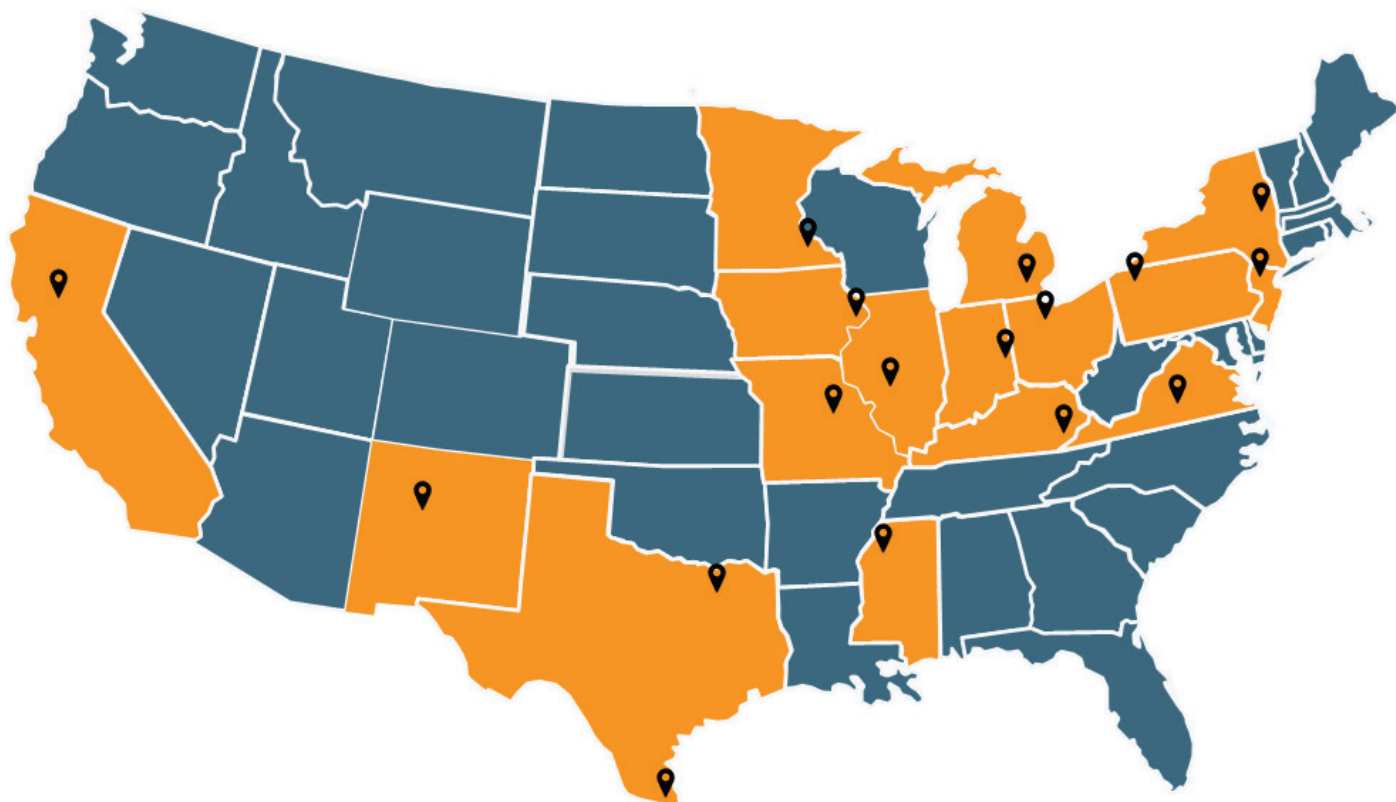


RAISING RURAL VOICES

Listening to the Hopes and Hardships of Rural Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Over the past year, NETWORK held 17 rural roundtables in 16 states, meeting and listening to a diverse group of 250 people living in rural parts of the U.S.

This summary outlines what we heard during those conversations.

A Note from Sister Simone

Dear Washington,

For nearly 50 years, NETWORK has advocated for policies that advance the common good and promote justice and dignity for everyone. Since our founding, we have been a moral voice on Capitol Hill, listening to and lifting up the people who you need to hear from across the country.

So, in these polarized times, when division is exploited for political gain, we at NETWORK returned to our roots. We heard Pope Francis' call to a culture of encounter: "Not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying 'what a shame,' but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion."¹

I have driven thousands of miles and met people at service sites, community events, town halls, rallies, interviews, and roadside lunch stops during our Nuns on the Bus trips. Encounter drives the Nuns on the Bus trips, informs NETWORK's advocacy, and should shape our federal policies.

When our advocacy to mend the gaps led us to realize that health care, housing, education, and more were failing in rural areas, I saw a new opportunity for encounter. In the spirit of Pope Francis, NETWORK organized rural roundtables in every region of the United States and listened to the lived realities of more than 250 people.

To begin each roundtable, I asked "What do city folk get wrong about rural communities?" This usually elicited a laugh, but quickly turned into serious conversation. Almost every place, participants said that city people think country people are dumb and uneducated – but this is not true. As I saw that similar issues challenge both rural and metropolitan areas, this gap in perception was the most poignant divide.

Time and time again, I heard how rural areas are trying to cope with national challenges that affect their communities in unique ways. But problems rural residents face accessing health care or other issues are not easily solved with telehealth or other "city answers."

In eastern Kentucky, a retired high school teacher said with tears in his eyes: "I just want my representatives to represent me. I want them to meet with me just once, not only their donors." Today, as wealth, opportunity, and influence are increasingly concentrated, it is clear that you have not paid enough attention to the lived realities of people across the U.S. It is time to change that.

At a roundtable at Jubilee Farm outside Springfield, Illinois, an observer from metropolitan Springfield spoke with wonder in his voice. He said, "You folks are talking about the same things that we talk about in the central city." These roundtables taught us just that. The whole country, metropolitan and rural, shares common struggles. This report attempts to lift up what we heard: the hopes and hardships of the rural areas we encountered, which mirror the hopes and hardships of our country as a whole.

I invite you to embrace a culture of encounter as you read this report. To open your minds and your hearts to places you may have seen but not looked at; stories you may have heard but not listened to, and to people you've passed but haven't stopped to meet. In this encounter, we can find a common way forward and heal our democracy.

*Sister Simone Campbell, SSS
Executive Director
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice*

1. Encyclical Letter. *The Holy Father Francis.*

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html

Rural Hardships

There used to be manufacturing but that left and now there is a dearth of opportunity. Industries didn't survive advancements in technology. Now there are just fast food places. Most people work in the service sector. There used to be more of a middle class. — ADRIAN, MI

There is no public transit program, and to have people make an (doctor's) appointment to come in is really difficult because a taxi costs so much. — AMSTERDAM, NY





We're losing family farms because of increased costs of production and low return on crops. Some are moving to small towns, but a lot of young folks are just moving to the cities. — COLUMBIA, MO



Tiffin, OH



Springfield, IL

-  Poverty rates are 4% higher in rural areas than in cities.²
-  Rural families spend an average of 12.2% of their income on childcare and 60% of rural Americans live in a "childcare desert" with very limited access to childcare.³
-  One in four rural renters is spending more than 50% of their income on housing. 38% of rural communities face moderately severe rental housing needs while 58% experience less severe needs.⁴
-  63% of rural Americans have access to broadband in their homes, up from only 35% in 2007.⁵

Rural Hopes

Connection to the land is physically and emotionally healing. — SPRINGFIELD, IL

It is without question that our community is one of extended family and deep roots. Yet, we worry that kids can't live here anymore though — with no opportunity. —TIFFIN, OH

People who live here do know each other and come together. They show up if needed to deal with tornados or other things...There is treasure in responding to needs for the common good...Together we have hope that the problems can change. — SPRINGFIELD, IL

2. *Rural Poverty & Well-Being*. United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. August 20, 2019. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/>

3. *5 Facts To Know About Child Care in Rural America*. Leila Schochet, Center for American Progress. June 4, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2019/06/04/470581/5-facts-know-child-care-rural-america/>

4. *Rental Housing for a 21st Century Rural America: A Platform for Production*. Corianne Payton Scally, Brandi Gilbert, Carl Hedman, Amanda Gold, Lily Posey, Urban Institute. October 2, 2018. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/rental-housing-21st-century-rural-america>

5. *2019 Broadband Deployment Report*. Federal Communications Commission. May 29, 2019. <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-19-44A1.pdf>

Turning Hope and Hardship into Action

Whether the conversation turned to housing, health care, jobs, or the environment, the people we met in rural communities were facing struggles too big and too complex for them to fix on their own. Too many people today are working harder and harder just to keep falling behind. This has to end. We have to build a better home, and a better country together. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis writes "Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems."⁶

It's time to turn this hope into action. The message is clear: rural residents share the same desire for a just, equitable, and prosperous future as those living in metropolitan areas. To realize that future, rural communities need their elected officials to find and support solutions that recognize the unique characteristics of rural life. We hope that the voices we've raised in this report will be heard, their needs will guide policy decisions, and their lived experiences in rural communities will be taken into account to achieve these goals.

6. *Laudato Si'*. Paragraph 61.

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

To download the full *Raising Rural Voices* report visit www.networklobby.org/raisingruralvoices.



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