

# Rural Aging Action Network

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Lessons from an Innovative Model for Mobilizing Whole Communities and Empowering Older Adults Across Rural America



# About This Report

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This report was developed for leaders of organizations that are serving rural older adults or seeking to expand their reach into rural communities. It provides lessons learned during the development and implementation of the Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN), an innovative model for mobilizing whole communities and empowering older adults across rural America.

Lutheran Services in America developed the RAAN to help nonprofit organizations meet the needs of rural older adults who desire to age in their homes and communities. The organization then partnered with the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston to evaluate the effectiveness, impact, and value of the RAAN model in mobilizing whole communities to address gaps in the care of older adults.

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## Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the contributions of these organizations to the development of this report:

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*This report is dedicated, in loving memory, to Bill Barton, Barney Strand, and Rose Huffman.*

## About Lutheran Services in America

Lutheran Services in America is one of the nation's largest national networks of health and human service providers with a mission to cultivate caring communities that advance health and opportunity for all. With 300 nonprofit organizations across 1,400 U.S. communities, and more than \$26 billion in combined annual services, the Lutheran Services in America network advances equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families; improves independence and choice for older adults; champions meaningful services and supports for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; and strengthens stability and purpose for veterans, refugees, new Americans, and other special populations. Formed in 1997, Lutheran Services in America brings together a network of leaders, partners, and funders to catalyze innovation, strengthen organizational capacity, and advance public policy.

As a nationwide network, Lutheran Services in America is committed to raising the voice and visibility of its member organizations, older adults, and their family caregivers in rural communities. From Alaska to Pennsylvania, the Lutheran Services in America network has a deep and enduring presence in rural aging. In many cases, Lutheran social ministries have served with and in their communities for more than a century.

The Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN) is a national collaborative created and led by Lutheran Services in America. The RAAN is dedicated to cultivating caring communities to address the personalized needs of rural older adults and connect them to nutrition, transportation, safe housing, health resources, and social engagement.

For more information, visit [LutheranServices.org](https://LutheranServices.org).

## About the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston is the first organization of its kind to combine the resources of a major research university with the expertise and experience of applied researchers working with providers of long-term services and supports (LTSS). LeadingAge and the University of Massachusetts Boston established the LTSS Center in 2017. This joint venture expands the capacity of both organizations to translate research into policy and practice. The LTSS Center conducts studies and evaluations that will serve as a foundation for government and provider action to improve quality of care and quality of life for the most vulnerable older Americans.

For more information, visit [LTSSCenter.org](https://LTSSCenter.org).

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# Glossary

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**Community Assets:** Leaders of the Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN) identify and recruit potential partners from among the community's unique "assets." These assets include individuals, institutions, associations, physical space, culture and stories, and economic exchanges that could offer valuable resources or services to support older adults. A community's non-physical assets include associations, institutions, culture, and stories. Its nontraditional assets include restaurants, the Boys and Girls Club, and local farms.

**LSA RAAN Collaborative:** Five Lutheran Services in America (LSA) member organizations participate in the LSA RAAN Collaborative. These organizations are located across four states: Lutheran Social Services in Minnesota, St John's United in Montana, Immanuel Living in Montana, Missouri Slope in North Dakota, and Lutheran Social Services in South Dakota.

**LSA Collaborative Learning Model:** The LSA collaborative learning model unites and engages community leaders, Lutheran member organizations, and national partners in cultivating caring communities that advance health and opportunity for all people. In particular, the model is a platform where peers share knowledge to advance innovation, equity, and sustainable progress through changes in people, practice, policy, and systems.

**RAAN Model:** The RAAN model mobilizes whole communities to empower whole people to meet the unique needs of older adults aging in rural communities. The model consists of seven innovative and impactful core approaches: selecting a focal region, recruiting a RAAN lead, identifying community assets, identifying gaps in addressing the social determinants of care, mobilizing assets into community partners, launching the RAAN, and creating awareness and outreach.

**RAAN Lead:** The RAAN Lead is the primary staff person in the RAAN and assumes a wide range of responsibilities, including project management, social needs assessments, community outreach, and strategic planning. The RAAN Lead's role provides an exciting opportunity for individuals to spearhead a novel approach to home and community-based services, utilize their professional skills and networks, and gain personal fulfillment.

**Rural Aging Action Network:** The Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN) is a national learning collaborative developed and led by Lutheran Services in America. It aims to expand community-based services and supports to ensure independence and choice for older adults. The Rural Aging Action Networks have been established in rural communities across Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

# Glossary

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**Social Determinants of Health:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defines the social determinants of health as “conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.” According to HHS, these social determinants of health are more pronounced in rural areas and contribute to health disparities and inequities when access to them is limited. This report focuses on five social determinants of health: food, safe housing, transportation, healthcare, and social support.

**Whole Communities:** Rural residents often rely on each other. The RAAN model builds on this core asset to engage the whole community in co-designing solutions to meet the daily challenges older adults face. Lutheran Services in America’s whole community approach is rooted in its faith-based tradition of elevating the voices of all people.

**Whole People:** The RAAN model’s whole person approach recognizes older adults as vital community members. The approach starts with assessing critical gaps in the care of older adults that may affect their physical, mental, emotional, and/or social well-being through one-on-one conversations. During the assessment process, RAAN Leads focus on listening to the voices of older adults to learn about their unique needs, their goals, and to foster and improve understanding of their strengths and challenges.



# Executive Summary

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For over a century, Lutheran social ministries have been trusted community-centered leaders in rural communities across America. As a nationwide network, Lutheran Services in America (LSA) has built on its deep geographic footprint to become an authentic and trusted leader in rural aging.

In 2022, Lutheran Services in America created the Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN) as a national collaborative dedicated to expanding community-based services and supports to ensure independence and choice for older adults. The RAAN is rooted in Lutheran Services in America's collaborative learning model, which aims to strengthen the capacity of rural leaders through facilitated peer exchange, training, new partnerships, leveraging of shared resources, and learning and evaluation. Through the LSA RAAN Collaborative, Lutheran Services in America brings investment and visibility to older adults and to the unique joys and challenges of aging in rural America.

As the number of older adults aging in rural communities continues to grow, there is a need for rural-relevant solutions like the RAAN that meet the unique needs and build on the unique strengths of rural communities. The RAAN is an innovative and impactful community-centered model that mobilizes whole communities to empower whole people (older adults). The RAAN's signature whole community and whole person approaches build on Lutheran Services in America's faith-based tradition of "caring for thy neighbor" and its belief in the inherent dignity of all individuals. These two approaches also leverage the often-overlooked strengths of rural communities, including the tight-knit social bonds and feelings of connectedness among residents.

From October 2022 to July 2024, the LSA RAAN Collaborative referred 462 older adults to services related to food security, housing safety, transportation, and social support. The RAAN mobilized whole communities by identifying 1,183 unique community assets and engaging over 376 community partners to address gaps in care.

## Evaluation of the RAAN Model

As part of its commitment to evaluation, Lutheran Services in America partnered with the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston to understand the effectiveness, impact, and value of the RAAN model. This document shares the findings from that research, including the research team's:

**Qualitative Findings:** These findings are based on interviews with Lutheran Services in America personnel and the RAAN Leads, as well as focus groups and interviews with older adults, family caregivers, and community partners. Qualitative findings, including direct quotes from the RAAN Leads, are interspersed throughout this document.

**Quantitative Findings:** These findings are based on the LTSS Center's analysis of program measurements. Quantitative findings can be found throughout this document.

## Purpose of This Report

This report aims to raise awareness about the growing population of older adults living in rural communities nationwide. It provides an overview of the RAAN, outlines the seven steps involved in establishing a RAAN, and explores how the RAAN empowers older adults and advances equity and engagement among diverse populations.

We encourage readers to consider partnering with Lutheran Services in America to learn more about the Rural Aging Action Network. For more information, please contact [Regan McManus](#).



# Part I: Overview of the Rural Aging Action Network

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The Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN) is a community-informed approach to expanding services available to older adults by leveraging the unique assets and resources in rural communities—along with the characteristic strength and resilience of older adults and caregivers—to remove barriers to care. Lutheran Services in America (LSA) designed, developed, and implemented the RAAN model. The model’s design is based on extensive research exploring rural aging, some of which is described below.



## An Introduction to Aging in Rural America

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### Characteristics of Older Adults in Rural Communities

About 10 million adults aged 65 and older live in rural areas throughout the United States. Older adults make up a more significant portion of rural populations (18%) than urban populations (14%) (Smith & Trevelyan, 2019; Tuttle et al., 2020). Compared to men, women comprise a higher proportion of both rural and urban older adult populations.

When compared to urban older adults, rural older adults are more likely to be white, veterans, and to have low-to-moderate incomes. They are also more likely to be lifelong residents of the state in which they live (Tuttle et al., 2020).



## Social Determinants of Health Among Rural Older Adults

Rural older adults are more likely than their urban counterparts to report poor health. They are also more likely than urban older adults to report having a disability, diabetes, cancer, or obesity and to have experienced a heart attack or stroke (Carter & Dean, 2021; Tuttle et al., 2020). These differences are likely due to the contrasting social determinants of health that urban and rural older adults face.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines the social determinants of health as “conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.” These social determinants of health, which are more pronounced in rural areas, contribute to health disparities and inequities (DHHS, 2021) when access to them is limited.

This report focuses on five social determinants of health: food, safe housing, transportation, healthcare, and social supports.

- 1. Food:** Older adults living in rural areas are more likely to experience food insecurity than urban and suburban older adults (Ziliak & Gundersen, 2020). Contributors to food insecurity among rural older adults include lower income and lack of access to transportation and social networks (Valliant et al., 2022).
- 2. Safe Housing:** Rural residents, especially those with low incomes, struggle to obtain safe and affordable housing. Housing tends to be older and of lower quality in rural areas than in non-rural areas (National Rural Housing Coalition, 2018; White, 2015).
- 3. Transportation:** Rural older adults who must give up driving will likely face transportation inequalities for several reasons:
  - ➔ Rural older adults may not have family members or friends to transport them.
  - ➔ Public transportation can be sparse and unreliable in rural areas.
  - ➔ Private transportation, including taxis and rideshares, may not be available or affordable to older adults with low incomes (Fraade-Blanar, Best, & Shih, 2022).
  - ➔ Lack of transportation can affect the ability of older adults to participate in social activities and access healthcare.
- 4. Healthcare:** Rural older adults have difficulty accessing health care because rural areas have fewer physicians and specialists than urban areas (Krasniuk & Crizzle, 2023). Research also shows that rural older adults often forego medical treatment due to the cost of healthcare (Carter & Dean, 2021).
- 5. Social Supports:** Older adults in rural areas have more extensive networks that provide social support, compared to older adults in urban areas. However, rural older adults face unique barriers that can limit their access to those social networks, including:
  - ➔ Lack of access to transportation.
  - ➔ A non-walkable built environment that is not conducive to social interactions.
  - ➔ Fewer financial resources.
  - ➔ Limited access to the Internet.

Like urban older adults, rural older adults who feel socially isolated or lonely are at greater risk for poorer health outcomes (Henning-Smith, 2020; Henning-Smith, Ecklund, & Kozhimannil, 2018).

## Meeting the Desire of Rural Older Adults to Age at Home

As their health declines, most older adults choose to stay in their homes and age in their communities. Home and community-based services (HCBS) and other long-term services and supports (LTSS) can help older adults remain in the home and community of their choice. However, fewer organizations and formal care partners provide HCBS in rural areas. As a result, rural older adults are more likely than their urban counterparts to rely on family members and friends for the help they need to age in place (Miller, Ornstein, & Coe, 2023).



A recent [study](#) by Lutheran Services in America and [ATI Advisory](#) sheds light on other issues that influence the ability of rural older adults to age in the community. Researchers used surveys, focus groups, and interviews with community leaders, service providers, caregivers, and older adults to identify six critical questions representing the primary challenges to aging in rural America:

- 1. Who can provide the necessary care?**
- 2. How can older adults reach services?**
- 3. How can caregivers reach older adults?**
- 4. When services exist, how do people learn about them?**
- 5. Where will caregivers and older adults live?**
- 6. How can we encourage older adults to prepare for aging?**

The study also identified strategies for meeting these challenges, such as raising awareness about the issues facing rural older adults and the services available to help them address those issues, and ensuring that services meet rural older adults where they are.

# Program Overview

## RAAN Description and Brief History

The [Rural Aging Action Network \(RAAN\)](#) is a national learning collaborative developed and led by Lutheran Services in America. The RAAN aims to expand community-based services and supports to ensure independence and choice for older adults. Lutheran Services in America has established RAANs in rural communities across Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

The LSA RAAN Collaborative builds on the faith-based, community-centered, and trusted leadership of Lutheran social ministries in rural communities. In many cases, Lutheran social ministries have served with and in their communities for more than a century. Through the LSA RAAN Collaborative, Lutheran Services in America brings investment and visibility to older adults in rural America.

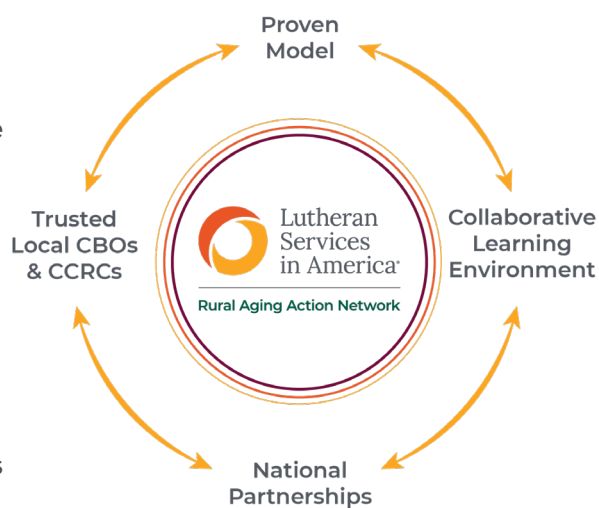
## Participating Organizations

In 2022, Lutheran Services in America selected five member organizations from its nationwide network to join the LSA RAAN Collaborative. Since then, the collaborative has demonstrated its unique ability to assemble the partners, infrastructure, and collaborative environment necessary to support older adults living in six rural communities located in four states. RAAN's member organizations include:

- ➔ [St. John's United](#) in Ravalli, Missoula, and Richland counties in Montana.
- ➔ [Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota](#) in Clay and Traverse counties in Minnesota and in Cass and Ransom counties in North Dakota.
- ➔ [Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota](#) in Charles Mix and Douglas counties in South Dakota.
- ➔ [Missouri Slope](#) in Burleigh, Morton, and McLean counties in North Dakota.
- ➔ [Immanuel Living](#) in Flathead County in Montana.

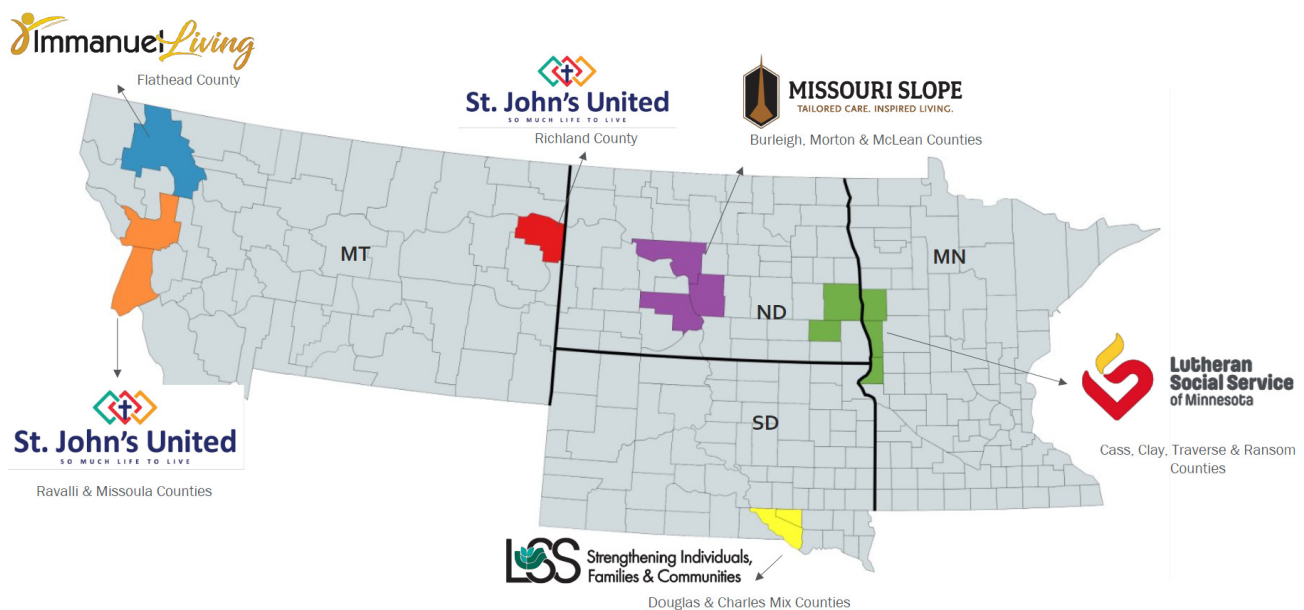
Each organization has an established, trusted presence in rural communities and a shared commitment to leverage its unique assets to meet the needs of older adults. Through its collaborative learning model, Lutheran Services in America helps these rural leaders address critical gaps in care that can prevent older adults from aging with independence in their communities of choice.

The LSA collaborative learning model unites and engages community leaders, Lutheran member organizations, and national partners in cultivating caring communities that advance health and opportunity for all people. In particular, the model is a platform to advance innovation, equity, and sustainable progress through changes in people, practice, policy, and systems.



The LSA member organizations grow and generate collective impact in their communities and nationwide through facilitated peer exchange, training, new partnerships, leveraging shared resources, and learning and evaluation. The LSA collaborative learning model is adaptive and can scale evidence-based programs and create and pilot innovations in social service delivery.

“ Being a part of the collaborative has given me a sense of unity, a place to turn to when I need guidance. It is the willingness of all of us to come together to share ideas that makes programs like ours continue to thrive. I consider myself fortunate to be a part of such a phenomenal team. ”



## Program Framework and Approaches

**The RAAN mobilizes whole communities to empower whole people.**

**At the community level,** the RAAN mobilizes whole communities by expanding the circle of partners in aging services and recruiting nontraditional partners to address gaps in care.

**At the individual level,** the RAAN uses a whole person approach to connect older adults with services and supports that allow them to age at home with dignity and independence.

**At the family level,** the whole person approach supports family caregivers alongside older adults and recognizes the family's role in caring for older relatives.



## Mobilizing Whole Communities

Rural communities often have a limited physical infrastructure, which creates a demand for creative and inclusive approaches. One of the often-overlooked assets of rural communities is the tight-knit social bonds and feelings of connectedness among residents, who often rely on each other. The RAAN model builds on this core asset to engage the whole community in co-designing solutions to meet the daily challenges older adults face. Lutheran Services in America's whole community approach is rooted in its faith-based tradition to elevate the voices of all people.



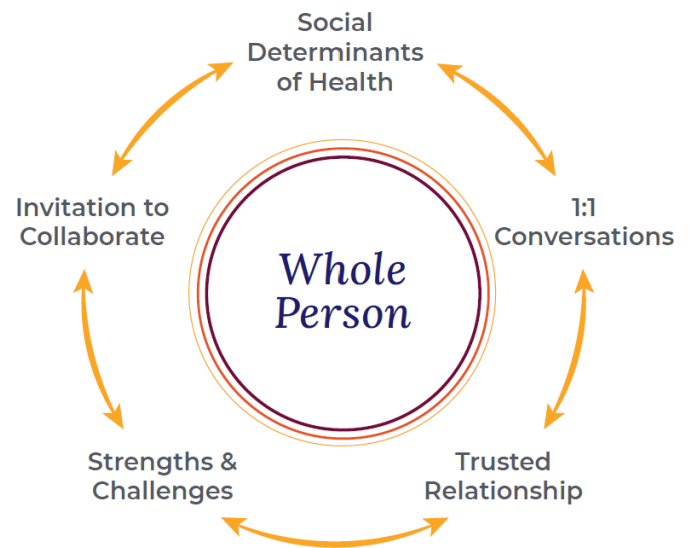
### Key elements of a whole community approach include:

- ➔ **Community-Driven Mission:** Sustainable solutions are led by, for, and with the community. The RAAN is community-led and solicits local input through focus groups and community meetings.
- ➔ **Asset-Based Approach:** The RAAN begins by identifying existing assets in the community. A community's non-physical assets—including individuals such as older adults, associations, institutions, culture, and stories—can be as important as its physical assets in helping older adults age in their homes and communities.
- ➔ **Nontraditional Partners:** Engaging “nontraditional partners,” or those less familiar with the challenges of aging in rural communities, is essential. At the same time, the RAAN engages key individuals and organizations in the community and considers where older adults gather. Nontraditional partners can include the local Boy/Girl Scouts, the farmers union, grocery stores, and restaurants.
- ➔ **Lived Expertise:** The RAAN's staff leaders, called RAAN Leads, come from and reflect the communities they serve. Having a background in aging services is not a requirement for the RAAN Leads. Instead, the RAAN Leads are selected based on their ability to build lasting partnerships by merging their lived expertise with the community's knowledge and trust.
- ➔ **Cultural Relevance:** Successful outreach depends on knowing how and where people in the community communicate and gather. The RAAN events—such as a fishing competition turned into a fish fry for older adults—should reflect the local culture. In addition, the RAAN outreach should reflect how the community shares information, whether through an ad at the local movie theater, a table at the farmers market, or a bulletin displayed at the post office.

## Empowering Whole People


The RAAN model centers on a whole person approach. This approach starts by assessing critical gaps in care through one-on-one conversations with older adults to learn about their unique needs and goals and to foster and improve understanding.

“The RAAN’s focus on empowerment, dignity, and intentional connection has transformed the traditional deficit-based assessment process and nurtured a sense of community and self-respect among participants,” says Emily Dieppa Colo, vice president of workforce innovations at PHI, a national training, research, and policy organization.



### Key elements of this whole person approach include the following:

- ➔ **Social Determinants of Health:** The RAAN Leads strive to understand all the factors that impact an older adult’s ability to age at home. These factors often include reliable and affordable access to healthcare, food and nutrition, transportation, safe housing, and social supports.
- ➔ **Personal Conversations:** The RAAN model uses open-ended questions and encourages individual meetings with older adults to understand their unique goals and challenges.
- ➔ **Trusted Relationships:** The RAAN’s success is rooted in its ability to establish and build trust and rapport with older adults. When the RAAN team members meet with older adults and their caregivers, the initial focus is getting to know one another before connecting to services.
- ➔ **Strengths and Challenges:** The RAAN uses a strength-based approach to understand each individual’s joys and challenges.
- ➔ **Invitation to Collaborate:** The RAAN honors older adults as unique and vital community members. The RAAN model invites older adults to contribute their talents, skills, and wisdom so the RAAN can reach more older adults and develop rich community partnerships.



**Coming Together in Rural America: Aging in Rural America on Vimeo** ➔

Watch this video to learn more about the Rural Aging Action Network.



## Benefits of the RAAN

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston chose to augment its quantitative data evaluation with qualitative interviews to align with Lutheran Services in America's commitment to elevating the voices of the community and people with lived experience. LTSS Center researchers conducted focus groups and interviews with older adults, caregivers, and community partners to understand the RAAN's impact from the perspective of its participants.

Based on this research, the LTSS Center documented the RAAN's perceived benefits, as shared during focus groups and interviews.

### Benefits to Older Adults

**Increased Access to Services:** Older adults said the RAAN acts as a liaison to services and a "go-to" resource for meeting the need for aging services. The RAAN helps increase access to a variety of services and supports that are unique to each person's needs, including assistance with homemaking, legal services, medical appointments, translation, transportation, and technology.

**Opportunities for Long-Term Planning:** The RAAN model positions the RAAN Lead as a point person who raises awareness about available services and coordinates care delivered by multiple providers. Older RAAN participants said they found comfort in knowing that RAAN Leads would help them carry out long-term care planning for the future, even if they did not currently need assistance. Participants were confident that the RAAN Lead would help them access services when the need arose.

**Personal Attention from a Trusted Friend:** The RAAN model offers a "human touch" by providing personal attention that older adults especially valued. One caregiver explained that older adults like having personal contact—someone to talk to and see face-to-face—rather than navigating an online search or email correspondence. Older adults reported that they have benefitted from the ongoing personalized support of the RAAN Lead, describing Leads as a "friend," "champion," and "wonderful listener."

In addition, the RAAN Leads often go above and beyond their job descriptions as they secure services for participants. One RAAN Lead not only made a referral to a home care service but also offered to interview potential homemakers to ensure a good fit. When one older adult had difficulty finding a hospice care provider, the RAAN Lead provided respite to the caregiver. One RAAN Lead supplied laptops during a home visit to help older adults with limited technology skills complete online applications.

**Respect for Participants' Lived Experience:** The RAAN Leads often reflect the lived experience and diversity of the community where they work. For example, several RAAN Leads, who initially came to their communities as immigrants, helped older immigrants adjust to their new surroundings and access vital resources through the RAAN. One Spanish-speaking RAAN Lead used a language-specific WhatsApp texting group to connect older adults to local resources, including hospitals and gas stations. Another RAAN Lead, a refugee from West Africa, built trust with members of the Liberian community and connected them to transportation and affordable housing.



### [Coming Together in Rural America: Priscilla's Story](#) →

Watch Priscilla's story to learn more about RAAN's benefits to older adults.

## Benefits to Family Caregivers

**Relief from Caregiver Strain:** The RAAN model eases the daily responsibilities of caregivers by coordinating community-based services such as transportation for medical appointments, nutrition planning, and social engagement opportunities. Specifically, RAAN Leads reduce the burden on family caregivers by:

- ➔ Conducting detailed needs assessments.
- ➔ Offering tailored recommendations and referrals to meet health care, social activities, and daily living needs.
- ➔ Providing educational resources that help family caregivers build confidence in their ability to provide care, manage stress, and become more resilient.

**Peace of Mind:** The RAAN offers caregivers peace of mind by managing multiple moving pieces of service coordination and delivery that enable older adults to live more independently in their homes. Family caregivers noted that their parents feel less dependent on them for care because they know they can rely on the RAAN Lead for information and service access. Many family caregivers balance work responsibilities and caring for a parent or grandparent and reported that services they accessed through the RAAN helped ease this burden.

**Help Acclimating to a New Community:** One caregiver said she felt like a fish out of water after moving from Cuba to South Dakota. The RAAN Lead supported the caregiver by providing hands-on assistance to her mother-in-law, including translation services, help completing legal forms, and referrals for free psychological treatment and affordable nutrition services.

“Feedback from caregivers consistently emphasizes the transformative impact of RAAN on their caregiving journey. Many caregivers report a notable reduction in stress and an improved ability to manage caregiving tasks. They appreciate the personalized support from RAAN Leads, who help navigate the complexities of the healthcare system and eldercare services. The accessibility of resources and the responsive support network that RAAN offers have been particularly praised for enabling caregivers to better support their loved ones while also attending to their own well-being.”



### [Coming Together in Rural America: Susan's Story](#) →

Watch Susan's video to learn more about RAAN's benefits to family caregivers.

## Benefits to Community Partners

**Pressure Relief:** By connecting older adults to services, the RAAN helps relieve the pressure that aging services providers often feel to fill gaps in care beyond their programs. When one organization experiences funding or staffing shortages and cannot meet high demand, the RAAN works with other community organizations to refer older adults to other partners within the network.

**Free Advertising:** The RAAN referrals can serve as free advertising and extended community outreach for partners seeking to increase awareness of their services. For example, the RAAN Leads, trusted in the community, often share information and resources from the RAAN partners with older adults aging at home. One RAAN Lead helped educate older adults about the county's new emergency response notification system and enrolled them in the alerts database.

**Support and Resources:** Community partners that join the RAAN receive support and resources from community leaders who also belong to the collaborative. This enables centralized information sharing that is often not found in rural communities.

**Improved Community Awareness:** Many community partners agreed that the RAAN improved older adults' and caregivers' awareness of services and the community's ability to respond to their needs. The RAAN has the capacity to bring stakeholders together. Through its whole community approach, the collaborative promotes teamwork across different sectors to address gaps in care for older adults.



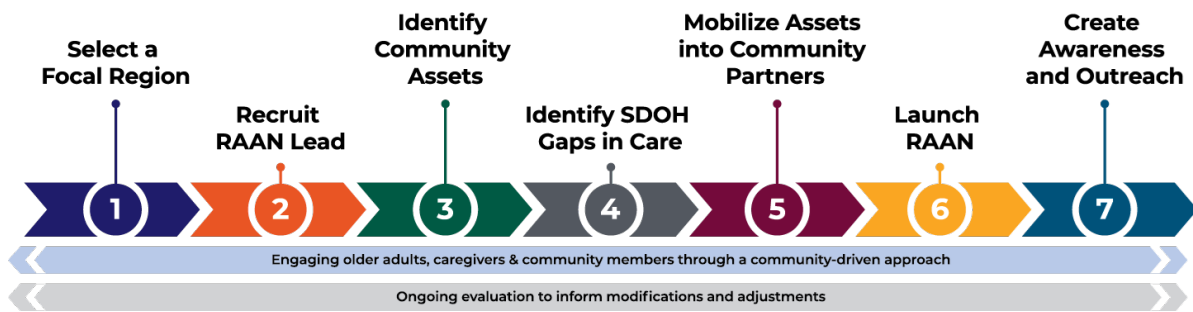
### [Coming Together in Rural America: Reverend & Mrs. Sirleaf's Story](#) →

Watch One Family Christian Center's video to learn more about the RAAN's benefits to community partners.

# Part II: Implementation of the RAAN

When implementing the Rural Aging Action Networks (RAAN), Lutheran Services in America (LSA) leads communities through the following steps as it mobilizes whole communities and empowers whole people.

## Mobilizing Whole Communities



### Step 1: Select a Focal Region

Choosing a geographic focal region is the first step in implementing the RAAN model. Multiple factors play a role in deciding the RAAN's focal area, including proximity to traditional aging service providers, the demographics of the local aging population, the need for service coordination, and the buy-in from key stakeholder organizations. The organizations implementing the RAAN model are expected to demonstrate:

- ➔ The need and opportunity to mobilize partners to develop a Rural Aging Action Network.
- ➔ Their trusted leadership of older adults and partners in that community.

The RAAN model is most effective when:

- ➔ **A community lacks available services and supports** and needs additional investments in home and community-based services that would allow older adults to age in place.
- ➔ **LTSS organizations are willing to implement strategies to expand existing long-term care offerings.** For example, several RAANs adopted a "hub-and-spoke" model that allows them to leverage the resources of aging service providers in more densely populated communities to meet the needs of nearby rural communities.
- ➔ **The RAAN takes a community-centered approach.** When deciding on a focal region, the RAANs must be willing to listen to the community's wants and needs. Several RAANs hosted community listening sessions and interviewed key stakeholders before selecting a focal region.

## Step 2: Recruit RAAN Leads

The RAAN Lead is the primary staff person in the RAAN and assumes a wide range of responsibilities, including project management, social needs assessments, community outreach, and strategic planning. The RAAN Lead's role provides an exciting opportunity for individuals to spearhead a novel approach to home and community-based services, utilize their professional skills and networks, and gain personal fulfillment.

Following retirement from the Foreign Service, one RAAN Lead returned to the small town where she grew up and accepted the RAAN Lead position to give back to her community. Another RAAN Lead, after taking a hiatus from the health and long-term care fields during the COVID-19 pandemic, found the RAAN Lead role as an opportunity to “fill [her] cup.”

“I act as a bridge between older adults in need, caregivers, and service providers, ensuring that our programs effectively support our clients living independent, healthy lives. The job also involves significant stakeholder engagement, requiring the ability to communicate effectively with various individuals from different sectors.”

## Qualities of Successful RAAN Leads

The RAAN Leads take responsibility for building trust among older adults and families, assessing gaps in social determinants of health, and forging community partnerships. Organizations are most successful in building a RAAN that is responsive to the needs of each community when they choose the RAAN Leads with these characteristics:

- 1. Reflect the community's culture, language, and lived experience:** The RAAN Leads should authentically reflect their community's demographics and understand the challenges and joys of aging in a rural community.
- 2. Serve as community connectors:** The RAAN Leads are responsible for building the network of older adults, caregivers, and community partners that comprise the RAAN. Successful RAAN Leads are actively and visibly engaged in the community and are best able to build trust among community members and develop relationships with stakeholders. Hiring an individual with lived experience and local knowledge is critical to building these connections and instilling confidence in the program.

“You can transplant the model, but not the individual, because (the model) really is based on having that community member that's from there ... that's known there ... (that's the) social connector that has the confidence and respect of people.”

**3. Are ambitious, innovative, and visionary thinkers:** The RAAN Leads are responsible for recruiting and mobilizing community partners to help carry out their ambitious vision. They reported being excited by the challenge of building a program and motivated to partner with the community to co-design creative solutions to complex problems.

“When I thought of the RAAN, I looked at the end game and said, ‘What do I want this to be? What do I want it to accomplish?’ And then I worked on how to get to that end game. ... I have so many more visions of where this is going to go. If we get there, this is going to be enormous, it’s going to be in every county in the state.”

**4. Have varied professional and educational experience:** The RAAN Leads come from a variety of professional and educational backgrounds and often do not have formal experience in aging services. RAAN Leads often have professional backgrounds in social work, project management, foreign diplomacy, law, and long-term care administration. Despite these varied backgrounds, all RAAN Leads demonstrate leadership, communication, strategic problem-solving, and program management skills.

## Challenges Experienced and Overcome

The RAAN Leads experienced several challenges in developing the RAAN model and building trust with community partners and older adults. They overcame these challenges in partnership with Lutheran Services in America, which provided the RAAN Leads with coaching and peer support through the LSA RAAN Collaborative.

| Challenge   | Response  |
|---|---|
| Recruiting and maintaining community partners and volunteers            | Through the LSA collaborative learning model, RAAN Leads shared with one another the messaging frameworks and marketing materials they used to recruit community partners and communicate the value of joining the RAAN.  |
| Time management and prioritization of efforts as the program grew       | An Executive Sponsor guided each RAAN Lead as they carried out program management and strategic decision-making. In addition, Lutheran Services in America led peer meetings for the RAAN Leads and Executive Sponsors and coached each organization’s team.  |
| Developing RAAN’s legitimacy and building trust among community members | Because trust takes time to build, particularly in rural communities, the LSA RAAN model values hiring people with lived experience who have demonstrated trust with community members. Lutheran Services in America partnered with organizations to redesign job descriptions to reflect this value. |

[Table continued on next page]

## Challenges Experienced and Overcome (Continued)

| Challenge  | Response  |
|--|---|
| Lack of affordable services to which RAANs could refer older adults            | The RAAN meetings with community partners included discussion of the social determinants of health and how community members could co-create a sustainable solution, or mobilize additional partners, to address them.  |
| Need to rely on community partners for timely and responsive service provision | The RAAN Leads shared their approaches to working with community partners during collaborative meetings facilitated by Lutheran Services in America. During RAAN community meetings, the RAAN Leads shared their challenges with ineligibility, long waiting lists, and workforce strategies. They also discussed strategies to improve partnership and communication, and how to mobilize additional partners to address gaps. |
| Data entry and management  | Lutheran Services in America hosted bi-monthly meetings to help the RAAN Leads strengthen their capacity in key areas such as data entry and management. For example, the RAAN Leads met in pairs to review and discuss their data dashboards and how data could inform their approach.   |

“Look at things from a strategic viewpoint. And just being mindful that, you know, sometimes you have to pivot. If something’s not working, you need to figure out why and what the problem is and just try to pivot.”



**[Coming Together: Aging in America: Tanya's Story](#)** →

Watch Tanya's video to learn more about one RAAN Lead's experience.



### Step 3: Identify Community Assets

One of the most critical steps of the RAAN model is creating and growing a network of service providers who can be called on to help older residents age in the community. The RAAN Leads identify and recruit potential partners from among the community’s unique “assets”— individuals, institutions, associations, physical space, culture and stories, and economic exchanges—that could offer valuable resources or services to support older adults. The RAAN model recognizes that all assets have the potential to leverage their resources to help older adults live well in the community.

Lutheran Services in America partnered with [Sharing Common Ground](#) to strengthen the capacity of the RAAN Leads through a series of training sessions on this asset-based community development approach. Rural communities can be asset-rich, even though they often are characterized as small and distant from a metropolitan area’s health and social service infrastructure. The RAAN’s whole community approach mobilizes an array of assets, including restaurants, the Boys and Girls Club, and local farms, to support older adults and caregivers.

**From October 2022 to July 2024,  
RAAN identified 1,183 community assets.**  
Institutions represented more than half of all assets.



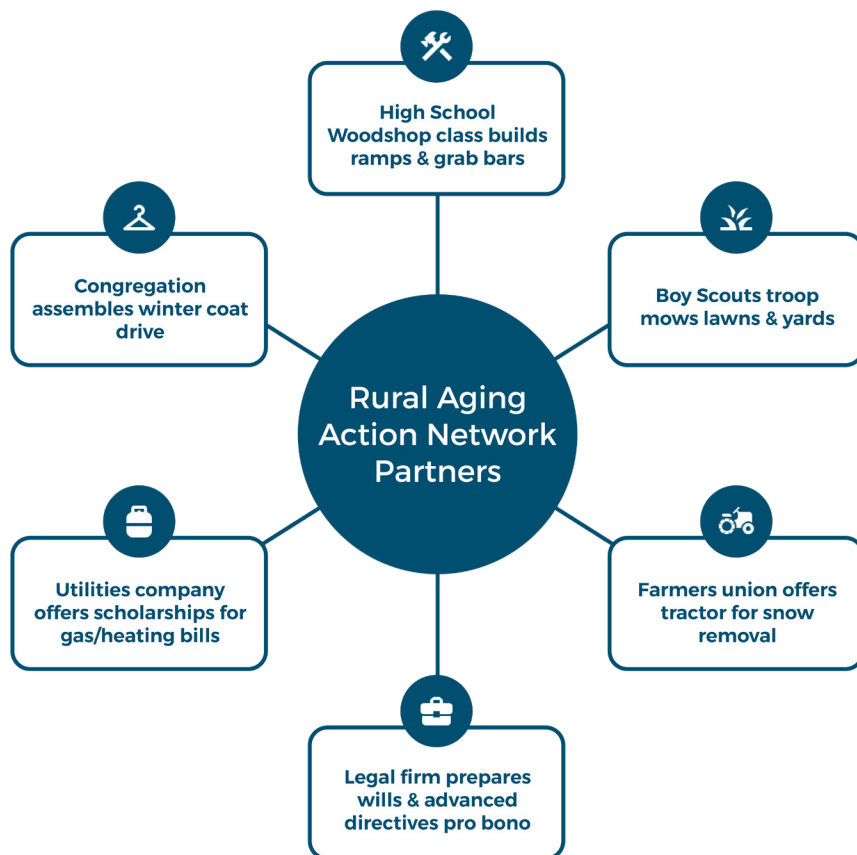
## Leveraging Existing Community Assets

The RAAN model encourages the RAAN Leads to develop asset maps that answer such questions as:

- ➔ Where do older adults gather?
- ➔ Who engages with older adults?

To answer these and similar questions, the RAAN Leads seek out existing local businesses, organizations, and individuals who regularly interact with older adults. The resulting asset maps include traditional aging service organizations, such as senior centers or home care agencies. In addition, the RAAN model highlights “nontraditional” assets that are not necessarily familiar with the challenges of aging or work exclusively with older adults. The rationale is that nontraditional assets that engage regularly with community members may be the first to notice an older adult’s change in wellness and can be valuable partners in addressing gaps in addressing the social determinants of health.

“Be mindful all the time when you’re doing anything, anywhere, even just running errands, like going to the post office and supermarket. When you run into people, just kind of have your radar on and listen to what they say. Pick up on gifts or resources or things that they might be able to contribute, even at a later date. ... Always have your connector radar on.”



“It was the coffee shop owner, it was the mechanic at the local garage, [it was] grocery delivery. Those are the people that have the best relationship at the most local level. And connecting with them, making them more aware that there’s this huge [RAAN] network that’s just focused on taking care of one another.”

“I had an older adult [with] health issues. And even though I did connect her to the food bank, some of the food that she was receiving was not really adequate. So how can we close that gap? Because I had previously known the owner of the local corn farming community here, I was able to reach out to her and say, ‘How can we be able to partner together?’ When there’s an overproduction, they know who all the older adults in this community [are] that need access to food and groceries.”

## Engaging Older Adults: The Community’s Lived Experts

The RAAN model honors the critical role of older adults and family caregivers, many of whom appreciate the invitation to become contributors and leaders of the collaborative. Older adults are the lived experts of their communities and are knowledgeable about community events and resources that resonate with their peers. The RAAN recognizes that older adults are vital members of the community. The RAAN elevates the voices of older adults by developing leadership and volunteer roles through which they can help guide and inform the collaborative.

“One older adult does a Bible study group, and she’s the spouse of a very prominent medical doctor who loves this program and refers a lot of people. He works with a lot of older adults. We asked her to be on the steering committee, and she was delighted. And she has just been such a huge asset to our program. Those are people (who) have boots on the ground. And they have knowledge and situational awareness to share.”

## Step 4: Identify Gaps in Addressing the Social Determinants of Health

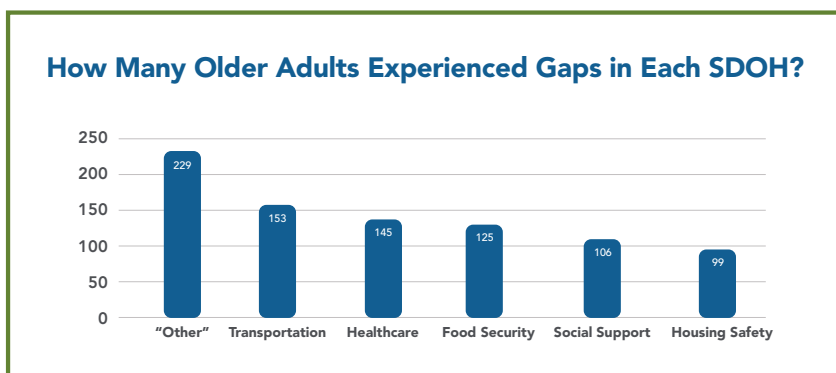
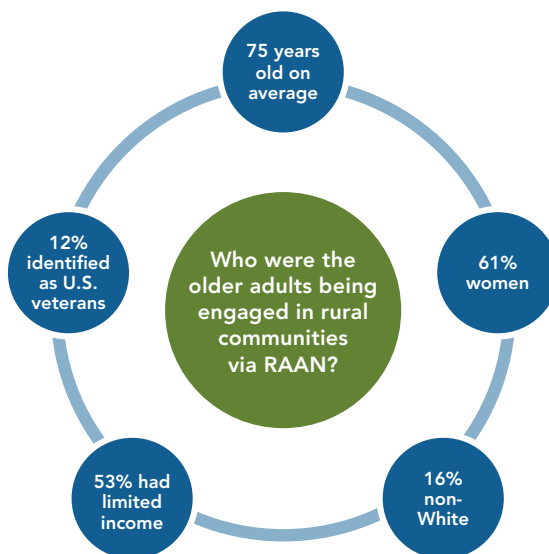
Understanding the unique needs of older adults in the community is vital to the success of each RAAN. The RAAN model uses an evidence-based needs assessment to determine gaps in a community's ability to address five social determinants of health (SDOH), including food security, housing safety, social support, transportation, and healthcare. This assessment gives the RAAN Leads the critical information they need to connect older adults with appropriate services and to track the model's effectiveness over time.

The RAAN assessment also poses additional questions about each community to identify challenges not captured by the five social determinants of health. Questions exploring the community's cultural norms, the languages older residents speak, and the impact of harsh weather conditions might reveal older residents' needs for energy assistance, technology support, legal advice, translation services, and pet care.

Lutheran Services in America invested in a tracking tool and community data dashboard to measure the community's needs and the RAAN's progress over time. It also provided training so the RAAN Leads could share data and easy-to-understand graphics illustrating the RAAN's impact. That data included:

- ➔ The demographics of older adults in the program.
- ➔ Leading gaps in addressing the social determinants of health.
- ➔ Referral rates. Of the 788 older adults who received a needs assessment between October 2022 and July 2024, 462 (59%) were referred to relevant services.
- ➔ Services initiated. Of the 462 older adults referred to services, 290 (63%) were successfully connected to such services.<sup>1</sup>

To learn more about Lutheran Services in America's RAAN community dashboards, read "[Building a Dashboard for Rural Leaders](#)" by [Transform Consulting Group](#). See page 25 for more information about how the RAAN model assesses older adults through a whole person approach.



<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that not everyone chooses to receive services or a referral. A client may no longer feel comfortable receiving services, and provider agencies may have waiting lists or may determine that the client does not meet eligibility criteria. The quantitative evaluation also found that some caregivers and older adults were looking for resources before they needed to be connected. The RAAN became a long-term care planning resource in some communities to help older adults and families plan for services in advance of critical needs.

## Step 5: Transform Community Assets into Community Partners

After identifying community assets, the RAAN Leads engage with those assets and encourage them to become RAAN community partners. The success of this process depends on the ability of the RAAN Leads to emphasize that the RAAN network works collaboratively—not competitively—with partners. The RAAN takes a team-based approach to service coordination and delivery, and each partner becomes a valuable piece of the care “puzzle” so older adults are empowered to age at home.

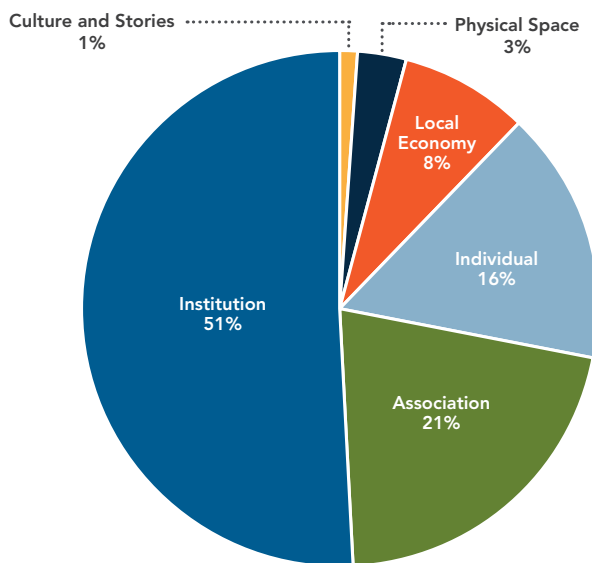
The RAAN Leads reported that, at least initially, some potential community partners mistakenly assumed that the RAAN would compete with their organizations. To overcome this misconception, the RAAN Leads prepared talking points explaining how the RAAN, as a coordination mechanism, collaborates with community partners to fill service gaps and link older adults with services from multiple providers.

The RAAN Leads explained how the RAAN and community partners are aligned on common goals and values related to improving the lives of community members. The RAAN Leads reported that partner organizations were more willing to join the RAAN when the RAAN Leads explained the following benefits:

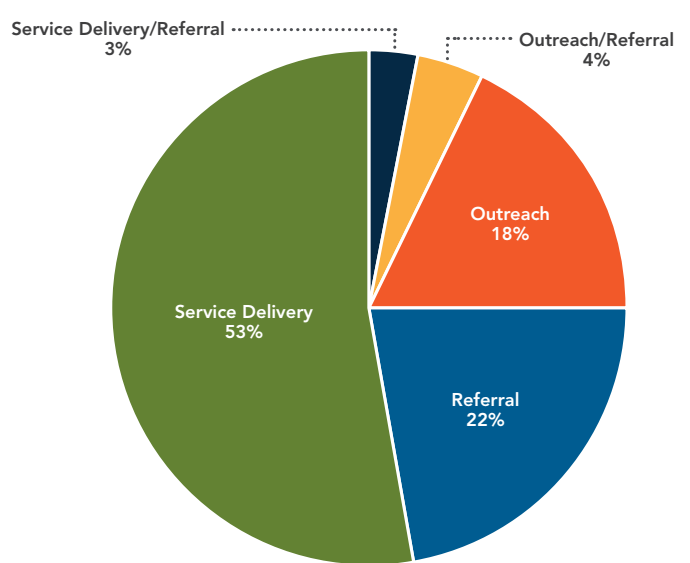
- ➔ The RAAN helps relieve pressure to fill service delivery gaps, particularly given the workforce shortage.
- ➔ The RAAN increases service awareness, outreach, and referrals for every partner.
- ➔ The RAAN builds a network of community support and information-sharing for organizations.

The RAAN engaged **376 community partners from October 2022 to July 2024**. More than half of these partners identified as service providers. Nearly one-third of all partners provided some referral services. A quarter (**25%**) of the partners were non-traditional.

Types of Assets



Types of Partners



## Step 6: Launch the RAAN

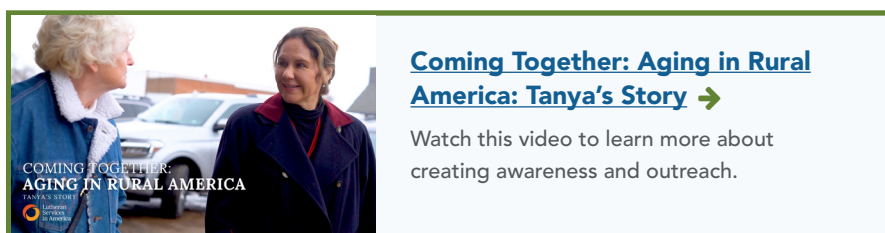
After recruiting community partners, the RAAN Leads typically initiate a launch process that includes these steps:

- ➔ **Choose a Name.** While many of the RAANs chose to stay with the RAAN name, other organizations chose different names, including “Older Adult Resource Network” and “Senior Connect.” The best names are those that community members will recognize and understand.
- ➔ **Host a kickoff event.** The RAANs invite community partners, older adults, and family caregivers to attend kickoff events that promote community-building and build awareness of the RAAN. Lutheran Services in America encourages the RAAN Leads to host events at culturally authentic and neutral locations and to engage nontraditional partners. Events with nontraditional partners have included a “Meet & Greet” at the local coffee shop and a game night at the town library. The RAAN-hosted community events were most successful when they were unique to the community’s culture. These events included chili cookoffs, Oktoberfest celebrations, and crafts showcases.

## Step 7: Build Awareness and Conduct Outreach

To reach more older adults, the RAAN Leads focused on creating awareness of the program and conducting outreach through the following:

- ➔ **A RAAN Ambassador Program:** Older adults who are knowledgeable about or directly benefit from RAAN services volunteer to host or attend outreach events. Other older adults interested in seeking assistance through the RAAN appreciate hearing the “peer perspective” from ambassadors and feel less intimidated or alone.
- ➔ **Local Marketing and Outreach:** The RAAN Leads make it a point to understand where community members receive their news, including bulletins in the post office, the local newspaper, or ads at the movie theater.
- ➔ **RAAN Events:** The RAAN Leads invited older adults, caregivers, community assets, and partners to serve as speakers at the RAAN events. These speaking opportunities helped raise awareness about new services in the community and kept community members informed about the RAAN activities.



# Empowering Whole People

## Whole Person Approach

The RAAN model uses a strengths-based approach to understanding older adults' health-related social needs and empowering whole persons. This approach is rooted in Lutheran organizations' long-standing commitment to whole person care and the inherent dignity of every individual.

During the assessment process, the RAAN Leads focus on listening to the voices of older adults to understand their strengths and challenges. The RAAN model recognizes older adults as vital community members despite gaps they may experience in addressing the social determinants of health.

Many older adults reported feeling vulnerable or embarrassed when seeking assistance. To reduce these feelings, the model encourages the RAAN team members to build trust by spending significant one-on-one time with older adults during the needs assessments.

Lutheran Services in America partnered with [PHI](#), a national training, research, and policy organization, to train the RAAN Leads on person-centered and strengths-based approaches to engaging older adults. Any effort to provide a whole person approach must include the following:

- ➔ **Clear Introductions:** Providing a clear introduction to the RAAN and its objectives and expectations is critical. To avoid confusion or fear, the RAAN Leads communicate clearly that the goal of the collaboration is to empower older adults to live well in their homes.
- ➔ **Connection to the Community:** Discussions of local culture, events, or referrals to community partners help the RAAN Leaders build trust with older adults.

“I try to explore if there's some kind of connection I can make with them that's local. Like, did you get your tomato plants from Anchor's Greenhouse? So, they know I'm not from [the big city]. Or, do they know so and so who was in my class? Or I went to school with so and so ... just some kind of a local type of connection because it helps build trust.”

- ➔ **A Focus on Goals and Strengths:** The needs assessment allows the RAAN Leads to do more than just identify gaps in care. They can also use the assessment to understand the older adult's unique goals and strengths. For example, to better understand the individual, the RAAN Leads begin every assessment with strengths-based questions like, “How long have you lived in this community?” and “What brings you joy?” Traditional assessments typically focus only on asking older adults about their challenges, which can lead to feelings of embarrassment or shame.
- ➔ **Efficient Referrals:** To streamline the referral process and build the older adult's confidence in the program, the RAAN Leads come to assessments prepared with informational pamphlets and service applications. The RAAN Leads also leave behind an “action plan” outlining the next steps in connecting the older adult to services.



- ➔ **An Invitation to Contribute:** The RAAN model focuses on the strengths and value of older adults by inviting them to contribute to the RAAN program for the benefit of their neighbors and the larger community. In addition to the “Ambassador” roles previously discussed, older adults are invited to join community partners in providing their perspectives during monthly RAAN stakeholder meetings. The RAAN Leads also offer train-the-trainer roles to help older adults learn how to facilitate these gatherings.

“Instead of only asking “How can we help you?” we saw a tremendous response when we asked older adults, “How can YOU help us?”



**Coming Together: Aging in Rural America:  
Bill's Story** ➔

Watch Bill's video to learn more about one older adult's experience with RAAN.

## Advancing Equity and Engaging Diverse Populations

Rural communities are changing and rapidly diversifying. It is now estimated that one in five older adults in a rural community is non-white (Jensen, Leif, et al., 2020). This number is growing as more older adults who are new Americans or refugees immigrate to rural communities alongside family members seeking employment opportunities in agriculture and other industries. The Pew Charitable Trusts estimates that immigrants have accounted for 37% of the net new population growth in rural counties across the United States since 2003 (Mitchell, 2018).

This growth in the immigrant population makes it imperative to raise awareness about the RAAN's success in meeting the needs of diverse populations in rural communities. Several of the RAANs successfully assisted older adults and their families who recently moved to the community from another county, state, or country and needed additional support navigating the complexities of healthcare and social services in a new cultural context. The RAAN model has been successful with diverse communities for several reasons:

- ➔ **Broad Engagement:** The RAAN's whole community approach mobilizes the entire community and engages multicultural organizations as community partners.
- ➔ **Attention to Additional Needs:** The RAAN's whole person approach values the unique goals of diverse populations who may have additional needs, such as translation or legal assistance. These needs are not always identified in traditional social determinants of health assessments.
- ➔ **Cultural Competency:** Lutheran Services in America is an experienced leader of a diverse nationwide network of health and human service organizations, including refugee resettlement agencies. The organization sought additional training to help the RAAN team members develop cultural competency and disaggregate data by an older adult's race and time living in the community.

“The best advice I can give you is to know your community. Know where you’re going. [One county] has farming. So, if I’m going there, I have to be knowledgeable about the season, the weather, snow birds, all of those different things. Engaging in a way that is respectful and tactful. But I will not enter the community and put myself first ... I will go through somebody else to introduce me to that community, because that’s not the culture that I come from. I want to be respectful of how to approach them.”

“[Our RAAN] has translation services ... we have notaries. We have developed a wealth of knowledge to help facilitate their assimilation or integration, and we work on the social side to connect them to other people and get them involved in the community. And that’s been a lot of fun ... it’s been really rewarding to help those people and just point them in the right direction.”



**[Coming Together: Aging in Rural America: Marian's Story](#)** →

Watch Marian's video to learn more about one RAAN Lead's approach to engaging diverse communities.

# Conclusion

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The Rural Aging Action Network (RAAN) is an innovative and impactful model developed and led by Lutheran Services in America (LSA) to meet the unique needs of the growing number of older adults aging in rural communities.

Rural communities demand inclusive and creative solutions like the RAAN. For example, because rural communities lack infrastructure, the RAAN's whole community approach mobilizes entire communities to address gaps in care for older adults. Additionally, because older adults in rural communities are resilient, the RAAN's whole person approach focuses on building trust with older adults before sharing resources and assistance with them.

With a large and growing number of older adults aging in rural communities, rural-relevant solutions such as the RAAN are needed so older adults can age independently in the home and community of their choice.

One in four older adults currently lives in a rapidly changing rural community. Now is the time for aging services and community-based organizations to implement this unique solution as they seek to expand the availability of long-term services and supports in rural communities nationwide.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information or to partner with Lutheran Services in America Rural Aging Action Network, please contact Regan McManus at [rmcmanus@lutheranservices.org](mailto:rmcmanus@lutheranservices.org).

For more information about LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston, please contact Verena Cimarolli at [vcimarolli@leadingage.org](mailto:vcimarolli@leadingage.org).

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