



# **Sustaining Rural Independent Living Programs Through Innovative Grant Writing & Strategic Partnerships**

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# Stephanie M. Picazo, MS

- Founder & Executive Director, Advocates Consulting LLC
- PhD Student in Rehabilitation Counseling, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
- 9 yrs of experience in specializing in Pre-ETS, and inclusive workforce development
- Passionate about culturally responsive, person-centered transition services for young adults with disabilities.
- Research interest in focus on young adults with disabilities in the areas of employment, education, self-efficacy, support services, and long-term success.



# Dr. Lidia Fonseca, CRC

- **Executive Director** at Valley Association for Independent Living (VAIL) in South Texas
- **13 years of experience** in the Independent Living (IL) field
- Oversees **program development, management, and implementation** at VAIL
- Areas of Focus:
  - Emergency management
  - Resource development/Grant Writing
  - Employment services for people with disabilities
  - Leadership and advocacy training
- **President** of the Regional Transportation Advisory Panel (RTAP)
  - Focuses on accessible transportation in rural areas
- **Board Member & Secretary** of the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL)



# Purpose of the Session

- Empower rural IL programs with strategies to sustain services
- Explore tools for diversifying funding and strengthening proposals
- Build partnerships that enhance long-term sustainability

# Why This Topic Matters

- Rural IL programs face unique challenges: limited staff, geographic barriers, and funding gaps
- Data + lived experiences strengthen funding cases
- Partnerships expand service reach, build credibility, and align with APRIL's mission.



# Session Roadmap

- Challenges & Context
- Funding Strategies
- Grant Writing Tools
- Partnerships
- Research Evidence
- Interactive Activities
- Case Studies & Tools
- Wrap-Up

# Learning Outcomes

- Identify diverse funding opportunities
- Write winning grant proposals tailored to rural IL contexts
- Build and sustain effective partnerships
- Use data + stories to advocate for resources

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# Rural IL Context & Challenges

- 1 in 4 rural adults live with a disability (CDC, 2022).
- Rural residents with disabilities experience higher poverty rates, limited employment opportunities, and poorer health outcomes (Popkin et al., 2025).
- Centers for Independent Living (CILs) often cover multiple counties with limited staff/resources.
- Rural development success is directly linked to local participation and co-production of services. Participatory grant mechanisms have proven to activate communities that were previously passive or excluded from other funding (Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2021).
- Strengthening social capital through cooperative participation enhances both program reach and sustainability in rural areas (Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2021).

# Research Insight: Accessibility Gaps

- Geographic network analysis, rural residents face longer travel distances to access IL services (Johnson et al., 2021).
- Rural disability programs often excluded from federal datasets, "*invisible in data*" (Popkin et al., 2025).
- Result: Harder to make compelling grant justifications.

# Implication for Grants

- Combine quantitative data (census, CDC, VR agency data) + qualitative narratives (consumer stories, focus groups).
- Funders respond well to “data + lived experience” approaches.
- What to do when you don’t get funded?

# Funding Challenges for Rural Programs

- According to Stevens & Peikes (2006), 80% of community initiatives that received structured foundation support sustained operations beyond the initial grant cycle, largely due to early planning and diversified revenue streams.
- Sustainability increases when organizations establish local philanthropic support and maintain transparent governance frameworks (Stevens, B., & Peikes, D., 2006).

# Diversified Funding Sources

- **Federal:** ACL, RSA, USDA Rural Development, SAMHSA, HRSA.
- **State & Local:** County commissioners, community development block grants, school districts.
- **Foundations:** Local community foundations
- **Alternative:** Fee-for-service contracts, corporate sponsorships, crowdfunding, social enterprises.

# Becoming Grant Ready

- *"80% of grant success is planning, not writing (Ohionline, 2024).*
- Elements of readiness:
  - Documented needs with local data
  - Strategic plan alignment
  - Evaluation framework (logic model, outcomes, indicators)
  - Staff capacity & sustainability plan

# Writing Winning Proposals

- **Use storytelling:** rural challenges + success stories.
- Show measurable outcomes: employment rates, service reach, transportation access.
- Address equity and inclusion for underserved populations.
- Highlight innovative practices (telehealth, cross-sector partnerships).

# Research-Backed Strategies

- Collaborative proposals have higher award rates (GrantCorps, n.d.).
- Sustainability sections predict funder confidence (Wehman et al., 2018).
- Demonstrating cost-effectiveness is increasingly required by funders.
- Projects with **strong community participation, co-creation, and co-production** were more likely to sustain themselves and even expand after funding ended (Yu, Y., Appiah, et al., 2024).
- Integrated planning and collaboration across education, management, and local governance promote long-term viability of rural programs (Yu et al., 2024).

# Why Partnerships Matter

- Shared resources, credibility, and broader service reach.
- Funders increasingly require collaboration in proposals.
- Partnerships reduce duplication of services.
- Integrated rural development models emphasize that cross-sector partnerships between education, social services, and community leadership improve outcomes in employment, capacity building, and service access (Yu et al., 2024).
- Successful partnerships align with the “learning regional” and “triple-helix” frameworks that connect community, academia, and local government for innovation in rural sustainability.

# Partnership Ecosystem

- Local government (commissioners, mayors).
- Education (community colleges, adult ed).
- Healthcare (hospitals, health clinics).
- Workforce boards & VR agencies.
- Businesses & chambers of commerce.

# Research Evidence on Collaboration

## Key Findings

- Intersectoral collaboration enables organizations to address complex, multidimensional challenges more effectively than working independently.
- Successful partnerships often thrive when organizational differences are acknowledged and leveraged, rather than minimized.
- In rural contexts, place-based, cross-sector frameworks are especially critical for ensuring sustainability and impact.

Kim & Lee, 2025; Taylor et al., 2023; Lo et al., 2022

# What Makes Collaboration Work?

## Enablers Identified in Research

- Shared vision and strong, committed leadership
- Clear and consistent communication across sectors
- Resource sharing (funding, staff expertise, and data)
- Trust and effective governance structures

## Common Barriers

- Siloed or fragmented service systems
- Restrictive or competitive funding mechanisms
- Lack of accountability and measurable outcomes

Amri et al., 2022

# Collaboration & Nonprofits

- 75% of nonprofit collaborations report measurable positive outcomes (e.g., expanded services, increased funding, improved program outcomes).
- Community–academic partnerships strengthen grant writing, evaluation, and capacity building.
- Cross-sector collaboration enhances long-term sustainability and organizational credibility.

King et al., 2015; Nonprofit PRO, 2024

# IL Collaboration

## ■ **Case Study Insights**



- Intersectoral partnerships significantly improved supports for adults with disabilities by strengthening coordination across health, social service, and community agencies.
- Success was tied to shared goals, aligned funding streams, and long-term commitment.

- **Important Caution:** Partnerships are not a panacea misaligned collaborations may waste resources and hinder progress.

# Why Collaboration Matters for Rural IL Programs

- Expands service reach into remote and underserved communities.
- Strengthens grant proposals by demonstrating multi-agency buy-in.
- Builds sustainability beyond federal funding streams.
- Reinforces APRIL's mission of independence, inclusion, and community integration.

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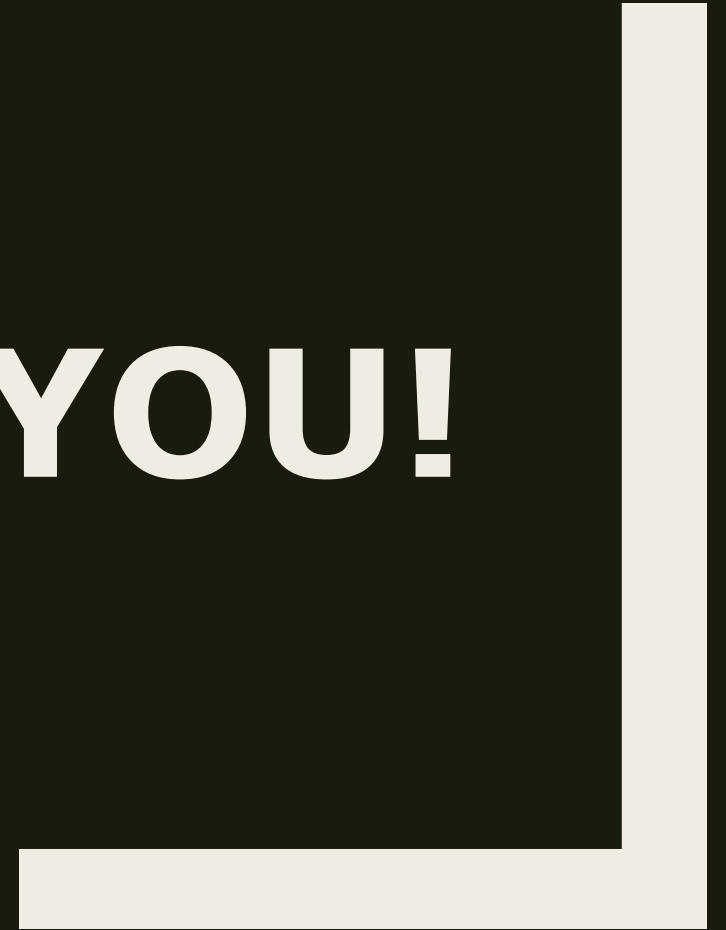


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# Key Takeaways

- Rural Independent Living (IL) programs encounter unique barriers such as limited funding, staffing shortages, and geographic isolation.
- Grants and strategic partnerships are essential tools to enhance long-term sustainability and service reach.
- Using local data and community stories strengthens proposals and demonstrates relevance to funders.
- Collaborative approaches multiply resources, credibility, and innovation capacity across rural networks.
- Research demonstrates that sustainability thrives through participatory grant design, early capacity building, strong leadership, and intersectoral collaboration (Stevens & Peikes, 2006; Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2024).

**THANK-YOU!**



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