



## **STRATEGIC PLAN 2024 – 2027**

**106 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
Telephone: 814-863-8214  
Fax: 814-865-4688  
E-mail: [porh@psu.edu](mailto:porh@psu.edu)  
Website: [porh.psu.edu](http://porh.psu.edu)**

# INTRODUCTION

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is recognized as one of the most preeminent State Offices of Rural Health in the nation by federal, state, and community partners.

The 2024-2027 Strategic Plan is a tool for sharing the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's principles and plans with its constituents and guides current programs and new initiatives to meet the demands of health care in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Plan allows for agility so that goals and strategies can be adjusted to respond to new and emerging challenges and opportunities.

## Vision Statement

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health will be the preeminent rural health leadership organization in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and one of the most effective State Offices of Rural Health in the nation.

## Mission Statement

The mission of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is to enhance the health status of rural Pennsylvanians and ensure that rural residents have access to high quality, affordable health care.

## Guiding Principles

The activities of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health are based on social responsibility, commitment, cooperation, honesty, and integrity. Our actions are collaborative and nonpartisan.

## Our Constituency

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is a collaborator with all parties that have a sincere interest in the health of rural Pennsylvanians. Our constituency includes professionals, organizations, and advocates whose actions and interests affect the delivery of health care services in rural areas, the health of Pennsylvania's rural residents, and the health of the nation. This includes, but is not limited to, national, state, and community-based rural health advocates; health care providers; educators; elected officials and policy makers; state agency staff; community and economic development specialists; farm safety and agricultural health specialists; researchers; and others.

# THREE DECADES OF ADVANCING RURAL HEALTH

Since 1991, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health has strengthened the existing network of rural providers and advocates by encouraging partnerships and identifying opportunities for collaboration and cooperation; advocating for rural Pennsylvanians and raising awareness of rural health issues; serving as a liaison among academia, state and federal governments, and professional associations; providing information to policy makers, health care providers, educators, and administrators; and conducting research on health care issues affecting rural Pennsylvanians.

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health was formed as a partnership between the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). The office serves as a source of **coordination, technical assistance, and networking; partnership development**; and assistance in the **recruitment and retention** of health care providers with expertise in rural health, agricultural safety and health, oral health, quality improvement, health care transformation, population health, and community and economic development.

At Penn State, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is administratively located in the Department of Health Policy and Administration in the College of Health and Human Development at the University Park campus.

A summary of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's programs and activities is included as an attachment to this Strategic Plan.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Pennsylvania is one of the most rural states in the nation. More than 3.5 million residents live in areas that are designated as rural. These residents are impacted by the cultural, economic, and geographic facts that affect the delivery of health care services in rural areas.

Challenges include financially stressed health care delivery systems, shortages of primary and specialty health care providers, vulnerable populations, disparities in access to broadband, and a lack of public transportation systems. Rural Pennsylvanians experience reduced access to health insurance options, health promotion and disease prevention programs, and services to address special health care needs.

## Issues and Trends Affecting Rural Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health

There are critical rural health topics and trends where the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health needs to be knowledgeable, collaborative, engaged, and sensitive to assuring adequate consideration of rural residents and providers. These issues continue to shape health delivery services and the health of rural residents. When considering growth and expansion, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health will focus its efforts on contributing to the knowledge and skills of rural health care providers and advocates.

Issues and trends where the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health will continue to be engaged and/or seek to expand current involvements include:

- A continuous assessment of the gaps in the rural safety net and the specific barriers to high quality, affordable health care services;
- Rural health workforce development;
- Substance use disorder and behavioral health care services;
- Quality improvement and performance management;
- Oral health care services;
- Rural emergency services;
- Transportation for health care and other services;
- The use of data to drive and advance change;
- Population health data collection, analysis, and community health improvement;
- Rural health transformation and redesign, and associated strategy implementation;
- The consolidation of health care services and providers;
- Federal and state payment and delivery systems reform initiatives;
- Telemedicine, health information exchanges, electronic health records, broadband access, and high-speed data transmissions systems;
- The economic considerations of rural health and rural health services; and
- Agricultural health and safety with an emphasis on vulnerable populations.

## GOALS FOR 2024-2027

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health will continuously assess current and emerging initiatives to meet the evolving needs of rural health care delivery systems and residents as health care transforms to provide high quality care, achieve population health priorities, and reduce health care expenditures. The following key goals and strategies will guide these efforts.

## **I. Launch a rural health policy agenda for Pennsylvania**

- Compile and analyze data from Community Health Needs Assessments, state and federal sources, forums, and other sources to develop a three-year Rural Health Policy Agenda for Pennsylvania.
- Integrate into the agenda:
  - State and federal transformation models of care;
  - Federal and state payment models;
  - Primary care, behavioral and mental health, substance use disorder, oral health, and additional health care services as indicated;
  - Primary medical care, oral health, and behavioral health as integrated components of primary care;
  - Workforce development and interprofessional development;
  - Current and emerging state and federal health care policy, legislation, and regulation;
  - Social Determinants of Health; and
  - Health equity principles and framework.
- Engage local, state, and federal partners to refine the agenda.
- Identify metrics of success and challenges, utilizing the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) continuous improvement process.
- Develop and implement strategies to advance the agenda.
- Engage elected officials and key staff in advancing the agenda.
- Review and refine the agenda at least annually.

## **II. Strengthen the rural health care delivery system**

- Expand the focus of hospital- and community-based programs to address quality issues, with a focus on the needs of primary care, oral health, behavioral health, and other components of the rural health delivery system.
- Increase the focus of hospital- and community-based programs to address quality issues, emphasizing the needs of primary care, oral health, and other components of the rural health delivery system.
- Promote programs that increase access to health care services in rural areas such workforce development programs and state and national policy that promote rural practice.
- Expand activities with individual and regional health systems.
- Promote volume-to-value transformation in rural health care delivery.
- Increase technical assistance and other services to the state's Rural Health Clinics and other primary care providers.

## **III. Promote community and population health**

- Increase the current focus on population health, including attention to changing rural demographics and shifting demands for services.

- Expand opportunities for facilitating access to and use of population health data to drive rural health systems change.
- Support community health improvement efforts with health care systems, rural communities, and statewide initiatives.

#### **IV. Advocate for rural health care delivery systems and rural residents**

- Apply an in-depth understanding of federal and state payment and delivery systems reform initiatives affecting rural health and rural health care delivery to education, outreach, and advocacy activities.
- Utilize the robust understanding of the models of regional consolidation of providers as they align with larger systems and the implications of expanded health systems development for rural populations.
- Increase partnerships with other organizations seeking to address rural health issues.
- Assist Rural Health Clinics and other rural primary care providers in meeting the needs of communities and residents.

#### **V. Provide continuing education for agricultural producers, rural health care providers, and advocates**

- Expand the Penn State Worker Protection Standard Safety Program to address current and future regulations regarding safe farm practices.
- Evaluate options for promoting rural health strategies through on-site presence with farm workers and their families on issues such as nutrition, oral health, health insurance, and other current or emerging health issues.
- Expand the focus on immigrant populations, migrant farm workers, and Anabaptist populations.
- Expand continuing education programs to meet current and emerging issues and develop new opportunities.
- Increase partnerships to extend continuing education to new audiences.

#### **VI. Expand infrastructure and operations to support activities**

- Continue to secure funding and diversify programs and funding sources.
- Expand partnerships with relevant departments and faculty at Penn State and other academic institutions to advance rural health research and program development.
- Further develop the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's multi-media communications strategies.
- Support staff professional development.
- Continue to engage undergraduate and graduate students in initiatives.



## **PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES**

### **State Office of Rural Health Program**

The national State Office of Rural Health program, through which the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is administered, is funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Services and Resources Administration. The State Office of Rural Health program creates a focal point within each state for rural health issues and provides an institutional framework that links communities with state and federal resources to help develop long-term solutions to rural health problems. State Offices of Rural Health are charged with being a source of coordination of rural health strategies, providing technical assistance, networking, partnership development, and assisting in the recruitment and retention of health care providers. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health provides technical assistance to health care facilities and communities; advocates for rural health; collaborates with national, state, and local partners to advance rural health; provides extensive outreach and education on relevant issues; and assists in workforce development activities.

### **Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program**

The Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program was created by Congress in 1997 to address small rural hospital viability by designating eligible hospitals as Critical Access Hospitals (CAH) by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. CAHs are located in a federally designated rural area, are no more than 35 miles from another like hospital, are licensed for no more than 25 beds, provide 24/7 emergency care, and serve high Medicare and Medicaid populations. Technical assistance targets quality improvement, financial and operational improvement, innovative model development, population health advancement, rural emergency medical services sustainability, and designation of facilities as CAHs. Through these activities, the program ensures that residents in rural communities have access to high quality health care services to improve the health of rural residents. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is a national leader in the implementation of this program and in population health activities to assess rural community health needs assessments, expand emergency medical services, participate in transformative models of financing and care, and develop programs to meet identified needs. The program is funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## **Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program**

The Small Rural Hospital Improvement Grant Program funds State Offices of Rural Health to support rural hospitals with 49 beds or fewer engage in health system reforms. These models include value-based purchasing activities that support data collection to facilitate quality reporting; shared savings activities to develop Accountable Care Organizations; payment bundling and Prospective Payment System activities that improve the revenue cycle process; and care transition efforts focused on reducing hospital readmissions. Funds are also used by eligible hospitals to invest in quality improvement and other training. This program is funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## **Penn State Worker Protection Standard Program**

The Penn State Worker Protection Standard Program provides technical assistance to agricultural producers and employees on complying with the requirements of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Worker Protection Standard to prevent illness or injury from pesticide exposure, with an emphasis on Anabaptist populations and migrant farm workers. The program is a joint effort of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, Penn State, and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Plant Industries, which supports the initiative.

## **Pennsylvania Rural Primary Care Oral Health Initiative**

Working with partners across the state, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health supports efforts to improve access to oral health services for rural Pennsylvanians. PORH's focus on oral health began in 2016 with a program that integrated oral health services in Rural Health Clinics. PORH continues to support oral health integration and has also expanded programming to provide oral health education to Community Health Workers. Proudly partnering with the PA Coalition for Oral Health, PORH also focuses on improving the oral health workforce, promoting oral health for all patients, and providing education on policy change aimed at improving oral health for all.



# Rural Human Trafficking Awareness and Education

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health serves in a pivotal role to bring awareness to, and education on, human trafficking and its prevalence and impact in rural communities. Human trafficking—the use of force, fraud or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act—can happen in any community and victims can be any age, race, gender or nationality. Rural areas can be particularly vulnerable due to isolation, geography, and transportation routes that facilitate human trafficking. Education, awareness, and an understanding of local, state, and federal resources are essential to identifying potential human trafficked victims and assisting them in getting the help they need. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health coordinates continuing education programs, participates in state and regional planning efforts, and provides resources to health care providers and others on this critical issue to target—and stop—human trafficking.

## Advocacy

Advocating for high quality, affordable, and accessible health care in rural areas is one of the highest priorities of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health. The staff serves on boards of directors, committees, task forces, and work groups at national, state, and local levels to advance rural health, community and economic development, and agricultural health and safety. Our goal is to ensure that the rural voice is strong and resonates throughout the development and implementation of policy, legislation, regulation, and programming that affect the delivery of rural health care services and the health of rural residents.

## Continuing Education and Outreach

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health coordinates continuing education programs to provide rural health leaders and advocates with the skills and knowledge they need to provide high-quality health care services. Programs focus on topics including health care financing and administration, health care transformation, primary care practice management, health information technology and telehealth, community and public health, migrant and immigrant health, grant writing skill building, federal and state funding assistance, agricultural safety and health, the economic impact of the health care sector, and rural legislative briefings. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health offers certification and recertification programs for swimming pool pesticide applicators.

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health publishes a bi-annual publication, *Pennsylvania Rural Health*, which highlights issues relevant to rural health care delivery; summaries of best practices; resources for rural health care providers and advocates; and information on programs and initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels. Access the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's programs on the website, [porh.psu.edu](http://porh.psu.edu), and “like” us on Facebook at [facebook.com/PORHPSU](https://facebook.com/PORHPSU).

# PARTNERSHIPS

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health collaborates with organizations, governmental agencies, and educational institutions in the state including these important partners:

- Pennsylvania Department of Health
- Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
- Pennsylvania Rural Health Association
- Pennsylvania Public Health Association
- Pennsylvania Rural Partners
- Center for Rural Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers
- Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvania Trauma Systems Foundation
- Pennsylvania Area Health Education Center Program
- Pennsylvania Coalition for Oral Health
- Pennsylvania Head Start Association
- Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
- CareQuest Institute

Academic institutions include Penn State and other colleges and universities in Pennsylvania and other states.

Federal partners include the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health, the National Rural Health Association, the National Association of Rural Health Clinics, and the other forty-nine State Offices of Rural Health.