SOAR in Rural Communities

While individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness are more visible in urban settings, homelessness is also prevalent in rural areas.[[1]](#footnote-1) Roughly eighty percent of the United States is considered rural or frontier and approximately one in five people reside in rural communities.[[2]](#footnote-2) These areas often have a higher rate of poverty and may lack the resources and services more readily available in urban areas.[[3]](#footnote-3) A lack of infrastructure and affordable housing may also exacerbate the issue of homelessness in rural communities.

Homelessness in rural areas often ‘looks’ different than in urban settings – people may live doubled up, reside with extended family, or live in the woods or areas well outside of town. For individuals experiencing or at risk of rural homelessness, the barriers to access Social Security disability benefits can be numerous, but SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery)[[4]](#footnote-4) can assist.

# Tips for SOAR case workers working in rural communities:

* *Collect as much information as possible at the first meeting.* SOAR case workers working in rural areas often need to travel long distances to meet with their applicants; additionally, applicants may frequently move from place to place and lack reliable communication or transportation. As a result, case workers may only be able to meet with their applicants a few times. When these meetings do occur, gather as much information regarding the applicant and their functional limitations as possible and ensure that all forms are complete and signed.
* *Use the telephone or Skype to communicate with your applicant.* If the case worker is not able to meet with the applicant in person, use technology! When available, the phone, Skype, instant messaging, etc. can be great ways to communicate with the applicant regarding the status of their application or to continue the interviewing process.
* *Ensure that there is a reliable third-party source.* Whether it be a friend, relative or case worker of the applicant, having a reliable third party who can locate and communicate with the applicant is a key component of working in a rural setting.
* *Utilize telemedicine.* Telemedicineis the use of telecommunication and technology to provide health care to communities from a distance. It helps to eliminate barriers to treatment and can improve access to services in rural or remote areas.

Throughout the country, rural and frontier communities are finding innovative ways to work with applicants and complete SOAR applications. Their efforts have resulted in more people receiving benefits, becoming stably housed and progressing on the road to recovery!

1. Rural Homelessness from http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/rural [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Rural Housing, Toolkit Money Follows the Person* <https://www.neweditions.net/products/toolkits/rural-housing-toolkit-money-follows-person-mfp> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Farrigan, T. USDA ERS - Rural Poverty & Well-being: Geography of Poverty from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SOAR Works! from https://soarworks.prainc.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)