

Vermont RETAIN Finds New Way to Reach People in Rural Areas

Spring 2024 RETAIN Success Story

Reaching people in rural areas is a challenge for any nonprofit or public services program. The Vermont RETAIN team looked beyond traditional outreach methods to find a digital platform that rural Vermonters actively use and trust. Vermont RETAIN used that platform to tailor its message and saw an increase in the number of people completing its screening questionnaire and enrolling in RETAIN.

Background

Front Porch Forum (FPF) is a service that hosts regional networks of online neighborhood forums in Vermont. It is widely used across the state, including in rural areas.

Challenge

Vermont RETAIN has been increasing awareness of its program through several outreach activities, including placing posters in local gathering locations, such as grocery stores, libraries, and community centers, as well as health-care clinics. People visiting these locations see the posters and can scan a code with their phones to complete the screening questionnaire. This can be an inexpensive and effective way to raise awareness about a program.

However, 65% of Vermonters live in rural areas, where there are not as many large gathering locations. In addition, people who live in rural locations may face challenges accessing transportation, and there are few options for health-care providers. These factors limit the effectiveness of poster campaigns and health-care clinic outreach in these areas. The media environment has also become more fractured and global in the age of social media. Recruiting and enrolling participants has become a bigger challenge as audiences move away from traditional media sources.



Challenge-Action-Results

Challenge: Reaching Vermonters in rural areas is especially challenging because their options for care, transportation, and services may be limited.



Action: The Vermont RETAIN team advertised on Front Porch Forum, a service that hosts regional networks of online neighborhood forums in Vermont and some of New York.

Results: The ad contributed to an increase in the number of people completing the Vermont RETAIN screening questionnaire and enrolling in the program.

Actions

The Vermont RETAIN team needed to think outside the box to reach people in remote and rural areas. They took the following actions:

Reach People Where They Are. The Vermont RETAIN team identified FPF as a localized social media platform that was popular among Vermonters, especially those in rural areas—exactly the people they were not reaching through other efforts, like poster campaigns. They decided that advertising on this platform was the best way to target the areas they needed to reach.

Craft Your Message Appropriately. Vermonters, especially those in rural areas, can be hesitant to seek out needed services due to the incorrect belief that they might become a burden or “use up” services someone else might need more. FPF allowed the Vermont RETAIN team to focus their message to combat these beliefs. Carefully crafting their call to action and linking directly to the screening questionnaire (rather than to the Vermont RETAIN website) helped to drive responses.

Track Your Results. Vermont RETAIN created a unique link that allowed it to track who was coming to the screener from the ad. This let Vermont RETAIN see beyond the analytics provided by FPF and better measure the effectiveness of the campaign.

RESULTS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The ad proved successful, contributing to an increase in the number of people completing the Vermont RETAIN screening questionnaire and enrolling in the program. Overall, the campaign showed the following results:

- One hundred and thirty potential participants completed the screenings because of FPF.
- Of the 130 potential participants, 120 were eligible for Vermont RETAIN and 41 ultimately enrolled. This meant that 32% of screeners received through FPF were eligible and enrolled.
- The quick email campaign gained 599,202 impressions without Vermont RETAIN needing to build a contact list or develop an entire campaign.
- The ad was displayed to people more than 19,000 times in the rural, difficult-to-reach Northeast Kingdom area. That region includes St. Albans, St. Johnsbury, and Newport.
- Vermont RETAIN saw a 55% increase in total screeners during the time the FPF ad was running. The Vermont RETAIN team had not implemented any other new outreach or enrollment initiatives during the same time frame.



Vermont is participating in RETAIN (Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network) to build connections and improve coordination among employers, health-care providers, and other key parties to help newly injured and ill workers stay in the workforce. The state Department of Labor's Division of Workers' Compensation and Safety, in coordination with several partners, leads Vermont RETAIN. The US Department of Labor, in collaboration with the Social Security Administration, sponsors RETAIN.

This document was prepared for the US Department of Labor (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy and Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network (RETAIN) state grantees, by the American Institutes for Research under DOL Contract Number 1605DC-18-F-00429. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of the same by the US Government.