Melissa Russom
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Big impact, small budget: grassroots marketing for rural housing

NOTES FROM PRESENTATION DELIVERED AT RURAL HOUSING COALITION OF NYS ANNUAL CONFERENCE, OCT 2, 2026

The goal: move from notifying to engaging

Notifying is a one-way announcement: "Here's our program, apply here." It can feel cold or easily forgettable. Engaging is consistent presence and genuine relationships, both with the people you serve and with the other organizations and agencies already serving them.

The goal: people come to you proactively, and end up extending the reach of your marketing.

Three foundation channels

1. Website

The go-to source for information about who you are, what you offer, and why your audience should trust you.

Why a website?

- **Legitimacy:** a professional web presence signals a credible, established organization
- **Examples of your work:** past projects and press in one place; useful for grant applications too
- **FAQs:** reduce the one-on-one calls and emails answering the same questions
- **Leadership:** listing your staff and board supports transparency, especially with funders
- **You control it:** your content is permanent and independent of any platform's policies or algorithm
- **Search:** people looking for housing help can find you

The Rural Housing Coalition can help you build a website on WordPress, a platform that's easy to maintain yourself, whether you're adding a news item, updating the text on a page, or updating a photo.

Examples of websites built with the Coalition

- Veterans & Community Housing Coalition (vchcny.org) | Galvan Housing Resources (galvanhousingresources.org)

2. Newsletter

Regular communication that helps your audience better understand the value you bring to the community, and to them. A newsletter doesn't *need* to be sent monthly: send it when you have something to share. Aiming for bi-monthly or quarterly is a good place to start.

Tool	Cost	Best for
Outlook / Gmail	Free (you already have it)	Starting today: BCC your list, and move to a platform once you outgrow it
LinkedIn Newsletter	Free	Organizations already active on LinkedIn: no new tool or list
Mailchimp	Free up to 250 contacts / 500 emails per month; paid plans from about $13/month	Building your own list that you fully own and control
Constant Contact	No free tier; plans from about $12/month	Built-in event and RSVP tools alongside the newsletter

Plans and pricing change, so confirm current details on each tool's site.

3. Community partners

Nonprofit organizations that also serve your community and already have their trust. Examples include libraries, food pantries and food banks, after-school programs, religious groups, and job training organizations.

Natural opportunities to cooperate

- You serve the same community and have valuable, non-competing services to offer to them.
- You can learn from one another: what kind of outreach works best, what new challenge just popped up that affects the people you serve, and so on.
- You can easily meet each other at community events or through direct outreach.
- Introductions and warm hand-offs from one service provider to another are more likely to end in a meaningful connection.
- More experts in the community can share information about the services you offer.

⭐Organizations are always looking for content for their newsletters, so ask if they're open to sharing your updates, and offer to share theirs.

Borrow and share content with community partners

You're already trying to reach the same people, and sharing content is the fastest way to reach them together.

- **Share partner info in your newsletter:** a standing "Community Corner" section makes this effortless every issue
- **Ask to be included in their newsletter:** their audience, at no cost to you (often the highest-impact option)
- **Leave brochures at their site,** and offer to display theirs at yours
- **Reshare and comment on each other's social posts:** costs nothing, keeps both feeds active
- **Co-host or table at each other's events:** an info session, an open house, a tabling day

Multi-sector opportunities: organizations that could take partnership a step deeper

These organizations may need you as a partner, since housing insecurity affects their work too. Many of these relationships already have a foundation, for example from the DSRIP era.

Healthcare: housing is healthcare

Social Care Networks

What it is. Nine regional networks screen Medicaid members for unmet needs, including housing, and connect them to services. The NYS Department of Health's Social Care Networks page explains the program.

- 9 regional networks statewide
- 1M+ Medicaid members screened (June 2026)
- Current 1115 waiver funding runs through March 2027

How you fit. Contact your local Social Care Network to see whether it needs additional capacity to address housing needs. Even if it's too late for this round of programming, these are good organizations to be connected to. The state's SCN page is a good starting point for finding each region's lead entity.

Key things to know

- Screening picked up significantly last spring and summer, so networks may now be looking for partners who can help meet the housing needs that were identified.
- The current funding cycle runs through March 2027, so it's worth reaching out soon.
- Relationships built now can continue beyond this funding cycle.

- This program is separate from the H.R.1 changes (also known as the “One Big Beautiful bill”), which affect hospital financing rather than Social Care Networks.

Rural Health Transformation Program

What it is. A federal program that funds rural hospitals and clinical providers for health system improvements. New York has received its first major award, with more expected to follow. The NYS Department of Health’s Transforming Rural Healthcare page has program details.

$212M awarded to New York State, including $76 million for partnerships and care coordination.

How you fit. You won’t apply directly; health systems and coalitions are the applicants. Funded projects must name community partners, so connect with health leaders to position yourself as a community-based organization that can address unmet social needs.

Key things to know. Advocacy is underway for a dedicated CBO capacity fund, since the current framework routes money to hospitals and health systems rather than to CBOs directly. The outcome is unresolved and worth watching.

Schools

Schools already see housing insecurity every day, so you’d be helping with a challenge they already have. Every NY school district must designate a McKinney-Vento liaison who helps students in temporary housing enroll and stay in school, even without the documents usually required.

Schools are also a hub for a surprising number of social needs, not just education. Counselors and other staff are already used to connecting families with outside resources, so they’re likely to welcome knowing what you offer and to share your information when the right situation comes up:

- **Housing:** the McKinney-Vento liaison, required in every NY school district. Find yours in the statewide liaison directory.
- **Food insecurity:** Bountiful Backpack programs
- **Mental health:** in-school counseling
- **Medical care:** school-based health clinics (e.g. Bassett Healthcare, Central NY)
- **Family support:** immigration support, clothing closets, translation, referrals

To learn more about the liaison role, see the NYS-TEACHS liaison overview.

County offices

These offices become another set of hands pointing people your way:

- County Supervisors
- Dept. of Social Services
- Dept. of Health
- Office for the Aging
- Dept. of Mental Health
- Youth Services
- And others

Additional channels

Social media

Awareness, interactions, and borrowing audiences.

	Facebook / Instagram	LinkedIn
Best for	Engaging your community directly	Networking with other organizations and professionals
Audience	Community members, families, local supporters	Nonprofits, funders, county and healthcare partners
How to engage	Reply to comments, tag local partners, and join local community groups: post and comment there too	Engage with their posts: like, comment, reshare

Post ideas, from official to casual

- **Program announcements:** your baseline, the "immediate" content
- **Staff and volunteer spotlights:** builds trust; volunteer posts can double as recruitment
- **Before-and-afters:** concrete proof of impact
- **Just plain entertaining or catchy** (e.g., beautiful foliage outside your office): catches attention
- **Sharing other organizations' posts:** free content that reinforces partner relationships

Sample posts

"We're excited to see our latest project get started this week: structural improvements that will bring a home up to code and reduce the homeowners' energy bills."

"We can't do it alone! We're so grateful to have incredible community partners, like @ABC Construction, who just finished the 5th home built this year through a Community Development Block Grant."

Lighter lifts and immediate actions

Brochures & flyers

Supermarkets, Stewart's, and libraries are good places to leave them. The Coalition can help produce these for partners.

Local media

Radio stations and newspapers are outlets worth approaching directly, and many small organizations overlook them. A press release, a short written announcement, is how you reach both at once: you write it once and send it to whichever outlets you want covering the story. Be sure to follow-up after you send your initial message.

Google Business Profile

- Shows up on Search and Maps: hours, photos, and reviews
- It's free, and nonprofits are eligible
- No public office? List it as a service-area business instead
- Requires verification before it goes live

Set-up instructions are in Google's Business Profile Help.

Email signature line

Every email your staff sends already reaches someone, so a single added line turns routine email into free, low-effort outreach. Keep it simple so you don't add unnecessary bulk to your emails. For example:

- Grant open: "Applications open: [link]" | No grant open: "Be the first to know — join our mailing list: [link]"

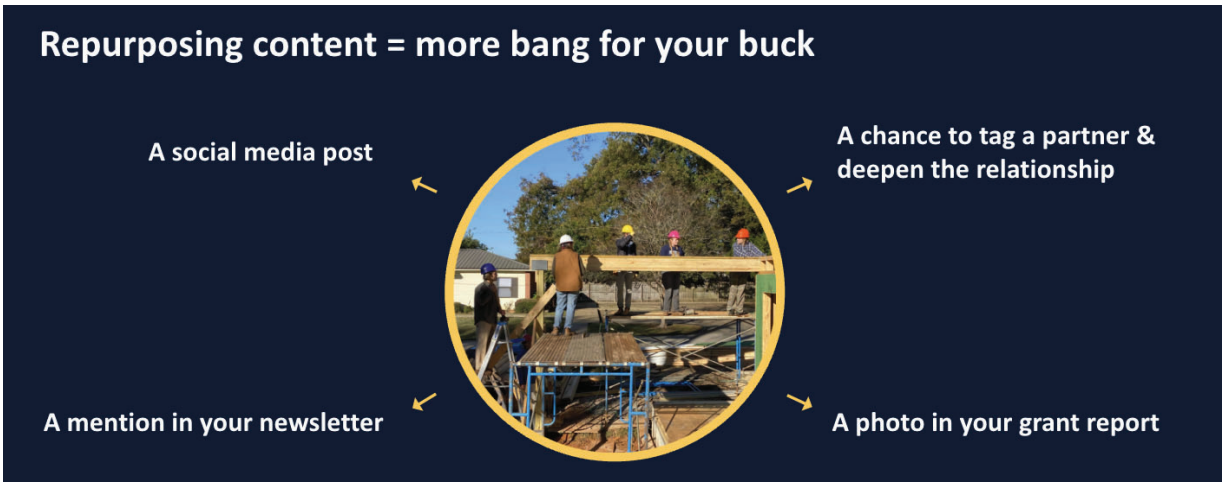
A note on AI: what it's good for

Wondering if AI can help? It's useful for a first draft, but keep your own voice in the final pass.

Task	How AI helps
Press releases	Great: structured, formal tone is what these tools do well
Newsletter articles	Good: a solid draft, but add your own specifics and voice
Proofreading / editing	Great: catch typos, tighten language, check tone
Flyer layout ideas	Good: can suggest structure, though it's not a designer
Flyer / social images	Real photos tend to work better: AI images can read as generic
Social media posts	Less of a fit: this channel runs on personal, human warmth

⭐ Reuse everything: get more from each piece of content

Most people won't see a message the first time, so it helps to share an event, activity, or noteworthy item more than once.



Next steps: where to start

Opportunities for quick wins. Pick one to try next week.

1. Reach out to one community partner: a coffee date, or just an email intro
2. Identify your school's McKinney-Vento contact and introduce yourself. Start with the statewide liaison directory.
3. Find your regional Social Care Network's lead entity and ask about partnering. Start with the NYS Department of Health's Social Care Networks page.
4. Claim or update your Google Business Profile
5. Add a line to your email signature: a grant link, or "join our mailing list"
6. Send your first newsletter, even from Outlook or Gmail
7. Post once on a platform you're already using