

PRESS RELEASE

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Budget cuts to impact rural health in North Central Florida

Gainesville, Florida—When Diane McCaliaster, 61, was diagnosed with Type II diabetes, she didn't know that her poor diet and lack of exercise could have caused the onset of her illness. She knows now.

The Chiefland resident learned about her illness and how to deal with it from the Self Managing Awareness Rural Team (SMART), a program that teaches diabetes and hypertension self-management skills to rural residents. She credits the program with keeping her alive.

Though residents like McCaliaster depend on rural health initiatives such as SMART, the President's 2008 Fiscal Budget proposes eliminating federal funding for a number of rural health programs, a move that local healthcare advocates say would be devastating to North Central Florida's rural residents.

Barbara Locke, president of North Central Florida's Rural Health Partnership (RHP), believes the proposed elimination of Rural Health Flexibility Grants, the Small Hospital Improvement Program, Rural Health Network and Outreach Grants, and Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) would seriously impact North Central Florida's ability to provide healthcare services that help residents like McCaliaster.

“We would effectively revert back to where we were 10 years ago,” Locke said. “Essentially, all the rural residents that we serve would no longer be served.”

Jeff Feller, associate director of WellFlorida Council, a Gainesville-based non-profit that serves as an umbrella agency for the RHP and SMART, is concerned the loss of such programs and grants would leave rural medical services stunted.

“Without funding for rural hospitals and the ability to train healthcare providers through AHEC, we can't offer rural residents quality healthcare,” he said.

The elimination of Rural Health Network and Outreach Grants would cut the lifeline programs such as the Rural Health Care Services Outreach Grants, a source of funding for educational programs such as SMART.

Since its inception six years ago, SMART has helped hundreds of rural residents in seven counties manage their conditions on their own without costly hospital visits.

“In a survey, 46 of our clients said they had been hospitalized for diabetes or hypertension-related reasons prior to entering the program,” Feller explained. “After a year of being in the program, only two of those 46 people could say the same. Forty four avoided hospitalizations add up to \$428,345 in healthcare savings.”

“Without SMART, I'd probably be on insulin right now,” McCaliaster said. “There are so many small-town people who don't know enough about being healthy. Programs like that are so important in fixing the problem.”

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees will evaluate the proposed cuts and their effects in upcoming months. North Central Florida's rural health advocates are urging supporters to put pressure on Congress to fully fund the programs.

“We need these senators to know how much they'd be taking away from us,” McCaliaster said. “These programs save lives. Isn't that worth saving?”

Additional programs such as the Rural and Community Access to Emergency Devices Grant Program, Geriatric Education Centers, and Community Access Program are also in danger of losing funding.

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