

RURAL COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS EVENT- SUMMARY

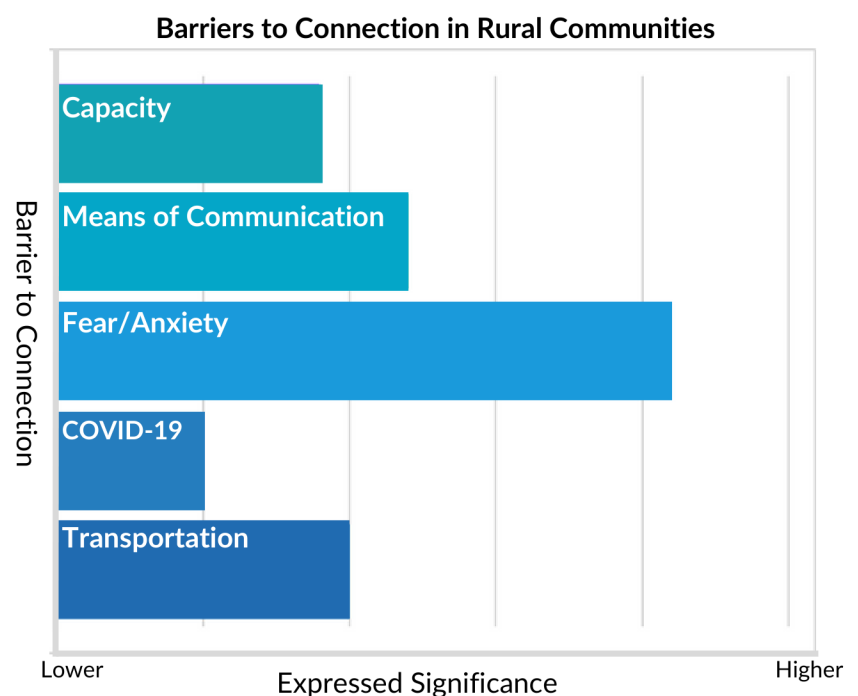
Event Description

On April 17th, 2024 Community Foundation for Kingston & Area, the Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resilience Coalition of KFL&A (ARC), Rural Frontenac Community Services, and Kingston Community Health Centres hosted the Rural Community Connections event in Verona. The event brought together over 50 participants, a group comprised of rural residents, stakeholders, and agency representatives, who participated in a community discussion about connection and belonging. The enthusiasm in the room was palpable, and spirited discussions found participants of all ages exploring the challenges of isolation, and potential solutions for creating connection and fostering resilience in rural communities. Emerging from this discussion is a number of key themes, outlined below.

Barriers to Connection

When asked what barriers participants saw themselves, family, or friends experiencing in building connection in rural communities, there were several areas of agreement expressed in both small and large group discussions.

- **Transportation/Distance:** The difficulty of accessing affordable, convenient, reliable, and timely transportation was cited as a key barrier preventing connection. It takes extra effort for individuals without reliable transportation to participate in community events, even if they wish to, and those who use services for their transportation needs must plan far in advance to ensure their needs will be supported. These concerns were paired with the sentiment that those requiring transportation support might feel a sense of dependence on others or service providers, sometimes with associated feelings of shame, that might add additional barriers to connection.
- **COVID-19:** The pandemic was noted to have exacerbated the loss of already tenuous social connections, many of which were not reclaimed afterwards.
- **Loss:** The reduction of key social connections as individuals age, such as the loss of a spouse or distance from adult children, was noted as an important barrier to connection as individuals may find themselves with few or no close supports to rely upon.

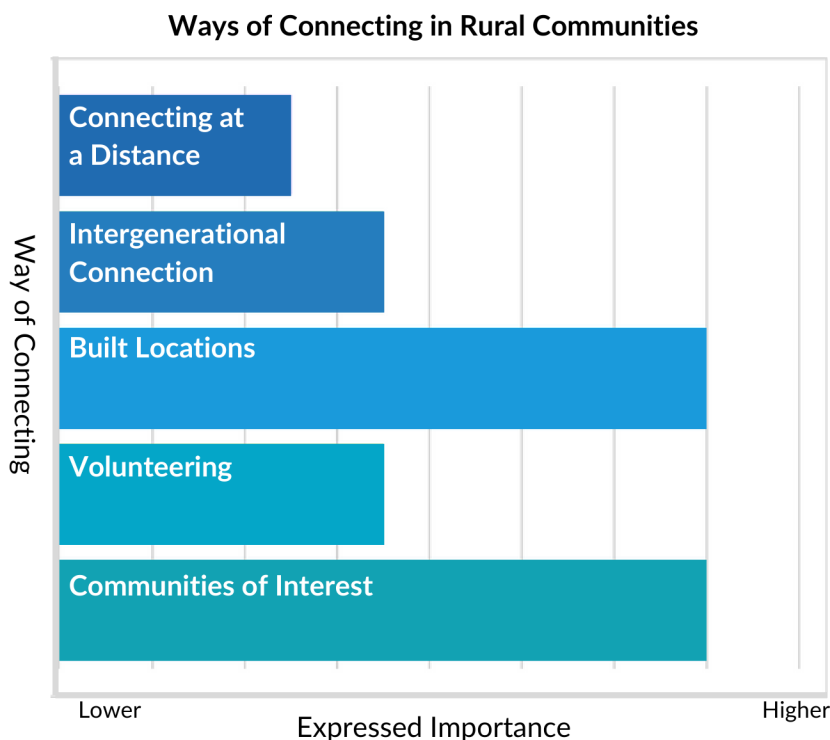


- **Fear/Anxiety:** The social barrier to entry in community can feel high for rural residents. Many participants expressed that it can be anxiety inducing to attend an event, especially for those new to the community, those who have no one to attend with, or for those who naturally lack the intrinsic motivation to attend an event without prompting from someone they already know. Some solutions posited during the discussion included the importance of ‘welcome wagons’ and social greeters at community events to ensure that those attending alone feel welcomed.
- **Means of Communication:** For rural residents, a lack of reliable internet may be common. Many older adults in particular may have different levels of digital literacy, and many informal community organizations may not have an online presence through which newcomers can learn about their gatherings. Local newspapers were identified as key locations through which information about community events is typically communicated.
- **Capacity:** Service providers and representatives from community organizations in attendance noted several key capacity issues affecting their ability to help rural residents connect. Lack of volunteer manpower, insufficient funds to run events or for individuals to afford to participate in them, and a lack of suitable programming for various age groups and interest demographics were noted as particularly significant.

Locating Connection

When asked about ways of connecting with their peers, older adults, and younger people, there was shared alignment across many responses. For all ages, joining a **community of interest** was a key way to find connection. Whether it be an extracurricular activity, through **volunteering**, a community social club, or another community of interest, these formal and informal organizations are key in rural communities. It was also clear that **built locations** that are able to support the activities of these collectives are important.

Schools, Legion Halls, Churches, fairgrounds, the gym, outdoor spaces— sharing public space and finding ways to convene was of importance to many participants. This was especially true for those who explained that more informal ways of seeing and getting to know others were important for those individuals who would not want to attend community events. The importance of **intergenerational connections** again arose in conversations as participants emphasized the need to find different ways of connecting across age groups, whether it be through shared activities like sporting events, activity



groups attracting multiple demographics, or buddy systems and childcare programs. Maintaining the ability to **connect at a distance** was also frequently mentioned as being important to rural residents, whether it be via connecting by phone, ensuring the local newspaper is populated with events for those who are not online, or connecting virtually to communities of interest that may not be able to gather in-person as frequently. The concept underlying much of this discussion was the importance of “being a good neighbour”, with the idea that— as one participant expressed— “making a commitment to make connections” was important for both individual and collective wellbeing in rural communities.

Visioning Rural Community

When asked what a connected rural community looks like, attendees found agreement on a number of key sentiments. The importance of intergenerational connections was a theme that arose often throughout the event, represented in the word cloud below.

A variety of ideas and suggestions came out of participant’s brainstorming discussions focused on imagining what might be done about the key concerns identified throughout the event. A selection are included here as inspiration. The most vital sentiment emerging from this gathering was the need for greater collaboration, increased and continuing discussions on such matters, and community-based solutions to improve rural connections. All attendees were encouraged to consider how they, in their own lives and community or professional practices, could contribute to stronger rural community connections.



Brainstorming Solutions

- Volunteer in your local community.
- Form informal social groups or contribute to a community organization.
- Make connecting a priority in your role/community.
- Reach out to others and newcomers in your community.
- Consider accessibility when you communicate information about local events.
- Prioritize opportunities for intergenerational connection.
- Help others work through a fear of rejection by being a social leader and greeter.
- Use social media to connect with different demographics.

We thank all partners and participants for sharing their knowledge, insight, and experiences. We appreciate your contribution to this event and look forward to watching this important conversation continue to grow.