

Wake County, North Carolina Equitable Outreach Strategy for Well & Septic Financial Assistance Pilot Program

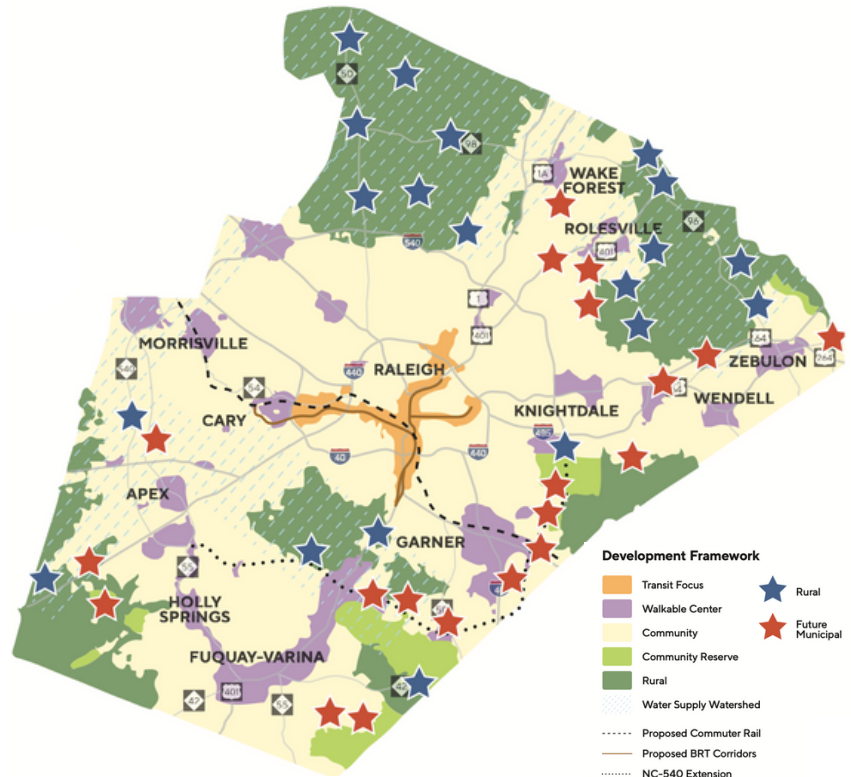


Project at-a-Glance

Community Overview

- Utility/Community: Wake County
- Location: Wake County, North Carolina
- Population served: 1.15 Million
- Service area: 835 square miles

Project Partners



Map from [PLANWake](#) (2021)

Project Benefits

- Increases awareness and uptake of programs that provide financial assistance to repair wells or onsite wastewater systems among hard-to-reach community members.
- Builds long-term relationships and engagement with community organizations and stakeholders, as well as with other service providers at Wake County.
- Develops strategies and resources that can inform the County's broader OneWater initiatives.

Project Challenges



Aging and Damaged Infrastructure



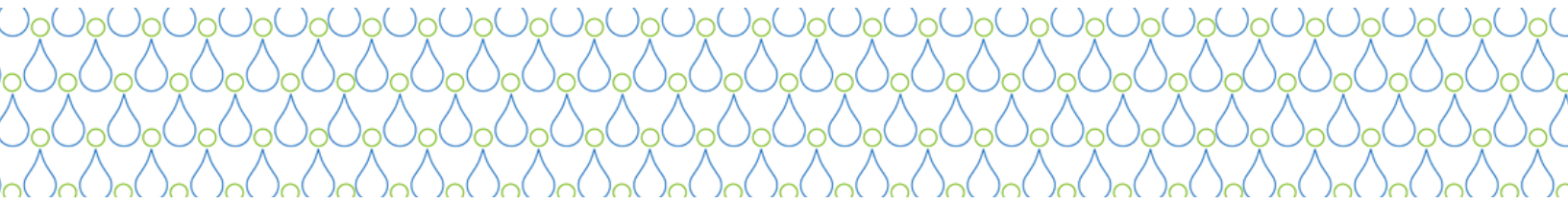
Equity and Affordability



Changing Population

Strategies for Success

WaterNow partnered with Wake County to develop an equitable outreach and communications strategy for a two-year pilot program that provides financial assistance to repair wells or onsite wastewater systems for eligible low-income and elderly community members.



Project Spotlight

Wake County is one of the fastest growing communities in the United States, with a population of 1.15 million. This rapid growth has contributed to an increasing cost of living which risks pricing residents out of living in the County. Approximately 90,000 Wake County residents are served by more than 40,000 private drinking water wells, and 240,000 residents are served by approximately 90,000 on-site wastewater systems. Among residents served by these systems, well contamination and on-site wastewater system failures present health risks, and high repair costs can discourage residents from addressing them. Comparison of economic indicators to rates of reliance on private wells show that large proportions of people rely on private wells and septic systems in some of the most economically challenged areas of Wake County.

To address these challenges, Wake County launched a two-year Pilot Well and Septic Assistance Fund that provides financial assistance to repair wells or onsite wastewater systems and support well water testing for eligible low-income and elderly community members.

Need help testing your water or fixing your well or septic system?

These Wake County programs can help!

EMERGENCY GRANT PROGRAM
Helps low-income homeowners fix immediate health or safety issues at their homes, including repairs to wells, septic systems, heating and air conditioning systems and electrical hazards. You could receive up to \$5,000 for approved repairs.

ELDERLY & DISABLED PROGRAM
Helps low-income homeowners who are 62 and older or have a disability fix safety or mobility issues at their homes. This includes structural issues, roofs, wells, septic systems, heating and air-conditioning units and more. You could receive a one-time grant of up to \$20,000.

DISCOUNTED WATER TESTING
Provides comprehensive tests on your well water for as little as \$73 depending on your income.

FIND OUT IF YOU QUALIFY:
919-856-7400
919-856-5689

LEARN MORE AND APPLY:
wake.gov/waterhelp



SCAN



Left: Flier advertising Wake County's discounted water testing and rehabilitation grant programs. Above: Images of a septic system and well.

Wake County's Health and Human Services and Environmental Services Departments have partnered with the Housing Affordability and Community Revitalization (HACR) Department to administer the pilot program funds through HACR's existing Elderly and Disabled Homeowner Grants and the Emergency Grant Program.

The County partnered with WaterNow Alliance, through Project Accelerator, to develop an outreach and engagement strategy that helps ensure that the program's target audience of low-income and elderly homeowners are aware of and able to participate in this pilot program.



Project Impacts

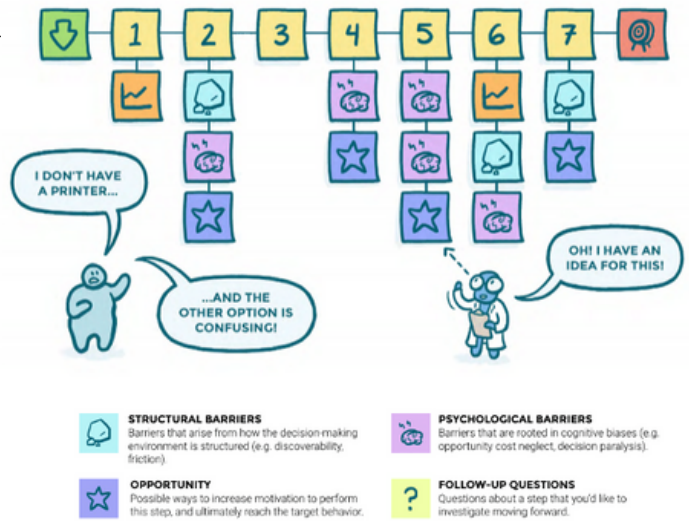
The project began with conversations with staff across Wake County's departments, to understand the program's implementation and to identify common questions and challenges, successful practices that could be amplified, and opportunities for further collaboration across departments. The project team also conducted research and interviews with programs and utilities that have developed successful outreach strategies focused on hard-to-reach customers, in order to identify best practices and actionable strategies to inform the County's approach. Conversations with local stakeholders and community members informed strategies for building awareness of and participation in the pilot program.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations with: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Health and Human Services; Housing Affordability and Community Revitalization; Long-Range Planning; and Environmental Services (Groundwater and Wastewater Programs) Departments • Review of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019 Well-Testing Campaign • Community Vulnerability Map • One Water Plan <p>Phase 1: Baseline Research</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of 13 utility and organization outreach campaigns  <p>Public Health Seattle & King County</p> <p>Phase 2: Research Strong Outreach Campaigns</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of 12 local community organizations  <p>Rebuilding Together Of the Triangle</p> <p>Phase 3: Engagement with Local Community Groups</p> 
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Summary of the project's initial phases of work, focused on baseline research, examples of successful outreach campaigns in other communities, and insights from community groups in Wake County.

The project team also spoke directly with past or current program participants, with the goal of understanding customers’ motivations and obstacles to participating in the program; experiences in the program; and preferences and suggestions for outreach content and mediums. Conversations took place in English and Spanish, and participants were thanked for sharing their insights with a \$25 gift card.



*Illustration of a behavioral blueprinting process.
Source: [Center for Advanced Hindsight](#).*

To bring the insights from these different phases of work together, WaterNow worked with Wake County to create a behavioral blueprint, mapping out a participant’s experience, along with the “behind-the-scenes”

work (e.g., underlying actors, systems, touchpoints, policies) that goes into creating and delivering that experience. The blueprint also flagged challenges and opportunities for customer engagement across each step of the process.

The project drew on these challenges and opportunities to develop a final outreach and engagement plan to support the uptake of the Well and Septic Assistance Fund.

Drivers and Barriers to Participation

The project revealed a number of common drivers and barriers to well and septic system testing and repair. Some drivers were intuitive; for instance, a clear change in a system’s function often prompted people to investigate or update their systems. Other drivers were more indirect – for example, news about national water issues or water challenges in other communities often prompted residents to look into the safety of their own local water sources.

Program Participation

Drivers

- Well owners’ ages and lifestyles (families, plans to sell home)
- National and local water-related news
- Clear changes in system function (e.g., unusual taste, odor, or appearance in water; septic system back-up)
- Referrals from County staff or other assistance programs
- Support from the County in navigating application and program process

Barriers

- Lack of program awareness
- Cost concerns (repair costs, hidden fees)
- Fear of findings (impacts to health, property value)
- Language barriers
- Navigation and completion of application and eligibility requirements
- Distrust or concern around government-led program (sharing personal information, exposure to immigration and other services)

Common drivers and barriers to well and septic system testing and repair, as identified through conversations with County staff, program participants, and insights from community-based organizations.

Program participants also shared some of the initial questions or hesitations others might encounter, such as a concern that the free assistance might not be truly free and instead come with hidden strings attached, or that they might face questions as to why they had not addressed the issue sooner. The conversations with participants also highlighted a core challenge around the program’s visibility; all past participants shared that they would enthusiastically recommend the program to others, but many worried people were unaware of this opportunity for support.

Community Engagement Insights

Conversations with programs in other communities, as well as with local community groups, centered around several cross-cutting themes:



Conversations shared the importance of meeting people where they are, suggesting that holding events or distributing information at common gathering places such as churches, grocery stores, outside of restaurants or in barber shops, beauty salons or libraries, can help build awareness and familiarity with the programs. Some programs have created or partnered with existing “community ambassador” efforts, engaging members of the community to reach out to their neighbors directly. While it’s important to ensure outreach includes neighborhoods that may have an especially high number of eligible participants, these conversations also cautioned that singling out a particular location can raise concerns and spark distrust, and that it’s important to strike a balance between targeted and broader outreach.

“Before the program, it [the septic system] was really bad... [I] had to go in every now and then and pay someone to clean it, which happened five times in one year.”

In many communities where trust in government agencies may be low, providing transparent information and ensuring a consistent presence and follow-through can help establish new foundations for collaboration. Trusted channels of communication are important avenues for sharing information about programs of support like the Well and Septic Assistance Program.

These may include local news sources, existing relationships with community organizations or assistance programs, and word-of-mouth from neighbors and community leaders. Maintaining long-term relationships with communities and community organizations

can help sustain trust and momentum across different outreach topics and efforts. For more on comprehensive efforts to develop mutually beneficial relationships between local government agencies and the communities they serve, see WaterNow and River Network's recently published report, on the [Building Blocks of Trust](#).

"I want to keep my property, but upkeep is expensive."

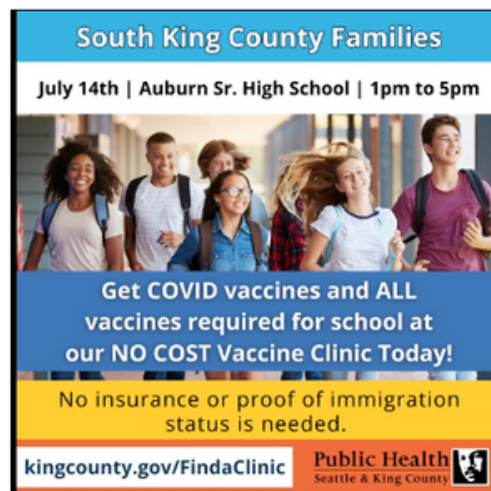
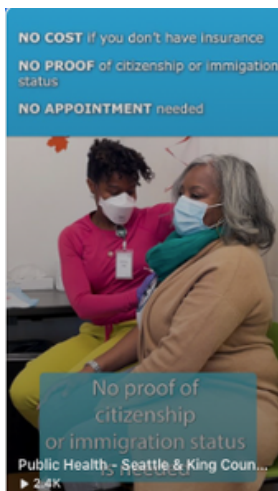
Outreach and Engagement Plan

The outreach and engagement toolkit drew on the behavioral blueprint to identify the next steps toward harnessing these opportunities and overcoming any roadblocks in engaging customers throughout the process of learning about, applying for, and receiving assistance through the Well and Septic Assistance Program.

The [toolkit](#) outlines potential next steps, resources, and examples in four key areas of focus, including:

- **Expand and build on existing partnerships with community organizations.** For instance, there may be opportunities to train service providers in other housing repair services and outreach programs, who are already interacting with people in their homes, to recognize well, septic, and other structural issues in need of repair, and refer these customers to the program. Because residents who stand to benefit from the Well and Septic Assistance Program are often also eligible for and receiving other forms of support, conducting outreach through adjacent programs would provide trusted avenues for residents to learn about the Well and Septic Assistance Program. The toolkit also outlines opportunities to deepen and expand existing relationships with local community-based organizations, providing insights and connections to particular demographics and neighborhoods in Wake County.
- **Expand and build outreach and communication content and strategies.** The toolkit outlines approaches for targeting outreach to locations with especially high need and/or eligibility for this and other assistance programs, in partnership with other departments and community organizations, based on using spatial data. The project also identified suggestions to tailor the timing of outreach to correspond with common drivers for testing and repair (e.g., selling or purchasing a home; local or national news related to water; events, such as rainstorms, that might affect a system's functioning, etc.). There are also opportunities to tailor messaging to address some of the common barriers or obstacles to participation (such as concerns that participation in the program gives the County a stake in the home; worries about health or maintenance issues; or questions about language barriers and translation support).

- **Engage and mobilize County resources.** The baseline research flagged additional opportunities to integrate well and septic content into messaging with broader considerations, such as home ownership and maintenance content or water stewardship outreach. There may also be opportunities to coordinate outreach around related assistance programs. For instance, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, City of Cleveland Division of Water, Cleveland Public Power, Cleveland Water Pollution Control, First Energy and CHN Housing Partners and other partners have hosted Utility Assistance Resource Fairs, which provide customers assistance in signing up for discount programs and cost-saving opportunities in a single location.
- **Engage and mobilize program participants.** The toolkit highlights opportunities to integrate storytelling alongside informational content about the program, from featuring stories or testimonials from past participants in outreach materials, to sharing fliers that participants can circulate to interested friends, family members and neighbors. The project also noted potential paths to continue engaging past program participants; for instance, sharing information about maintenance and operations considerations (such as changes to maintenance in response to precipitation, or increases in household size).



Screenshots from Seattle & King County Department of Public Health's informational Facebook reels regarding their COVID vaccine clinic, highlighting that participation does not require insurance or proof of immigration status.

Wake County has shared these materials with County partners and begun identifying opportunities to implement the outreach plan. The County hopes to expand the pilot into a long-term program, to continue providing vital support to customers relying on well and septic systems. In addition to informing the communication around the Well and Septic Assistance Fund, the practices outlined in the plan will also support Wake County's development of its One Water Plan and programming.





Lessons Learned

The project highlights a number of take-aways for communities seeking to engage hard-to-reach customers, including:

- While all outreach plays an important role in increasing engagement, in-person outreach and high-touch support are especially powerful in building connections, fostering trust, and supporting program participation.
- It's helpful to hear directly from customers about their motivations, hesitations, and experiences; while some barriers or incentives for participation may be widely anticipated and understood, others may be less evident.
- The positive experiences and endorsements from past participants or other trusted messengers remain one of the strongest potential ways to address concerns and hesitations, increase participation, and foster trust.
- Investing in sustained, long-term relationships with community stakeholders can help create the foundation for these types of organization-community partnerships.
- There may be many untapped internal and external synergies – with other internal or external assistance programs – that can increase program awareness without large increases to administration, overhead, and budget.