

*To reduce the financial burden of healthcare in the state of Florida, create a stronger workforce, and support those who put food on our tables, **we ask you to address the healthcare needs of rural Floridians.***

Rural communities—especially those in Florida—face unique healthcare challenges:

- Limited access to care
- Disproportionately high numbers of uninsured and under-insured
- Clusters of undocumented and migrant populations
- Entrenched community cultures (e.g., stigmas against preventive care, mental healthcare, men’s health)
- The isolation of living in remote rural areas.

Obstacles faced by healthcare providers and patients in urban areas are amplified in rural settings (e.g., educational shortcomings, economic factors, cultural and social differences).

**Together, these barriers lead to costly avoidable ER visits and hospitalizations, cycles of poverty, poor health, premature deaths, and a less effective workforce.**

Some of the key rural health and access concerns, as cited by the National Rural Health Association, are listed below.

## **ACCESS TO CARE**

- **Rural residents have poor access to primary care due to a physician shortage.** Only about 10% of physicians practice in rural America, despite the fact that nearly 25% of Americans live there.
- **Rural residents have poor access to dental care due to a dentist shortage.** There are 60 dentists per 100,000 residents in urban areas versus 40 per 100,000 in rural areas.
- **Rural residents have poorer access to mental health and substance abuse services.** One in five non-metropolitan counties lack mental health services versus one in twenty metropolitan counties.
- **Rural residents have poorer access to care due to their location.** Rural residents have greater transportation difficulties reaching health care providers, often travelling great distances to reach a doctor or hospital.
- **Rural hospitals face greater obstacles to maintaining financial viability than their urban counterparts.** Medicare payments to rural hospitals and physicians are dramatically less than those to their urban counterparts for equivalent services. This correlates closely with the fact that more than 470 rural hospitals have closed in the past 25 years.

## **HEALTHCARE AFFORDABILITY**

- **Rural residents are less likely to have adequate health care coverage.** Employed rural residents are less likely to have employer-provided health care coverage. The rural poor are less likely to be covered by Medicaid benefits than their urban counterparts.
- **Rural residents tend to be poorer.** On the average, per capita income is \$7,417 lower than in urban areas.

## **PREMATURE DEATH AND INJURY**

- **Rural residents are at increased risk of death due to motor vehicle accidents.** The chances of dying from a motor vehicle accident are doubled if the accident occurs in a rural area instead of an urban area. [One-third of all vehicular accidents occur in rural areas.]
- **Rural residents are at increased risk of death due to unintentional injuries.** Rural residents are two times more likely to die from unintentional injuries other than motor vehicle accidents than urban residents.

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

In order to maintain or improve the rural health infrastructure in Florida, legislators are urged to:

- 1) Maintain current Medicaid reimbursement levels for safety net providers.
- 2) Protect the funding of county health departments as they are often the main primary care providers in rural Florida.
- 3) Continue to build Emergency Medical Services (EMS) infrastructure—especially that in rural Florida—through the promotion of improved/more frequent education, improved communication technology and equipment, and improved recruitment and retention of quality personnel.
- 4) Provide incentives to increase of rural healthcare manpower (e.g., loan forgiveness programs in exchange for rural services).
- 5) Continue to fund state-certified Rural Health Networks, which coordinate the spectrum of rural public and private health resources.



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