



**National
Children's
Alliance®**

*The Force Behind
Children's Advocacy Centers*



Rural CAC Needs Assessment

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

May 2025

Project overview

National Children's Alliance (NCA) engaged Ivy.Ly Consulting to lead a comprehensive needs assessment process to identify and respond to the unique needs of rural CACs. This assessment aligns with NCA's Vision28 strategic plan and the strategic priority 'Awareness and Capacity Building'. Over a span of ten months, over 300 stakeholders were engaged in this needs assessment. Feedback was sought and provided from all aspects of the CAC ecosystem; rural Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs), state Chapters, and Victims of Child Abuse Act (VOCAA) partners. Based on insights from the field, the following takeaways provide a summary of the feedback and suggestions that NCA will utilize as part of our ongoing work with rural communities.

- Utilize the cross-cutting themes (below) to develop a roadmap for rural CACs;
- Engage with rural CACs by having their voice present across these cross-cutting strategies;
- Implement regular feedback gathering measures from rural audiences;
- Create unique communication strategies for rural CACs to expand access to existing resources.

Overall, there is much passion, commitment, and pride from CACs within rural communities. There was also a significant level of awareness and recognition for the role of NCA, Chapters, and VOCAA partners in the success of all CACs.

Project approach

In order to adequately and robustly complete the Rural CAC Need Assessment project, a range of stakeholders were engaged who could provide insights on CACs in rural communities. Ivy.Ly implemented the following tactics for each key audience:

Audience	Tactics	Definition
Rural CACs	• Survey • Focus Groups • Conference Presentation	Children's Advocacy Centers identified as rural as defined in Survey Strategy below.
Chapters	• Focus Group Discussion	NCA State Chapter Members.
Victims of Child Abuse Act (VOCAA) Partners	• Focus Group Discussion	NCA, the four Regional Children's Advocacy Centers: Midwest, Northeast, Southern, and Western; the National Children's Advocacy Center, the National Native Children's Trauma Center, the Native Child Advocacy Resource Center, and Zero Abuse Project.

The primary purpose of these activities was to engage CACs within rural communities as well as the key stakeholders who provide support, training, and technical assistance to rural CACs.

Survey Strategy

There were two primary audiences engaged:

- CACs who self-identified, via the NCA CAC census, as rural; and
- CACs who did not complete the CAC census and were identified by NCA using the Rural Health Information Hub's "[AM I RURAL](#)" tool.

The same survey was sent to the two above audiences during the period of 1/23/24 - 2/23/24. Over the course of the survey open dates, each audience received eight total reminder emails; six of these came from Ivy.Ly and two from NCA. Each time a reminder was sent, completion rates continued to climb.

The survey was sent to 448 representatives from rural CACs:

- CAC Census Responders (Self-identified): 387 people with a 75% open rate,
- CAC Census Non-Responders (NCA Identified/AM I RURAL Tool): 61 people with a 52% open rate.

The survey was completed and/or partially completed by 205 people, which is a 46% response rate.

Census Responders		
Region	Percent Who Fully Completed Survey	Percent Who Submitted Survey (Partial and Full)
Midwest	38%	50%
Northeast	30%	39%
Southern	35%	45%
Western	34%	51%
Census Non-Responders (NCA Identified)		
Region	Percent Who Completed Survey	Percent Who Submitted Survey (Partial and Full)
Midwest	8%	31%
Northeast	71%	71%
Southern	21%	24%
Western	17%	25%

It is important to note that:

- The 46% response rate is more than double the national average of 20% for online surveys.
- Some center representatives let us know that they completed the survey "on behalf" of multiple centers (ex: Accredited CAC that also has a satellite CAC or multiple sites), therefore, the response rate is more representative of the rural CACs than noted.
- Across both lists, representation across all regions were fairly similar. The 71% for the Northeast Census Non-Responders is based on a total number of seven invites and a total of five completions.

The needs assessment survey captured ideas from CACs within rural communities and organized them within the framework of NCA's strategic priorities. In order to do this, open-ended questions were utilized to encourage respondents to share as many of their ideas, suggestions, and examples as possible.

There were six cross-cutting themes that emerged from the survey data, which include:

- **Access to Resources and Impact on Services:** CACs within rural communities struggle with accessing resources (financial, human, or educational) and they feel the impact of these limitations in their service delivery.
- **Accreditation Resources and Support:** CACs within rural communities value accreditation but struggle with the requirements and the process of applying. Increased mentorship, support, and tools would improve the process and (potentially) the outcomes.
- **Community Awareness and Outreach:** As a result of their rural setting, CACs want to increase and improve awareness and outreach in their communities. There is an underlying belief that they could help more people if their community members knew about the center.
- **Hiring and Staffing:** Recruiting, retaining, and supporting the advancement of high quality staff is a major challenge for CACs within rural communities. The shortages of candidates and the turnover also impacts organizational sustainability.
- **Partnerships:** Partnerships of all shapes and sizes play an important role for CACs within rural communities. Many communities are forging strong, local networks of partners with schools, judges, health systems, and many more.
- **Training and Education:** CACs within rural communities would like to see training, education, and mentorship for staff and their governing bodies that is both accessible and affordable. This continuing education would support service delivery, impact, accreditation, and much more.

Focus group strategy

Following the needs assessment survey, focus groups were conducted with leaders from CACs within rural communities who expressed interest (via the survey) in providing further insights.

The focus groups each discussed the following:

- The six cross-cutting themes (from the survey analysis)
- Actionable ideas/solutions that the CAC ecosystem can provide to support CACs within rural communities
- The opportunity to prioritize actionable solutions

More than 100 people expressed interest, ultimately 48 individuals participated via eight focus groups that were offered.

The tables below represent the cross-cutting themes from field feedback. Actionable solutions are listed within each themed table and subsequently organized by the CAC stakeholders, including local CACs, Chapters, other VOCAA Partners, or NCA, that are best poised and equipped to address those needs.

As a reminder, these lists contain some suggestions that may already be available to CACs. An asterisk * is placed by those items that may already exist. Given that rural CACs have highly prioritized those items, this is an opportunity to examine whether these highly valued services need to be expanded or more effectively promoted to rural centers.

As part of the CAC Ecosystem, many of the actionable items can or will involve several of the key stakeholders. This creates an opportunity to activate multiple stakeholders to work together, combine resources, and work toward common goals to support rural communities.

Six Cross-Cutting Themes Identified by Rural CAC Leaders

Access to Resources and Impact on Services	Local CAC	State Chapters	Other VOCAA Partners	National Children's Alliance
Access to language and translation services	X	X		
Transportation support and partnerships	X	X		
Technical support and training on data management systems*		X	X	X
Advocacy efforts at the state level to support funding efforts**		X		X
Nationwide telehealth solutions for mental health and other services*			X	X

* This list contains some suggestions that may already exist or be available to CACs.

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Accreditation Resources and Support	Local CAC	State Chapters	Other VOCAA Partners	National Children's Alliance
Peer mentorship throughout the process	X	X		
Addressing challenges with medical and/or mental health providers participation in case review	X	X		
Provide education and support in understanding accreditation process, specifically with scoring checklist and process		X		X
Having more site reviewers with experience in rural CACs				X
Tools and templates that align with sample strategies and Standards*		X	X	

* This list contains some suggestions that may already exist or be available to CACs.

Community Awareness and Outreach	Local CAC	State Chapters	Other VOCAA Partners	National Children's Alliance
Hosting events to build relationships with local community leaders through outreach program	X	X		
Training on how to partner with schools to be able to educate the teacher community	X	X		
Provide media and social media campaigns and toolkits with images and messages tailored specifically for rural communities				X
Utilization of the 'rural' voice and image in public awareness campaigns as well as regular outreach in newsletters and materials	X	X	X	X
Targeted communication and promotion of NCA Engage with tutorials on how to find and use materials like manuals, approved messaging documents, PowerPoint presentations, etc.				X

Hiring and Staffing	Local CAC	State Chapters	Other VOCAA Partners	National Children's Alliance
Share creative ideas on (non-monetary) "benefits" that build a stronger organization, such as flexible schedule, jobshare, etc.	X			
Development of a leadership program that equips CAC leaders promoted from within the field. (Education and guidance were requested in the following areas: AI, fundraising**, outreach, HR, new resources, legal, data-driven decision making, leading without authority, leading effective meetings)		X	X	X
Workforce development with universities to create a staffing pathway for roles that can be challenging to fill such as medical and mental health	X	X	X	X
<i>Shared resources at a state or regional level (HR, finance, legal)</i>		X	X	

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Partnerships	Local CAC	State Chapters	Other VOCAA Partners	National Children's Alliance
Standardized resources (CAC 101) to train community partners	X	X		
Developing relationships with national organizations that support justice system and juvenile probation officers				X
Developing relationships and consistent training opportunities with the education community including administrators, teachers, nurses, counselors, staff personnel, and other school connected organizations like PTO, athletics, or clubs	X	X	X	
Developing relationships with national organizations of judges				X
Developing relationships with educators and system administrators as it relates to prevention	X	X		

Training and Education	Local CAC	State Chapters	Other VOCAA Partners	National Children's Alliance
Utilize virtual training opportunities through NCA, Zero Abuse Project, Regional CACs, NCAC, NCARC, Chapters, and other relevant entities such as universities, NCMEC, NCTSN, etc.*	X			
Utilize grant funding to expand the services and the service area of CACs in previously unserved or underserved communities, including rural, tribal, and frontier populations to bring training to rural communities and support MDT involvement*				X
Improved online/virtual training platforms	X	X	X	X
Training on Problematic Sexual Behavior (PSB)*		X	X	X
Training on prevention that would provide some consistent messaging and language		X	X	X
Use recorded trainings with CAC/MDT members*		X	X	X
Training on family dynamics for drug endangered/exposed children		X	X	X

* This list contains some suggestions that may already exist and are available for CACs.

The feedback from the rural CAC assessment surveys and focus groups was presented during NCA's annual Leadership Conference in June 2024. This session allowed participants to learn about the needs assessment process to date, the cross-cutting themes, and to provide their own additional input. The themes and actionable ideas were well received, with only a few additional suggestions related to Partnerships and Trainings added.

Chapter and VOCAA Partner Focus Group Discussions

The final stakeholder engagement strategy involved bringing all the information gained from the rural CAC needs assessment survey, focus groups, and conference presentation to Chapter and VOCAA partners to gain their thoughts and insights as key partners in providing training and technical assistance support to CACs in rural communities. We invited all Chapter directors to attend one (of two) virtual discussion sessions and all VOCAA partners to attend a virtual discussion session.

A total of 36 Chapters and 6 VOCAA partners participated. The focus of each discussion was to bring the leaders up to speed on what had been accomplished to date and then to present each of the six themes, the actionable items, and to learn the following from them:

- What are ideas they have for how the CAC ecosystem can support the ideas within each theme?
- What are examples of how they have seen success in these areas?
- Has anything been requested from them that might support this theme?
- Are they currently implementing anything that others in the field might benefit from learning about?

Universally, there was alignment that the presented themes were an accurate reflection of their experiences working within rural communities. Based on their state makeup, some leaders vocalized best practices and new ideas with the hopes of building an even stronger CAC ecosystem. These included:

- Meeting the rural communities where they are. Driving to rural communities, offering in-person meetings at their locations.
- Collaborating and partnering with their local CACs on trainings. Chapter leaders can lead the charge by forging relationships and then working with the local CACs to bridge the next steps.

- Creating regular avenues of communication that are both informative to CACs within rural communities but also responsive to their needs.
- Developing statewide and/or shared resources such as language translation services, legal support, human resources, data management systems, and/or shared MDT roles across CACs.
- Developing consistent messaging and campaigns to use across the ecosystem - especially for *April, Child Abuse Awareness Month*; specifically using same terms and language across the ecosystem.
- Focusing on engagement strategies with local and rural CACs especially for mental health and medical providers.
- Exploring/utilizing resources of other federal partnerships - such as Indian Health Services and Rural Health Information resources and forging prosecutor buyin.

In addition to the above tactics to gain feedback on the needs within rural communities, there were additional opportunities for CACs to provide insights related to sustainability efforts. This opportunity was possible via multiple virtual discussions that were held in Fall 2024 across all CACs, with a session offered specifically for rural CACs.

The final phase of the Rural CAC Needs Assessment concluded with a Rural CAC Convening which was held in Bozeman, Montana on October 23-24, 2024. Over 100 leaders from Rural CAC communities participated in peer learning and networking that focused on problem solving across the six identified themes determined throughout the assessment.

Investment in understanding the unique needs of CACs within rural communities is the first step in ensuring that the CAC ecosystem is stronger, more responsive, and more coordinated in meeting the needs of CACs within rural communities. The following recommendations have been informed by the field and, of course, the field will continue to be involved in the development and implementation of subsequent activities.

Recommendations

These recommendations set up the entire ecosystem to help CACs within rural communities thrive, by leveraging NCA's leadership, staff structure, and strategically created paths as well as strong, active, and connected Chapters and interconnected and collaborative VOCAA partners.

- First, ensure rural CACs are aware of what already exists. The CAC ecosystem, composed of NCA, VOCAA Partners, and Chapters, have developed a number of resources to support CAC growth and development. However, given staff turnover and bandwidth, there may be a lack of awareness about these existing tools, either where to find them, how to use them, etc. The more that the CAC ecosystem can work together to educate and support CACs at every level, the more likely these resources and tools will be utilized.
- Second, NCA is committed to developing opportunities for CACs within rural communities to collaborate and support each other. Whether these are networking events at existing conferences or more formalized work streams like collaborative work groups, empowering CACs within rural communities will ensure new initiatives and investments have the power and voice of the field as the foundation.
- Third, offer opportunities for more personalized support for accreditation at the NCA, Chapter, and/or site reviewer levels. Work closely with CACs within rural communities to understand their unique situations and challenges. There may be an opportunity to assure that these challenges can be addressed with creative solutions that help rural CACs meet the Standards prior to site visits, and/or to build their confidence prior to the submission of their application, recognizing NCA as an ally in their success in meeting the Standards. Additional opportunities to support CACs within rural communities may include:
 - Collaborate with and provide training and technical assistance for Chapters to increase state level and peer support to CACs.
 - Understanding the rural experience/expertise of site reviewers and then strategically assigning/pairing these reviewers with rural sites to improve the accreditation process of CACs within rural communities.
 - Providing additional education on scoring and the review process. Rural CACs could benefit from communications that help to demystify the scoring and feedback concepts and encourage CACs to enlist the assistance of the Accreditation and Member Services Departments, especially in situations where they are struggling to find a creative solution to meet a particular Component or an overall Standard.

- Next, engage the CAC ecosystem to enhance and implement new practices that would make accessing and sharing continuing education opportunities easier. This can be done by:
 - Utilizing key roles like the Senior Program Associate for Special Projects for Membership and Chapter TTA Staff to highlight and circulate new and/or relevant trainings to enhance exposure and awareness of what is available.
 - Continue to record and post NCA trainings on NCA Engage.
 - Asking training partners to both record training and offer virtual training when possible, so that staff at CACs within rural communities have improved access.

Note that the rural CAC needs assessment survey was launched in January 2024 and has run concurrently with the implementation of NCA's strategic plan, Vision28. The Rural CAC Needs Assessment has reinforced the direction and efforts of Vision28 across many domains, specifically with a focus on meeting the unique needs of rural CACs. NCA has been making thoughtful, strategic investments in several areas that will have positive nationwide benefits to CACs and Chapters for years to come.

- Correspondingly, a few additional noteworthy indicators that were identified in the Rural CAC Needs Assessment are in the areas of developing national partnerships, increasing advocacy efforts at the state level to increase state budget appropriations**, and in leading workforce development and career pathway needs across the ecosystem. It is reassuring to see there was alignment in priorities from stakeholders across the CAC ecosystem through NCA's strategic plan and the rural CAC assessment.

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- NCA has been developing thoughtful and strategic national partnerships especially in its work within the judicial system. Creating opportunities to share and reflect on how these relationships can be used to impact and benefit rural communities and local CACs could create deeper ties to the national work going forward.
- Over the past few years, NCA's government affairs department has provided many State Chapters with the materials they need to educate policy makers on the importance of CACs. The results of these efforts have shown a significant impact on increasing state allocations in either existing or new funding sources. NCA is committed to supporting ongoing and new efforts to build on relationships that support state specific revenue streams, all while building on federal and national partnerships to backfill and lift other CAC sustainability needs. Increasing education and tying sustainability efforts at the national level to state level and state level to local levels would benefit rural CACs and communities in being more connected to this work.

- Lastly, workforce development and career pathway staffing concerns have consistently been identified and substantiated by the field during NCA's strategic planning process, the NCA Leadership and Workforce Development Project, and here again in the Rural Needs Assessment. These issues are sizable, entrenched in the professions beyond the CAC ecosystem and are magnified in rural communities. While there are no short-term fixes, NCA recognizes the importance of addressing and collaborating on various aspects of workforce development solutions across the CAC ecosystem, particularly in the areas of medical and mental health. Workforce development efforts are complex and require long-term strategies. NCA is actively working in partnership with CACs, Chapters, VOCAA Partners, and other national stakeholders to strengthen the CAC workforce by building specific career pathways, working with academic institutions, and leading/publishing compensation reports.
 - Leadership and Workforce Development Project is working on creating Leadership training opportunities and creating career pathways to increase the availability of mental health clinicians and medical providers working in and with CACs.

Overall, this comprehensive, field-informed assessment is a critical first step in identifying and addressing the needs within rural communities. Reinforcement to the field on the value of the network, relationships, and peers is critical. Collaboration and conversation within and amongst all the stakeholders is of utmost importance and will enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Finally, supporting CACs as they ask for what they need will nurture stronger, more proactive local leaders while strengthening the movement from the ground up.



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