

# RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the  
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



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## NETWORKING IS GIVING, NOT TAKING

*by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher*

Isolation is a common contributor to reuse, but none of us are alone in our need for connection. Each of us yearns for—and deserves—attention, respect, and a sense of belonging.

I remember a chance encounter at a NARR conference years ago. Driven by a common passion to help those in need, we briefly shared notes before wishing each other well and bidding farewell. Years later, as I launched a new project, that person came to mind. But before I could call her, she called me. Out of the blue and completely unplanned, that brief encounter resulted years later in a highly rewarding collaboration.

There are many ways to be successful, but failing to connect with others is a recipe for failure. That's why this issue of our newsletter is dedicated to networking—the intentional building of connections with like-minded people to expand our horizons, our knowledge, and our impact.

The expression "reach out and touch someone" resonates with me, not because it signals personal gain, but because of what we may achieve together in service to others.



The Fletcher Group Rural  
Center of Excellence

# OVERCOMING THE FEAR

Rural networking expert Karen Atkins starts her presentation by asking the audience for their biggest networking fears, then lists her own. They include feeling uncomfortable and out of place with new people while simultaneously fearing rejection, small talk, phoniness, and being trapped in a meaningless conversation.

The only difference between you and her, then, is that Atkins has worked through her fears. Now she can help you do the same.

## Start Slow

For starters, don't bite off too much at one time. Start slow by networking with friends and relatives and *meet them where they are* by inquiring about their interests and passions. Then, when it's time to attend an actual networking event, make it easier to step outside your comfort zone by inviting a friend to join you.

Atkins' next bit of advice might surprise you. "Know when to leave," she says. "Quickly exit conversations that aren't good matches because if you end up having a bad time, you'll be less likely to try again."

## Anyone Can Do It

Success in life, says Atkins, is about getting people to say yes. And it's something anyone can do. "Just be the best version of yourself," she says, "and others will take notice."

Where you strut your stuff is up to you. "It can be anywhere, from a church group or book club to volunteer work. Wherever passion is shared, you'll find high-value people and the opportunities that come with them."

Indeed, Atkins says she's made many of her most valuable connections 'off the clock.' "I go to the gym with an open mind, an eager smile, and just strike up a conversation. The social circles I've built through exercise alone have expanded my professional network, resulted in substantial fund-raising opportunities, and cost me next to nothing."

## Practice Makes Perfect

But knowing how to start a conversation is tricky, right? Atkins says it's all about reps. "Don't worry about being clever. Just say hello to as many people as you can—your Uber driver, your restaurant server, your barista. The more you do it, the better you'll get at it."



Of course, you want to send the right signals with good eye contact, a warm smile, and open, relaxed body language. That's because, according to a recent Harvard study, it takes eight positive encounters to change a person's negative first impression,

One other thing: Just because you think you lack something doesn't mean you don't have talent. Growing your network authentically takes time, says Atkins. It's a lifelong pursuit that's all about building honest, mutually rewarding relationships. (Something you can learn much more about on the next page).

*To jump-start your own networking efforts, download Karen Atkins' "Networking Action Plan" by clicking the button below.*

**CLICK HERE**



## KEEPING IT REAL

"I don't admire cleverness. I admire authenticity," says rural networking expert Karen Atkins. "People crave connection so make it relational rather than transactional by being as candid and honest as possible. And don't waste time on small talk; go deeper. It's okay to be vulnerable and to share your insecurities with people you trust, provided you're also lighthearted and relatable."

Consistency is equally important. "Networking isn't about going to one event and getting a few business cards," says Atkins. "It's about fostering relationships over time. To reap the benefits of the professional connections you build, you have to be consistent."

Because a new connection is just the beginning, Atkins urges would-be networkers to, "Follow up, follow up, follow up. You won't regret it." One example: When you hear someone mention something personal—a vacation they're planning or a birthday celebration—be sure to ask them about it the next time you see them.

Another key element is the value you bring. "Always give more than you take," says Atkins. "Build a bank of goodwill by making deposits *before* you make withdrawals. If, for example, your strength is connecting people, do that for as many people as you can. And for every favor you ask—whether it's an introduction or a funding request—be sure to return something of greater perceived value, such as a handwritten note of gratitude. When you're helpful, supportive, and do good work, your network will naturally expand."

Then there's what Atkins calls intentionality. "Talk less, listen more, and ask questions," says Atkins. "The mark of a good conversationalist is not talking a lot. It's getting others to talk."

Last but not least is what Atkins calls 'reputation management.' "We are all responsible to each other. When you're building support for recovery housing, for example, you're building community supporters and allies on many different levels—locally as well as across the state and across the country. No one does it alone and your success will depend in large part on your reputation for integrity and honesty."



### KAREN ATKINS

Karen Atkins is the Public Information Officer at the Kentucky River Foothills Development Council, a Community Action Agency in rural Kentucky that helps individuals attain self-sufficiency. She also oversees the Agency's Rural Communities Opioid Response Program that works to reduce morbidity and mortality rates associated with opioid overdoses in Madison County, Kentucky.

To watch Atkins' presentation at the Fletcher Group's March 2 Webinar, simply click the button below.

[CLICK HERE](#)





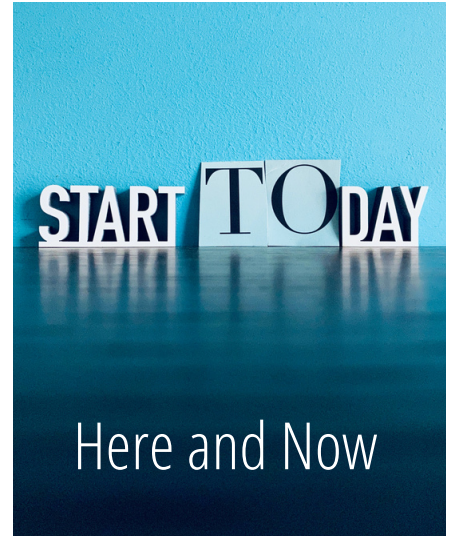
# WHEN AND WHERE TO NETWORK

According to expert Karen Atkins, the opportunities are everywhere and closer than you might think. Here's the list she shared at the Fletcher Group's March 2 Webinar:

- **Chamber of Commerce Events**—Atkins' personal favorite
- **Meetings**—especially those held by professional associations and societies
- **The office**—get to know your co-workers beyond a simple office connection
- **Volunteering**—a fantastic way to meet people
- **Job Fairs**—get some facetime with employers and fellow job seekers
- **Health Clubs/yoga/spa**—chat with people while you take a break
- **Outdoors**—you're bound to meet interesting people with similar interests
- **Sporting events**—a perfect platform to break the ice
- **Homeowner meetings**—get to know your neighbors on a more personal level
- **Parties**—office, holiday, and birthday parties are great for meeting people you might not meet otherwise
- **Community events**—Is there a July 4th celebration? Join it!
- **Religious events**—you'll be amazed how many people you can meet
- **Alumni events**—get back in touch with classmates, then follow up regularly
- **Clubs**—join any club of people who enjoy doing the same things you do
- **Coffee shops**—extend the conversation with people you often run into
- **Conferences and retreats**—great for meeting people while learning new things
- **Family and friends**—these more personal connections can almost always lead to a wider sphere of influence
- **Clients**—be personable, chat regularly, and stay in touch
- **School**—even if you're just picking up your kids from school, get to know the other students and parents

And of course there's **social media**. Atkins believes lasting relationships are built in person, but there's still a place for it as long as you protect yourself. Here are her tips:

- First ask if the post might somehow hurt your career or personal life
- Avoid negativity
- Be careful who you accept as a connection or friend
- And remember: the goal of social media is not to have thousands of friends or followers, but to generate high-quality, meaningful connections.



The new "Rural Roads Podcast" is the best way for RCORP grantees to stay abreast of current issues. The kick-off episode features Technical Expert Leads Donald McDonald and Robert Childs discussing what's trending among RCORP grantees, including prevention, treatment, harm reduction, recovery, and behavioral health.

To sign up, simply click the button below.

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