

CHALLENGES OF SCOUTING IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS



**THE CHALLENGES OF SCOUTING
IN RURAL AND REMOTE
AREAS**

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Introduction

Scouting is not a cookie cutter program. Sir Robert Baden Powell said in his "Aids to Scoutmastership" published in 1919, "What suites one particular troop or one kind of boy, in one kind of place, will not suite another within a mile of it, much less those scattered over the world and existing under totally different conditions".

This was true in scouting from the beginning, and still holds true today. The programs that work well in your more populated suburban environments may have little success in your more rural communities. In order to have a successful scouting program in the rural and remote areas, you have to learn to think outside the box and adapt to your program to a specific area.

In today's world where urban sprawl has slowly eaten away at what once was considered rural areas, the ideas of what constitutes "rural" has changed. Today there is a great variety of rural areas. Some are well established high growth areas that will support the conventional methods of scouting. Some are well removed from anything that would be considered urban. The areas that pose the greatest challenges to the normal scouting operations are those areas characterized by poverty or isolation from urban areas.

In this paper, I will address several areas that pose the greatest challenges to your rural scouting units today. These areas have been identified both through personal

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experience and through consultation with scouters that operate in what would be considered rural or remote areas. Over the past 30 years, I have volunteered as a scout leader in some very remote areas. During that time, I have gained lots of first-hand knowledge of the challenges that face unit leaders in those areas as well as some of the solutions to those problems. While the challenges can be many, I will address what I consider to be the most prevalent.

- Program cost (registration, uniforms, equipment)
- Distance (distance to council, distance to activities, distance to meetings)
- Community Support
- Limited resources for recruiting
- Communications
- Fundraisers
- Support from Professional Staff
- Schools
- Novelty of scouting activities
- Lone Scout Programs
- Neighborhood Patrols

PROGRAM COST: As with everything else, the cost of scouting has continued to rise. When you combine the cost of scouting with the increased cost of food, fuel and living expenses, it is not hard to envision scouting getting priced out of business. When you add in the additional factor of distance that your rural scouting units deal with, those

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cost are multiplied. In the rural communities, the vendors for your daily living necessities have overhead that may far exceed the overhead of your urban vendors. The cost of fuel just to get the product to the store is higher which causes the cost of goods to rise. Those cost are passed along to the family. That added cost cuts into the money available to a family for activities such as scouting.

In the not so distance past, a family could register several kids in scouting for under \$100. Those days are long gone. Your average family now has to really weigh the cost of the program to benefit received. For a family that has several scout age kids, the cost can be an obstacle that stops a family from joining the scouting program. When you add in the cost of uniforms and books and equipment, you are asking a family to make a sizable investment up front.

When you add the distance multiplier (the distance the families are required to travel to obtain some of the supplies and uniforms), the cost can be much higher. For a family that lives 75 miles away from the scout shop, you are talking about a good size time and fuel investment.

Some things cannot be controlled at the local level. The cost of registration is something that the unit does not control. The cost of uniforms is not controlled at the unit level. Both of these costs have a major impact on the unit quality. The cost of registration is a large deciding factor in the size of a unit. The cost of uniforms is a large deciding factor on the quality of the program. The uniform is part of the methods of scouting. If the cost of the uniform keeps a scout from enjoying that part of the program, it needs to be addressed.

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As unit leaders, we can try to fundraise to help offset those cost. Unfortunately, a unit's budget is often determined by how much disposable income a unit leader has. While the generosity of the scouting community is well known, it is not fair or realistic to expect a unit leader to continually cover the cost of the program. A successful unit fundraiser can help build a buffer that will help the families offset the cost if needed. While this is not a new concept, it does have added challenges. I will cover some of those challenges later in fundraising section.

As a unit commissioner that serves the remote areas, there are several suggestions that could be made to help offset the cost. The most practical would be teaching the units how to pool their resources. Have the scout shop make a current list of uniform and material prices. Break those cost down into what is required and what is suggested for a new scout. Help the units compile a list of all the needed uniforms and supplies. With that list in hand, one person could make the long trip for the unit.

If a district has enough rural units, it may be possible to work out an agreement with the scout shop to set up a uniform/supply sale at a central location. While it does take some effort by the district and council staff, it is a great help to the smaller units.

Another helpful suggestion for your smaller more rural units is to set up a uniform closet. These uniforms can be obtained from unit members that are no longer involved in scouting or from other units in the district that may have uniforms to pass along. A unit commissioner can help with this by helping to spread the word to other commissioners. One thing that never changes, scouts are always happy to help a fellow scout.

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Geographical Challenges: A recent trend in scouting has been to combine councils and realign districts. With those changes, some councils and districts have grown.

When the councils spread out, you are naturally going to gain more units that are farther away from the council office. Those increases in size do not always come with an increase in staff. When you ask the District Executives (DE's) to cover more area, most times, it's the units the greatest distance from the main office that suffer.

This is not necessarily the fault of the professionals. They still have the same requirements and duties. They still have the same meetings they must attend and the same deadlines they must meet. When you pair this with the fact that in most cases, the council offices are located in major metropolitan areas. In those larger cities and population centers, you will find the majority of the units within the council. For a DE that is serving 15 units with only a very small number of those units in remote or rural locations, it is just natural for the DE to spend the majority of their time with the majority of their units.

When the DE falls behind, they often rely on the district commissioners to help them. Even with the additional help, the rural units often feel underrepresented. While it is true the workload remains the same for the DE's, the requirements for the units also remain the same. The recharterers still have to be completed, the applications still need to be delivered to the scout office and the advancement reports still need to be completed. The only change for the unit could be the drive is a little longer.

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Community Support: When we think of community support in scouting, we do not normally consider this to be a challenge area. Some things have changed over the years however and scouting is no longer welcome in all communities. In smaller towns and tighter communities, the changes that scouting has made in an attempt to be more inclusive have actually had the opposite effect. Where once you could find scouting units sponsored by the local community churches, you now have churches that have made the choice to disassociate with scouting. In a larger more urban environment, this causes less of a problem because there will always be another organization that would be willing to charter a scouting unit. In the smaller rural communities, those options are limited at best. If the units are lucky, they may find a group that will allow them to use the facilities for meetings but will not charter a unit. In small town America, the values from the scouting movement of old are still widely observed. The changes that have been made will take some time and effort from the local scouts to win back the support scouting once enjoyed.

Limited resources for recruiting: I believe this may be one of the biggest challenges facing scouting units in the rural areas of the country. In your urban areas, a scout unit has a large pool to draw from when trying to recruit new members. If you plan to get 10 new members from school A, but you only recruit 6 you go on to school B and try again. In a rural community, in most cases there is only one school. If you don't get the numbers, you are looking for, your options are very limited. Just about anything the

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units do to try and find more scouts will meet with the same results because you are still recruiting from the same pool of people, just in a different location.

Knowing the resources are already limited, if you add an additional challenge to the mix, it becomes almost impossible. In many school districts throughout the country, the school districts have stopped letting the scouts into the schools to talk to the students. In your urban environments, if the public schools will not work with the scouts, those districts and units may still have the option of working with private schools. In the rural districts, this is very rare. Most small rural communities do not have private schools. In cases where the school system will not work with the scouts, units are limited to word of mouth and placing advertisement around the community in an attempt gain new scouts. These methods do not get the best results.

If a unit asks for help from the council, the council will usually fall back to the tried-and-true methods that work in the larger population areas but not so well in the rural areas. This can be very frustrating for the unit leadership. Many unit ideas are shot down before they ever get tried, because the council will not support the efforts. It is not uncommon for units to fold because they can not get the new members to stay active.

Communications: Some things we take for granted living in the United States. One of those things is the ability to stay connected 100 percent of the time. Most people have a cell phone at hand with the world at our fingertips. What happens when that ability goes away. Believe it or not, there are still places in our country that don't have great cell phone service and little to no internet service. I have been the scoutmaster of

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units that the scouts did not have internet in the home and no cell service. It is very difficult to keep families engaged in the unit activities when you are limited to face-to-face communications. If you are on a troop campout and have an emergency that requires contacting a parent, you may be required to send someone to the home to make contact. Last minute changes are almost impossible without good communication options. During recruiting efforts, one of the best ways to reach the families is through the school email system. If the school is willing to send out the school night information to the parents, you may have a large segment of the school population that will not get the information in a timely manner.

Travel in those areas can also be difficult. When you don't have cell service, there is a good chance you will not have GPS service. Several years back, as a Scoutmaster of a troop in a very rural area, I held a recognition program and invited several members of the council staff to attend. On the day of the program, none of the council officials arrived. It was later determined that they all got lost when the GPS on their phones stopped working when the signal was lost. The sad part of the story is the realization the council staff had no idea where this community was located. The troop had been an active unit in the council for 30 years. The unit leadership had always been able to function without the council or district staff help. The unit leaders were always willing to make the necessary trips to the council office or willing to meet the district staff in more convenient locations. The council and district staff had not been into the community for many years. With the staff turnover, nobody in the current council or district staff had ever been to the community. Incidents like this drive home to the units exactly how isolated the units can be.

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Fundraising: As with most organizations, fundraising is a necessary evil. Scouting is no different. There are several major fundraising activities each year. We sell popcorn and camp cards at the troop level, and we have the Friends of Scouting Campaign at the council level. In addition to those activities, many troops hold additional fundraising activities to help with local troop activities.

Every unit has challenges in fundraising. In rural areas, there are many unique challenges. In smaller population areas, you do not have the opportunity to spread the request for funds over a larger number of people. In a rural community that has only one school, scouting is competing with all the other activities such as band, sports, drama, judo, girl scouts and countless others for the limited funds. It is not uncommon to have every kid in the school involved in fundraising activities at the same time. It does not take long for the well to go dry.

While the camp cards may work well in larger communities that have all businesses offered on the card, they do not sell well in more rural areas that do not have the business base necessary to make the purchase worth the price. Some cards will sell just because people want to help a scout. If the card has no local business connection, the sales will be limited. Some councils will have different cards for different locations around the council. That is helpful to a point but only if the business base is present and willing to participate.

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Support from Professional Staff: It is no secret that Scouting has a hard time keeping professional staff. In some areas, District Executives change rapidly. I have been in Districts that had 4 DE changes in one year. It is hard to gain any real local knowledge in that short a time.

Professional Scouters get into the scouting programs because they want to serve youth. What many fail to realize is that is just a small part of the job. The fundraising requirements are a huge part of the job. Spring and fall recruiting are another huge part of the mission. As should be expected, the larger population areas take up most of the time and resources for the council and districts. When your job performance is tied to how many new scouts are recruited and how much money is raised in your district for the Friends of Scouting campaign, it is understandable that the DE's work the larger areas first. This leaves a large part of the recruitment process to the unit volunteers. There is no doubt that the unit volunteers are amazing, they are not always the best choice to lead these programs. Many small units struggle to keep enough scouts to stay active. When these units ask for help, they are not always provided with the support they need. This whole process can be very stressful for the units and districts alike. While no scouter wants to see a unit fold, sometimes as commissioners, we must be the voice of reason. The Unit Commissioner is often called the unit's friend. Sometimes the best thing a friend can do is listen and be the go between for the units and the council. There is no intent to slight the rural areas. We are all aware of the number of hours in a day and the large workload for scouting professionals. When the struggling units are

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two hours away from the council office, those units will fall to the back of the line out of necessity.

Schools: Schools are not unique to rural areas. The number of schools in the rural areas is a little different. In many rural counties, there is only one school. One primary school, one middle school and one high school. In some cases, those schools are combined.

In recent years, scouting has had a problem with the public schools allowing the scouting professionals into the schools to talk to the kids. For some reason, the school districts decided to cut the access. We all know that “Boy Talks” was a key part of the scout recruiting process. When the talks went away, so did the new scouts. In urban areas, there are schools outside the public-school systems that units may be able to fall back on for new membership. Those options do not exist in the rural areas. In an urban area, a troop may be able to put up a sign saying, “Scouts meet here”. That sign may be seen by thousands of people passing by every day. In a rural area, that same sign may not be seen by anyone for days. I was the scoutmaster of a troop that was sponsored by a small country church. Our meeting location was not on a major traveled road. A sign would have been completely worthless.

While I believe access to the schools has slightly improved, it is still dependent on the school administration. One way to keep fostering those relationships is through Eagle Scout Projects at the schools. When the school administration can see the benefits of the scouting programs, it is a great opportunity.

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Novelty of scouting activities: One of the great draws of scouting has always been the novelty of the scouting activities. From the very beginning of scouting, the founder saw the need to get the kids out of the city and into the country to expose them to skills they would need. Baden Powell saw a need to provide direction for the kids getting into trouble in town. He took the opportunity to pass along the skills he had learned as a military scout. The skills he was sure every kid needed to know.

Lord Powell thought these youth needed to know how to build a fire, tie a knot, make a shelter, track and trap game, read a map, send and receive a signal, how and where to pitch a tent. Those skills remain today. If you look at the current requirements for First Class Scout, they are pretty close to the original requirements. When Baden Powell developed the scouting program, his goal was for every scout to make it to First Class Scout. His goal was for every scout to learn the basic scouting skills.

When we take young scouts to summer camp for the first time, they are exposed to many new skills and activities. I grew up in the city. The first time I ever saw a swimming pool, was at scout camp. We take kids from the city and show them how to shoot a bow and arrow. We show them how to safely shoot a rifle and shotgun. We teach them how to pitch a tent and start a fire. All the basic scouting skills are the same. This is a great opportunity for urban kids to get exposed to all those great activities. It is a great selling point for scouting.

Now take those same skills to the rural communities. Kids in the rural communities have been doing those same activities for as long as they could walk. They are hunting,

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fishing, and camping on a regular basis. The novelty of scouting is not there. We have to think of new ways to draw the kids to the program. The first time I was a scoutmaster of a rural troop, I had a great idea to get the troop excited about going camping. I planned one of my favorite campouts. We were going to go have a sporting clay outing. I was excited to introduce my new troop to one of my favorite activities. When I made the announcement, the only one excited was me. One of the young scouts had a simple question. "Do we get to bring our own guns"? It had never occurred to me, that I was not giving them anything new. They did this stuff all the time. Normal scouting activities was not new. Competing with each other to see who did it better was good. Getting outside the rural areas to see something new was good. Tying those trips into the values of scouting was good.

What we must realize as scout leaders is what makes this program great. We are not all the same. There is no cookie cutter scouting program. One size does not fit all.

I once took a group of kids from the inner city on a float trip. Some of those kids had never been over ten miles from home. Going three hours away to float down a river through the woods was completely foreign to them. They were worried about alligators in the rivers in Central Missouri. Listening to those conversations was pure joy to me. Knowing that I was exposing these kids to something new and something they would always remember. That is SCOUTING.

I once took a group of kids from a very small town in Kentucky to Washington DC to see the national monuments and the center of the government for our country. The look of wonderment as we traveled across the country and the conversations as we passed

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through the major cities was amazing. These young men that could walk through the woods for days without a care in the world were completely lost in the city. That trip was amazing. Exposing those kids to something they had never seen and tying it to the scouting program was a once in a lifetime trip and something they and I will never forget. That is SCOUTING.

Yes, there are challenges in adapting the scouting program to the rural areas. There are also opportunities to grow the program in ways never imagined. A prime opportunity is for rural and urban units to team up and learn from each other. This is a perfect opportunity for unit commissioners to bridge the gaps and help the program grow.

Lone Scouting: There is an opportunity for Unit Commissioners to think outside of the box and help to deliver the scouting program to areas that may otherwise be forgotten or underserved. The Lone Scout plan is a way for any youth ages 7 to 10 (or who is in the first through fifth grades) to become a Lone Cub Scout; or ages 11 to 17 to become a Lone Scouts BSA member. A youth applies for membership as an individual Lone Scout only if he or she cannot conveniently join a Cub Scout pack or Scouts BSA troop.

Although the Lone Scout might miss the opportunity to participate in activities in the pack or troop, there are certain advantages to this experience. For example, Scouting activities can be done entirely at home. **Boys or girls who live in rural areas** have the outdoors close at hand where much of Scouting takes place. Each youth can progress at his or her own pace, building upon his or her own interests and abilities. Also, the youth has the personal help of an **adult counselor**.

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If there is an area within the district that is being underserved by scouting units or a lack of scouting units, the district commissioner may be able to work with the school district to promote the Lone Scout Program. The unit commissioners could take on the role of “Lone Scout Friend and Counselor”. Scouting America regulations require ***Each Lone Scout must have an adult 21 years or older who agrees to be the youth’s Lone Scout friend and counselor. It is preferred that this be one of the youth’s own parents, but also might be a minister, teacher, neighbor, or Scouter. If not a parent, the Lone Scout counselor must be approved by one of the youth’s parents.***

The counselor also must be approved by the local council. Both the Lone Scout and his counselor register with the local council. Both should use the usual youth and adult application forms and pay the same annual registration fee as other members.

The Lone Scout friend and counselor helps the Lone Scout get the most out of Scouting in many of the same ways that Cub Scout pack and Boy Scout troop leaders help youth in Scouting.

The role of the Counselor is to:

- Guides a youth in planning his Scouting activities
- Encourages a youth to grow and develop from his or her Scouting experiences
- Instructs, examines, and reviews a Lone Scout on all the steps in his Scout advancement

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- Helps a youth use the resources of the Scouting America local council and district in which the youth and counselor both reside
- Helps a youth get to the local council resident camp
- Serves as a role model for Scouting ideals

By taking on the role of Lone Scout Counselor/Friend, the commissioners may be able to help the scouting programs get a toe hold within a community.

Neighborhood Patrol: Sometimes we tend to lose site of what really makes scouting work. We see a troop or a crew and we see the big picture, but lose site of the small parts that make the whole. In a rural area, the district commissioner staff may see an area that will not support a scouting troop or crew and simply move on to the next area. Maybe they are correct and a troop or crew may be out of reach, but a small patrol might well be within reach. If there is a small number of interested youth and at least one willing adult, that area may be served by making a patrol that can work with an established troop in the district. The youth and adults can register with the established troop while holding patrol meetings at a local level. This method is not new to scouting, just often overlooked. The district commissioner staff plays a large role in making this work. Instead of having a unit commissioner per say, a district might have a neighborhood commissioner to help grow the program within that specific community. Sometimes the small steps we take in the beginning are the most important steps. This method has also been called the Wagon Wheel method. This is where the troop is the center hub, and the patrols are the spokes of the wheel. Each patrol operates and

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holds meetings separately for most of the month and the patrols all come together once a month for a complete troop unit. This is not unlike how Cub Scouts operate.

Summary: In 1938, the Boy Scouts of America published a book titled “Scouting for Rural Boys a Manual for Leaders”. Rural Scouting is not a new concept, even in the early stages, it was recognized that scouting was not a one size fits all program. A lot has changed since 1938, including scouting. In 1938, there were a lot more rural areas in America, and the need in those areas was great. In 2024, the number of rural areas has decreased, but the need for scouting in those areas has not. There is still a need for scouting and a need for new ideas and willingness to lead. As commissioners, it is our responsibility to help keep the flame alive in all areas. This is not always going to be an easy task. One thing that commissioners should never forget is basic human anatomy. We have two ears, two eyes and one mouth. We should always watch and listen twice as much as we talk. Listen to the people that live and work in the communities that we serve. Watch what is working in those communities and try to build off of those programs. As commissioners, we are not trying to reinvent the wheel, just help it roll a little better. When I first became a commissioner many moons ago, one term that really stuck with me was “THE COMMISSIONER IS THE UNIT’S FRIEND”. That is also true with a community. Don’t go into a community with the idea that you are going to change things. In small town America, that is the kiss of death. A commissioner going into a community as an outsider and trying to tell the community how things should be run, would be received about as well as a stranger coming into



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your home and telling you how you are doing things wrong and what you should change to make it better. That stranger may have the best intentions and all the right ideas. If the approach is not correct, nobody is listening.

Scouting has shown itself to be a truly adaptive program. Change is not always easy, but as we learn in Woodbadge, “Change is Inevitable”. Maybe it is time for scouting to take another look at how we address scouting in the rural areas.

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