trust, it's essential to strengthen the foundations which have been formed. If communities and groups are now engaging effectively, it should be easier to now grow efforts aimed at planning and implementing advocacy strategies, policy changes, and collective community work. Remember not to dismiss the restoring and building strategies and steps, instead continue to utilize them in these efforts. Through ongoing and intentional engagement, strengthening trust may look like:

- Applying the knowledge gained from the integration of environmental health literacy to the role of communal decision-making
- Utilizing communities' shared stories to amplify the need for policy changes & advocacy work
- Building upon the empathy and intimacy created during story circles to collaborate on communal projects such as growing a local community garden or hosting environmental wellness events

The Environmental Justice Greenbook serves as an extensive guide for building stronger communities in sustainability work: https://ejgreenbook.com/user-guide/

About Science for Georgia

Science for Georgia is a 501c3 dedicated to bridging the gap between scientists and the public through training, outreach opportunities, and direct contact with the public, policymakers, and the press. Science for Georgia highlights how science can impact people's lives and advocates for the responsible use of science in public policy.

Please reach out with any questions or comments info@sci4ga.org