

SPRING 2024

PENNSYLVANIA RURAL HEALTH

*The Intersection of the
Local Food Movement,
Agricultural Health & Safety,
and Healthy Eating*

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PennState

The Importance of Voting

By Andy Shelden, Writer, Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health



On November 5, 2024, Pennsylvanians will cast their votes in the General Election. Every election is important, but the 2024 General Election will have significant implications on the lives and livelihoods of everyone in the U.S. The

presidential election will garner the most media attention, but many state and local races will also be closely contested and the candidates we choose will have a great impact on our daily lives. It is essential that we exercise our fundamental right to elect our federal, state and local representatives.

Pennsylvania has gotten extra national attention during General Election years since the presidential race is often closely contested here, and 2024 will likely be no different. In addition to the presidency, Pennsylvanians will also vote to fill one U.S. Senate seat and all seventeen of its seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Both houses of Congress are projected to be narrowly divided between the parties and legislative control may be decided by voter turnout. Beyond the national races, the 2024 General Election ballot will also feature several critical state offices. Voters will be asked to choose a new Pennsylvania attorney general, as the incumbent is not running for re-election, and the offices of state auditor and state treasurer will be contested as well. Many state senate and house races are included and, depending on where you live, you may be asked to vote on ballot questions or local initiatives. As we near the election date, your county election board can provide you with a sample ballot on their website if you'd like to review your local races in advance.

Voter turnout is usually at its peak during General Election years, but the outcomes of these elections still hinge on who shows up to vote. In the 2020 General Election, 76.5 percent of registered voters in Pennsylvania cast a ballot; that's nearly 700,000 people who voted, but that means roughly 200,000 registered voters did not.

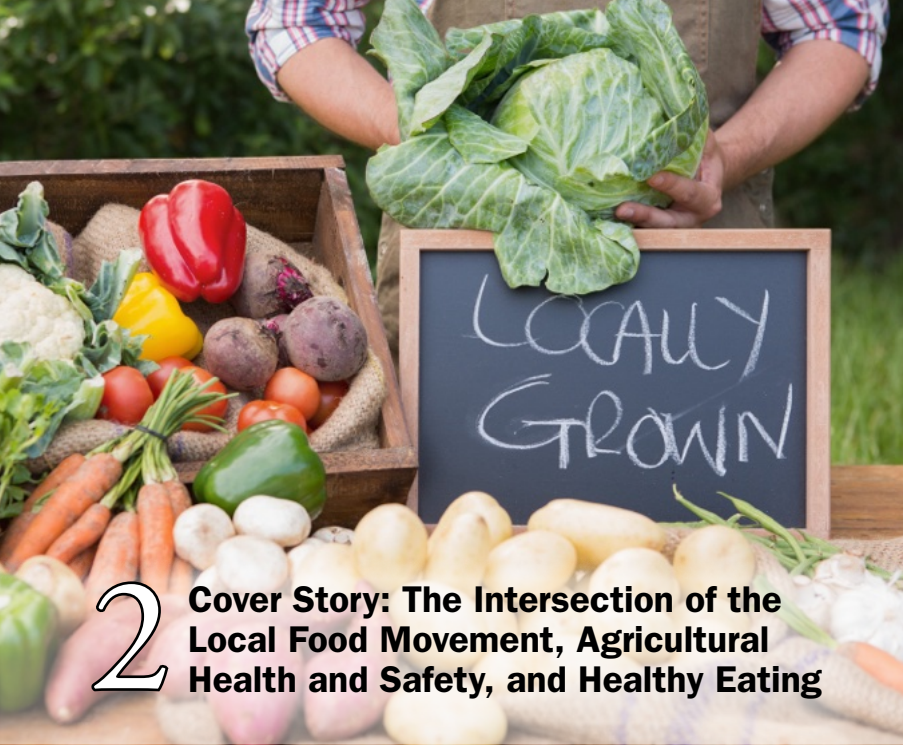
The margin of victory statewide in the 2020 presidential contest was only about 80,000 votes. Participation certainly weighed heavily on that outcome, and that participation only accounts for registered voters; it does not include the many eligible persons who are not registered to vote in Pennsylvania. While every vote is critical in the presidential race, the reality is that the smaller the race, the more your vote potentially matters.

The deadline to register to vote in the November 5 election is October 21. Any Pennsylvania resident may register to vote, as long as they have been a U.S. citizen for at least thirty days and are going to be at least eighteen years old on or before Election Day. Once you are registered, there are several ways to vote. You can request a mail-in ballot from your local election board up to October 29, which is one week before the election. Pennsylvania is a no-excuse mail-in/absentee voting state, which means anyone who wants to vote by mail can do so as long as the ballot is requested in time. Your ballot must be received by your county election board by 8:00 p.m. on election day, so plan ahead if you are returning your ballot by mail. You can also vote in-person on election day at your local voting site. You do not need to have a photo ID to vote in-person, as long as you've voted at your polling site before. For a list of acceptable forms of voter identification, contact your county election board.

It's important to remember that your vote will be counted accurately and reliably. Pennsylvania has implemented several policies to ensure the accuracy of the count and to address potential concerns about voter fraud. In 2020, the results of the November General Election were heavily scrutinized, both locally and nationally, and the final count was confirmed and verified by a non-partisan, post-election audit.

Voting is a fundamental right, the keystone of our democracy, and your vote matters. This November, please be sure to exercise your right to choose your national and local elected officials.

To learn more about election security, or if you have questions about voting or your voter registration status, visit vote.gov or contact your local county election board.



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Pennsylvania Rural Health
Lisa Davis, Director

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 **PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF
RURAL HEALTH**

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The Intersection of the Local Food Movement, Agricultural Health & Safety, and Healthy Eating

By Andy Shelden

Pennsylvania's farmers and farm workers will be busy this spring. Once the winter's final frost has melted, farmers will hustle to get their early spring crops in the ground and adapt to the many variables that could affect their harvest. Farmers' markets, often dormant in the winter, will re-open for consumers to buy meat, produce, and local goods directly from local producers. Restaurants will soon have a bounty of fresh produce from neighboring farmers and agricultural partners. An industry that has a history as the heart of daily life in Pennsylvania will be in full swing. A priority is keeping farm workers healthy, safe, and protected from the many stresses and hazards that come with growing food and getting farm products from the farm to restaurants and kitchen tables all across the country.

Pennsylvania is home to nearly 50,000 farms, the majority of which are family-owned and operated. Agricultural revenue accounts for roughly 20 percent of the state's economic output. Nearly a quarter of the state's total land mass is farmland. Pennsylvania is one of

the nation's top-five food and beverage manufacturing states, and Pennsylvania's farmers sell more food directly to consumers than every state in the nation, except for California. Agriculture has been, and continues to be, an integral part of life in the commonwealth, whether you live in cities such as Pittsburgh or Philadelphia or in one of the many smaller metropolitan or rural counties. While agriculture has been a constant in these communities, the availability of, and demand for, local products has been flourishing in recent years.

The 'Buy Local' Movement

"The local food movement has been growing and evolving," says Kim Tait, president of Tait Farm Foods in Centre County, PA, which operates both a food manufacturing operation and a direct-to-consumer (DTC) market. "We're fortunate to be in our community and have great support locally. Our farmers' markets are well attended. Roadside farmstands have seasonal specialties that attract a lot of interest. On the whole, there's a core group of people here in central Pennsylvania who support us growing fresh foods, year-round."

DTC food production has been a growing sector in U.S. agriculture in recent years, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service,

although it still accounts for a small fraction of total agricultural sales. Contributing to the growth in DTC agriculture is the proliferation of farmers' markets in communities across America. Over 300 open-air farmers' markets operate in Pennsylvania and a recent study by Penn State Extension estimates that those markets generate over \$100 million in revenue annually. Nationwide, the number of farmers' markets has almost tripled over the last twenty years, although growth has leveled off in the last five.

Tracy Clayton, who owns Kathy's Café, a farm-to-table diner in Hughesville, PA, has seen this evolution firsthand. "When my parents opened a restaurant here in the 1980s, the term 'farm-to-table' wasn't in our vocabulary in the restaurant industry. My mom made connections with farmers through word-of-mouth. She saw a need for healthier options and started to fill that need. Now, the options at our markets seem endless. Local food feels more accessible; that's been the biggest change."

"When we started this thirty to forty years ago, we were slightly ahead of our time," says Tait, referring to Tait Farms' DTC business. "We were early pioneers in the pick-your-own movement. We helped create a local consciousness of when seasonal crops are ready and at their best. Over the years, there's been a gathering momentum that's led to a larger agricultural community here, many of them Amish, and a lot of that production has gone directly to the consumer."

Many of the same consumers who buy fresh meats and produce directly from farmers at markets or through community-supported agricultural shares (CSAs) also want to find local foods and ingredients when they dine at restaurants. Farm-to-table restaurants are growing in popularity alongside the local food movement.

"There is strong support for local restaurants to use local ingredients around here," says Tait. "These are dedicated customers who want to maintain a local, seasonal diet. It's an important value."

Dave Magrogan is president of Harvest Seasonal Grill & Wine Bar, a sustainable, health-conscious, and locally sourced restaurant concept that opened in 2010 and has grown to include eight locations in Pennsylvania. He says, "When we opened, we wanted to create a polished dining experience that featured healthier foods and better sourcing of ingredients. And customer demand for those

local products has definitely improved over the years. The number of people conscious of where their food is coming from has gone up dramatically."

"We have an advantage," says Josh Short, corporate executive chef at Harvest Seasonal restaurants, "because Lancaster County is known for having some of the best farming soil in the world. It's just a natural platform for farm-to-table dining. When we feature local products on our menus, those ingredients not only taste better, but by using them, we are helping to contribute to the food education and knowledge of the community."

As consumers better understand what's available from their local farmers and when produce comes into its peak season, demand for those products has increased. Still, DTC farming can be a tough business. "Many more people have stepped into the farming circle and are making a modest living from it," says Tait. "But it's hard to make enough money to support a family just by growing food."

One of the recent evolutions in local agriculture has been the cooperative movement, where local farmers pool resources and, ultimately, share profits to create a diverse and sustainable flow of products to local markets. It's an approach that can benefit both the farmer and the consumer by maximizing the output of the farmable land and reducing surplus inventory. Farming co-ops naturally foster collaboration, with farmers seeking input from local chefs and restaurateurs before seeds are planted.

"The great part of working directly with local farmers is that I can ask them, 'can we grow this ingredient this year?' and they'll do it for me," says Clayton. "Or sometimes they'll tell me what they're growing, and I may not know the best way to use that ingredient, but I get to research and learn about it, and then I can bring it to my customers in an accessible way."

"We work with Lancaster Farm Fresh to find many of our ingredients," Short says, referring to a farming co-op made up of over 100 farmers in Lancaster County, PA. "They touch so many different farms and products. Sometimes they'll ask me, 'a farmer has X amount of land available; what types of fruits and vegetables are you interested in?' They'll source their seeds and their growing and harvesting schedules in consultation with us."

Farming co-ops naturally foster collaboration, with farmers seeking input from local chefs and restaurateurs before seeds are planted.



“If you can source items as locally as possible,” Magrogan says, “it can go from the dirt to your plate so much [more quickly]. The flavor profile, the vitamin and mineral content, and the nutrient value of that food will be much higher. If a tomato is picked in Lancaster at 4:00 a.m. and it ends up on a plate in our restaurant at 4:00 p.m. that afternoon, it’s going to taste ten times better than if it was picked in California, shipped across the country, and refrigerated for a week. When the food is local, consumers really see and taste the benefit.”

In addition to added nutrient value, eating local can have other health benefits. Locally grown foods tend to be safer from contamination because they spend less time in storage. Plus, eating local means investing in your local economy, which can have downstream benefits in a community.

“We take comfort food recipes here and prepare them with local ingredients in a healthier way and they taste good,” says Clayton of Kathy’s Café. “That to me is a gateway to people eating healthier foods more often. They’ll say to themselves, ‘if they can make this at the restaurant, why can’t I try it at home?’”

Health and Safety in Agriculture

As the local food movement continues to expand and evolve, it’s important for consumers to understand the type of labor needed to get fresh meat and produce from the farm to their table. “People often have these bucolic notions of farming,” Tait says,



“but it is not for the faint of heart. It’s really hard work.”

Agriculture is, in fact, among the most physically dangerous industries in the country. At the national level, the number of work-related fatalities in the agricultural industry is four-to-five times higher than the median industrial category, with a fatal work injury rate of 18.6 farmers and farm workers per 100,000 in 2022. The rate of non-fatal injuries and days missed due to illness and injuries is higher than other industries as well, and the actual incidence rates are greater than what is being reported.

“Injuries and illnesses are underreported,” says Florence Becot, Ph.D., associate professor of health and safety in the Department of Agriculture and Biological Engineering and lead of the Agricultural Safety and Health Program at Penn State. “One reason for the underreporting comes from the fact that the Occupational and Safety Health Administration (OSHA) requirements, including those around reporting of work-related injuries and incidents, do not apply to

farms with ten or fewer employees within the last year. The last estimates I saw indicated that over 90 percent of farms fall within that category. Another challenge in developing a full grasp of injuries and fatalities comes from the lack of a robust surveillance system.

“Still,” Becot continues, “we know that at the national level tractor overturns and roadway crashes are the number one cause of death in agriculture. Other causes of fatalities include contact with equipment, including animal-related injuries. And increasingly, we’re seeing more grain bin injuries—death by drowning in grain.”

“Whenever you’re using tractors or mowers or compost turners, there’s always an increased risk of someone getting hurt,” says Tait. “Having good training, good safety procedures, and protective gear available, and making sure equipment is in good working order is important.”

According to a report from Penn State Extension, there were thirty-seven farm-related fatalities in Pennsylvania in 2022, a significant increase over recent years (the previous five-year median was twenty-seven annual fatalities). The causes of those fatalities were similar to those reported nationally, with tractor overturns and other vehicular crashes being most common. These fatalities were disproportionately found among the very old (sixty-five-and-over) and the very young (nineteen-and-under), which is also statistically common.

Safeguarding children who live and work on family farms is a significant issue in agriculture. Even if a child is not of working age, they are often exposed to dangerous equipment or potentially harmful activities that take place when working with livestock or harvesting produce.

“We do know that whether children do or do not work on a family farm, both



groups experience high rates of injuries and fatalities,” Becot says. “When we think about supervising a young child, in most cases we think about having them within arm’s length or watching them carefully. But having a child within arm’s length on a farm might lead to a different result. For instance, if you’re milking a cow and you have the child within arm’s length, the child has a greater chance to be kicked by the cow.”

Lanette Fetzer, MS, MSN, CRNP, FNP-BC, CHC, is a certified AgriSafe nurse scholar and a member of the Centre County, PA child death review team where she’s reviewed farm-related fatalities in youth populations. “We had an Anabaptist farming family [in Centre County, PA] who lost one son in a fatal farming accident and then about six months later, two of the other sons got trapped in a grain silo and the father went in after them and both sons and the father ended up dying. It was a really tragic situation, and it underscores how unintentional injuries are a leading cause of death in the agricultural community.”

“For a long time, farm safety experts have been saying the best way to keep children safe is to supervise them off the farm worksite,” says Becot. “That’s particularly the case for the youngest children. But at no point has there been a real conversation about what childcare looks like in agriculture. Similar to the general population, farm parents are working parents and it’s not convenient for them to have children around all the time. It can be a source of stress but it also has an impact on these parents’ ability to get the farm work done.”

Together with Dr. Shoshannah Inwood from The Ohio State University, Becot has conducted a national study about the linkages between childcare farm safety and farm business viability, and she has asked what childcare looks like on farms. “When we asked farmers if they experienced childcare challenges, three-quarters said yes, and most of those challenges were related to cost and access,” she reports. “Even though we often think of farm families as having a village to help them raise their children, almost half of our respondents said their family and friends are too busy to help, and over a quarter told us that their family and friends cannot help due to health difficulties.”

Lack of childcare can be one source of stress for farming families, but stress is a major contributor to health issues for farmers more generally. “Farmers have an increased risk of stress because of the unrelenting nature of the job,” Fetzer says. “When it’s frigid outside, they still have to get up at 5:00 am to feed their animals. When there’s a drought, they have to worry about fire or they worry about their crops dying from lack of water. The stress is unbelievable.”

“I tend to be a pretty positive person,” Tait says, “but I will own that [farming] can be very stressful. It can be relentless. You don’t have the luxury of, say, not getting the carrots in when they need to be planted. It’s very time-sensitive work. Every good farmer

“The way we talk about supporting the farm sector is usually with regard to the needs of the farm business—for example, access to land, capital, and equipment,” Becot says. “But we rarely consider the challenges at the household level that any family can experience, whether that’s childcare, or aging or health insurance problems. If we want to support the ag sector, we cannot only focus on ag production, we need to look at the people as well. Research has consistently found that when farm families experience challenges in meeting their needs, the farm business is negatively affected.”

In addition to being physically dangerous and mentally stressful, working in agriculture can be extremely demanding on the body; those physical demands often lead to long-term



I know has an almost sacrosanct planting and seeding log. You need that stability and planning to make it work, because you’ll encounter a lot of things that won’t work. Sometimes the well goes down, or the electricity goes out, or you face other acts of nature—as a farmer you have to surrender to things that you can’t control.”

Even if stress is a fundamental part of the occupation, it’s never easily anticipated nor is it certain when or where it will come from. “The health community is trying to raise awareness about these mental health challenges,” Fetzer says. “Farmers don’t have to keep these things secret. There’s help available out there. The Penn State agricultural community is really interested in promoting that awareness and developing those connections to get people the help they need.”

health problems. Farmers and farm workers contend with prolonged sun exposure and extreme temperature variations, which can lead to health issues such as skin cancers. Farm workers have higher rates of cardiovascular health problems than the general population and frequently suffer from chronic respiratory ailments. Studies have shown that the stooping, bending, and kneeling positions that are routinely needed to perform farm work can lead to chronic musculoskeletal pain. Plus, the use of pesticides in treating produce can lead to negative health outcomes for those with prolonged or repeated exposures, especially women and children.

Beyond physical safety protections and mental health support, another acute area of need for farm workers and farm families is better access to quality, affordable health insurance.



Farm labor has a tangible impact on the lives of local residents and those people that farmers meet at farmstands or at weekend markets. The same is true of restaurant owners and operators who are committed to helping customers discover local foods and participate in healthy eating.

“We try to play an impactful role in our community by maintaining those relationships with farmers and co-ops which leads to increasing our customers’ knowledge of local fruits and vegetables,” says Short of Harvest Seasonal. “But it’s not just our customers; we’re also making sure our employees are getting a free meal every day that has local ingredients in it, that they know where those ingredients are coming from, and that it’s just better for their health. Our employees can then pass that knowledge on.”

Above all, local food is a commodity that everyone can share and appreciate, and it can bring communities together. “We’re lucky to be a place where people gather,” Clayton says of Kathy’s Cafe. “It’s a safe space, whether you come here all the time or you’re new. There’s a real feeling of community here. We say everyone’s a family here, but we really are. We spend more time with some people than their families do. We’ve had people meet their spouses here, or people who’ve worked here years ago who come back and bring their kids. It’s a place that people come back to.”

She goes on to add, “We’re just really grateful to have the agricultural community that we do. And we’re going to continue to support them as much as we can every day.”

“As a group, farmers are well insured—it’s over 90 percent,” says Becot. “But the problem is that they are underinsured, meaning, their coverage won’t be sufficient if they have a major health crisis. Over half of the farmers we interviewed in our research were not confident they could pay the cost of a major illness or injury without going into debt. For farmers who don’t have health insurance through an off-farm job, they often face the intersection of the cost of health insurance and the income generated by the farm business. If they want to grow their business, they might lose their eligibility for tax subsidies or Medicaid. We also heard from farmers who limited the growth of their farm business so that their children could remain covered by the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). One farmer told me, ‘the stable choice for my children to have health insurance is an irrational choice for my farm business.’”

Becot continues by addressing a persistent myth about farmers and their health: “I’ve heard over the years that farmers are stubborn, that they don’t want to go to [their health care provider]. The data on health care access [are] limited, but I have seen studies where 70-80 percent of farmers had an established relationship with a primary care provider. So, the reality is much more complicated than saying ‘they don’t want to go’. In our study, common barriers included the high cost of insurance, providers not accepting their health insurance, and the inability to take time off from work. It’s important to think about those structural challenges, and how people’s environment affects whether they’re going to seek care. Like a lot of things in life, it’s a more complex story. It’s not black and white.”

Food and Agriculture as Part of the Community

Despite the dangers inherent in the work and the economic challenges of running a small agricultural business, farmers are dedicated to their work and are deeply tied to their community.

“It’s a great vocation,” Tait says, referring to small farm agriculture, “but it does take a certain passionate kind of person to really want to grow food. Most farmers end up doing most things themselves: you have to grow it, plant it, harvest it, pack it, market it. It’s a lot. You end up doing it all.”

Fetzer again stresses the benefits of buying from local farmers: “Even if you’re not in agriculture, if you live in the community, you still get to buy the fruits of their labor. When you buy local, not only are you supporting your local industry; you’re buying really good food. They don’t have the added ingredients; it’s just very fresh.”

For More Information

General information on agriculture in Pennsylvania:
agriculture.pa.gov

Penn State’s Agricultural Health & Safety Program:
extension.psu.edu/business-and-operations/farm-safety

Penn State’s Department of Agricultural & Biological Engineering has partnered with the Northeast Center for Occupational Health and Safety to provide financial support to help farmers install tractor rollbar retrofitting, an important safety program that will reduce farm injuries. For more information, see: ropsr4u.org/

Pennsylvania Food & Beverage Manufacturing:
[USDA Economic Research Service Report](#)

Pennsylvania Farmers Direct Sales:
[USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service Release](#)

United State Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service Report on Local Food Systems: ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42805/51174_ap068_report-summary.pdf?v=573.2

2023 Pennsylvania Farm Fatal Injury Summary: extension.psu.edu/2023-pennsylvania-farm-fatal-injury-summary

Linking Childcare to Farm Health Safety – Research Report: marshfieldresearch.org/nccrahs/FarmChildrenChildcare

RURAL COMMUNITY HEALTH CARE: Perspectives from a Medical Student

Madeline (Maddie) Snyder is a fourth-year medical student at the Penn State College of Medicine-University Park Campus (PSCOM-UP). During the next year, she will chronicle her medical education, her experience serving rural communities, and her progress toward earning her medical degree.



Maddie Snyder

It is a pleasure to be writing to you again as I continue on the path to obtaining my medical degree.

While reflecting on the focus of this issue of the magazine, Agricultural Health and Safety, I was reminded of a several moments that have stood out as I have progressed through my medical training.

All of my medical training has been in Ohio and Pennsylvania, where even the large hospitals, located in big cities, serve a hardworking rural population. As part of the application process to get into medical school, it is important to spend time shadowing physicians of varying specialties to show prospective schools, and yourself, that you have spent time understanding the role of a physician, and that you like it! During one of these shadowing experiences, I was fortunate to work with the University of Pittsburgh Orthopedic Trauma Team. A patient I saw when on service was involved in a hay baler accident, having suffered a lower arm amputation. Many physicians have shared that there are patients who you will meet that stay with you the duration of your career. For me, this man is one of those patients. It was my first personal exposure to the dangers of a career in agriculture, and to the idea that as a physician, you often meet patients at turning points in their lives, moments of unavoidable change. It's important to recognize that, and to give critical thought to how you will support patients in making these transitions in their lives.

The secondary focus of this Spring issue, Farm-to-Table, has reminded me of the patients who have benefited from making small changes in their lifestyles that result in big improvements in their overall health.

One of the great benefits of attending medical school near a major university is the opportunity to work closely with elite athletes. As a former collegiate athlete, I know that fewer than 2 percent of college athletes go on to the professional leagues. Those athletes with their eyes set on a career must make many lifestyle changes that set them apart from their competition and on the path to success.

One patient with whom I worked closely is a wrestler, a sport which presents an interesting challenge of weight management. A close look at sports that involve cutting (losing) weight, especially at the youth level, reveals many unhealthy and potentially dangerous practices that can become habits over time. When viewing longevity in a sport that involves cutting weight, the healthy and intentional viewpoint is, the better one feels, the better they can perform to the best of their ability. This patient athlete made meaningful changes, including increasing water consumption, eliminating refined carbohydrates, and committing to eating locally sourced meats and in-season fruits and vegetables to gain maximum nutritional value and optimal flavor. This allowed the patient to live closer to an ideal weight, with little fluctuations due to diet, and when it came time to lose weight, an easier weight cut with more nutritional reserve was achieved.

While most of us are not training to be professional athletes, there's something about making small changes that make a big impact, especially in our health. This patient's journey has inspired me to consider the small tweaks I can make that will lead to a better overall quality of life.

PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

Celebrates Rural Health in Pennsylvania

To celebrate 2023 Rural Health Week in Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH) presented the 2023 Rural Health Awards to individuals and organizations that make a significant impact on rural health in Pennsylvania.

Rural Health Week in Pennsylvania encompassed and celebrated National Rural Health Day, held on November 16, established by the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health.

Rural Health Hero of the Year Award: George Garrow, MD

The Rural Health Hero of the Year Award was presented to George Garrow, MD, CEO of Primary Health Network, in Sharon, PA. The award recognizes an outstanding leader who demonstrates a personal and professional commitment to the rural health needs of a community, works with relevant organizations to develop or expand a program that addresses an identified need, and goes above and beyond the call of duty. Garrow was recognized for his exceptional dedication and leadership in addressing rural health care challenges in Pennsylvania. His extensive involvement on health care boards and councils, such as the Buhl Regional Health Foundation and the Mercer County Health Task Force, underscores his commitment to improving health care in Mercer County and beyond. Garrow's collaborative efforts with organizations in multiple rural counties, along with his pioneering work in environmental determinants of health, exemplify his innovative approach to rural

health issues. His contributions, including recruiting primary care providers and providing training for medical students, reflect his unwavering dedication to improving rural communities' well-being in Pennsylvania.

Rural Health Leader of the Year Award: Bonnie Kent

Bonnie Kent, operation manager and community liaison for the Northern Dauphin Human Services Center in Elizabethtown, PA, was honored with the 2023 Community Rural Health Leader of the Year Award. This award recognizes an outstanding leader who organized, led, developed or expanded an exemplary multi-dimensional rural community health program or initiative and who has demonstrated leadership to a rural community health program. The Northern Dauphin Human Services Center serves as a "one stop shop" with fourteen agencies that provide access to a variety of services and programs to improve their quality of life for northern

WAYNE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS Receive National Collaboration Award



In the photo above are, from left: seated: Dr. Linda Thomas-Hemak, The Wright Center; Lisa Davis, Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health; Terri Lacey, Wayne Memorial Community Health Centers; Dr. Carrie Demers, Himalayan Institute; James Pettinato, Wayne Memorial Hospital. Standing: Mikki Uzupes, Wayne Tomorrow!; Commissioner Brian Smith; Hope Wormuth, Pennsylvania Rural Health Association; Lisa Champeau, Carol Kneier, and Chandra Roberts, Wayne Memorial Hospital; Greg Capitolo, Himalayan Institute; Tim Huber, Wayne Memorial Hospital; and Commissioner Jocelyn Cramer.



Lisa Davis presents the Rural Health Hero Award to George Garrow, MD.



Bonnie Kent, third from left, poses with Rural Health Leader of the Year Award, together with family members, the Dauphin County Commissioners, and nominators from the Penn State College of Medicine.



Lisa Davis presents the Rural Health Program of the Year Award to the Sexual Assault Forensic Examination Telehealth (SAFE-T) System to the team.

Dauphin County residents. Kent creatively fills gaps and engages the community and organizations to work together for positive change. By partnering with the Penn State student-run Collaborative Outreach Program for Health Equity (SCOPE), a mobile free clinic, Kent found a way to help improve rural health equity in her community, which led to SCOPE's ability to build relationships and connect with the community by providing flu shots, health screenings, education, resources, and community-friendly activities. Kent's dedication to improving the health of her community goes beyond her position and roles she fills and her love of a happy ending drives her to steer others to be the best they can be.

Rural Health Program of the Year Award: Sexual Assault Forensic Examination Telehealth (SAFE-T) System

The Sexual Assault Forensic Examination Telehealth (SAFE-T) System received the Rural Health Program of the Year Award. This

award recognizes an exemplary health program that addresses an identified need in a rural community utilizing unique, creative, and innovative approaches to do so. The SAFE-T system, established in 2017 in the Penn State Ross and Carol Nese College of Nursing, was recognized for providing person-centered, evidence-based, trauma-informed forensic care for victims of sexual assault (SA) across Pennsylvania. The equitable access model to healing care delivers 24/7 telehealth support and guidance during SA forensic exams, ensuring patients take their first step toward healing in a familiar, local environment. Working closely with rural community partners, including advocacy, law enforcement, district attorneys, and regional and state government officials, the SAFE-T System provides a comprehensive approach to developing improved patient outcomes. Ongoing research and evaluation components are integral to the success of the program.

On National Rural Health Day 2023, the Wayne County, PA Board of Commissioners was presented with the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH) Collaboration Award. This award honors an individual or organization that demonstrates leadership in recognizing and promoting National Rural Health Day and the Power of Rural throughout the year. The award was presented during a commissioner's meeting on November 16, 2023, to Commissioners Brian Smith, Jocelyn Cramer, and James Shook by Lisa Davis, director of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health and outreach associate professor health policy and administration at Penn State.

Wayne County, located in the upper northeastern region of Pennsylvania, is one of the most rural and geographically isolated counties in the state and one of

the most beautiful. The county is served by an exceptional rural health delivery system, Wayne Memorial Health System; the Wright Center for Community Health, an FQHC system affiliated with Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine; and the Himalayan Institute.

In 2021, the Commissioners proclaimed November 18 as Rural Health Day in Wayne County, in recognition of National Rural Health Day. This was, and remains, the first, and only, county in Pennsylvania to take this action since the launch of National Rural Health Day in 2010. During the public meeting when the Proclamation was announced, the Commissioners pledged to "Support the Power of Rural" by proclaiming Rural Health Day in Wayne County on

each future National Rural Health Day. The promise was upheld on November 17, 2022, when that day was proclaimed as Rural Health Day in the county. The tenets in the Proclamation guide the county-wide initiatives supported by the Commissioners to advance high quality, accessible health care for all Wayne County residents.

The Wayne County Board of Commissioners make rural health a top priority and are committed to building industry, entrepreneurship, and family-sustaining jobs that complement the county's excellent quality of life. The wide-ranging initiative they created, "Wayne Tomorrow," ensures that a comprehensive plan guides healthy living in the county.



ANGEL FLIGHT EAST RECOGNIZED AS

2023 Pennsylvania's Community Star on National Rural Health Day

In celebration of National Rural Health Day on November 16, 2023, the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH) unveiled the list of 2023 Community Stars. This annual program recognizes remarkable individuals and organizations in each state that exemplify the true spirit of collaboration, turning challenges into opportunities, ensuring access to quality care, and fostering a sense of unity and support within rural communities.

Angel Flight East (AFE) was honored as Pennsylvania's 2023 Community Star for the unique services they provide: free flights for children and adults in need of medical treatment far from home and for their Rural & Rare Outreach Initiative. Serving communities across a fourteen-state footprint, AFE, of Blue Bell, PA, provides timesaving options for residents to access the best care possible for their medical condition. Volunteer pilots use their own airplanes and cover all costs of the flight. Passengers can fly as often as needed, and there is never a charge.



*image courtesy
Angel Flight East*



*images courtesy
Angel Flight East*

Along with flights to medical care, AFE provides compassion flights for family members and friends to see a loved one in treatment. They have flown children to specialty summer camps and partnered with other non-profit organizations to fly patients to medical conferences they may otherwise not have been able to attend.

AFE directs their resources to support health care needs other than patient and family transportation. At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, AFE needed to briefly suspend passenger flights. A volunteer pilot in Ohio asked if the organization could fly personal protective equipment (PPE) from the state of Indiana to the Boston Emergency Management Agency. From there, AFE partnered with local volunteer groups and businesses who started making face shields, face masks, hand sanitizer, surgical gowns, gloves, and more. AFE donated all supplies to rural hospitals across the East Coast and flew 200,000 pieces of PPE to ninety rural health care facilities.

Jessica Ames, AFE outreach and events director, noted, "When we first started the Rural & Rare Outreach Initiative, we partnered with the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health to learn where our efforts could be most utilized and have the biggest impact. We are grateful to serve the needs of rural patients and their families."

*To learn more about Angel Flight East, visit angelflighteast.org.
For information on National Rural Health Day and the
Community Stars recognition, see powerofrural.org.*

ASERT:

SUPPORTING THE AUTISM COMMUNITY IN PENNSYLVANIA

In 2004, Pennsylvania recognized the imperative to better support people with autism living in the state and established a task force to address this need. One recommendation led to the launch of the Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training (ASERT) Collaborative. ASERT is a unique partnership of medical centers, universities, and providers dedicated to serving the autism community across the lifespan through a focus on innovation, collaboration, and improving access to quality services, data, and information. ASERT focuses on developing and curating resources and trainings for individuals with autism, their families and caregivers, providers, professionals, and the community.

Since 2004, ASERT partners have included UPMC Western Behavioral Health, the Penn State College of Medicine, and the AJ Drexel Autism Institute. In addition to supporting the work done through the Pennsylvania Department of Human Service's Office of Developmental Programs, staff at these organizations have trained over 25,000 individuals and collaborated on projects encompassing social skills, psychiatric rehabilitation, autism needs assessments, and more to benefit the autism community.

ASERT's initiatives include trauma-informed care for therapists, resilience courses for self-advocates and direct support professionals, awareness education for professionals across the justice system, self-advocate access to health care equity, emergency preparedness, and strategies to support aging and



underserved populations. ASERT engages in community outreach through partnerships with advocacy organizations, state entities, community organizations, and health and social service providers to serve those impacted by autism.

ASERT operates three websites: PAAutism.org, ASDNext.org, and AID in PA.org. The ASERT website is an all-encompassing hub for resources for all ages and stakeholders, a map of support groups organized by county, training opportunities, events, and an eLearning page with access to free online trainings. ASDNext addresses the challenges, needs, and supports for teens and young adults transitioning to adulthood. ASDNext visitors will find a collection of self-advocate-authored blogs and a safe online Community Page for peer-to-peer connections with those on the spectrum. AID in PA supports the broader needs of the intellectual disability and autism communities.

The ASERT Resource Center, targeted to clinicians and community experts from across the state, fields questions and provides guidance to anyone in need of information related to autism. The Resource Center can be accessed by phone, e-mail or through a contact form found on the PAAutism.org website. A Spanish call line and e-mail address are available.

As ASERT strengthens its connections with communities and organizations across the state, requests to provide free educational and awareness webinars and materials, collaborate with new partners, and expand support to the autism community are welcome!

For more information contact the ASERT Resource Center at 877-231-4244 or info@paautism.org



Additional Resources:

ASERT: Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training paautism.org

ASDNext: Resources for challenges, needs, and supports for teens and young adults with autism transitioning to adulthood asdnext.org

Aid in PA: Supports for the broader needs of the intellectual disability and autism communities aidinpa.org



Rural Health Clinics in Pennsylvania Receive National Excellence Awards

Lilypad®, a leading health care analytics firm, announced the 2024 Lilypad Awards, the first and only ranking program for the nation's 5,400+ rural health clinics (RHC). The awards recognize those RHCs that outperform their rural primary care practice peers in efficiency and operational excellence.

Five RHCs in Pennsylvania, representing 50 percent of the clinics in the northeast region of the U.S., received this recognition: Cameron County Rural Health Center, Emporium; New Bethlehem Rural Health Center, Fairmont City; Penn Highlands Brookville and Philipsburg; Family Medicine-Waynesburg, Waynesburg; and Upper Allegheny Medical Center, Port Allegany.

The Lilypad Awards are based on a comprehensive and objective assessment of RHC performance metrics across five domains, using data from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

Many RHCs receive enhanced reimbursement from government payers such as Medicare and Medicaid as a means of sustaining financial solvency. RHCs must be located in one or more health care shortage designations to be eligible for the program and generally are categorized as either provider-based (owned by a hospital with fifty or fewer beds) or independent. The Lilypad Awards evaluate both provider types to produce a comprehensive ranking system for every RHC in the nation.



"We're in the midst of a rural primary care renaissance," said Gregory Wolf, founder and president of Lilypad, LLC. "The growth, maturity, and increased strategic relevance of both provider-based and independent clinics is unprecedented. With the emergence of value-based payment models and industry-leading chronic care management programs, the rural health care safety net provides incredible opportunities for innovation. Rural health clinics that can achieve efficiencies, increase productivity, and demonstrate value will be well positioned for success. The Lilypad Awards provide a platform to evaluate and compare performance among small rural primary care practices."

"We are thrilled to have five award winners in Pennsylvania!" said Kelly Braun, PORH's rural primary care and integration coordinator. "These awards are a true testament to the hard work of both RHC staff and providers who are devoted to providing high quality care close to home for rural Pennsylvanians."

Mobile Vision Clinic

BRINGS FREE EYE SCREENINGS, CARE TO CHILDREN

Founded in 2012, Vision To Learn (VTL) addresses a health care problem affecting as many as three million school children in underserved communities nationwide and more than 150,000 in Pennsylvania, who lack eyeglasses needed to see the board, read a book, and participate in class. VTL's mobile vision clinics bring care directly to high-need rural, suburban, and urban communities, eliminating barriers to care. Children receive vision screenings, exams, and new prescription glasses, at no cost to students or their families, to help them succeed in school and life. Forty-seven VTL clinics, operating across fourteen states, serve upwards of 100,000 students each year.



Pennsylvania Department of Education data for the 2019-20 school year showed that only 20 percent of students who were referred for vision care following a school vision screening statewide reported receiving an eye exam. That number falls to 18 percent in rural communities, which highlights the need for innovative solutions such as VTL.

VTL launched in Pennsylvania in 2018, and now has five mobile clinic locations across the state, providing service across twenty-five counties. In the past five years, VTL Pennsylvania has examined more than 48,000 children and distributed more than 41,000 glasses.

VTL's services eliminate cost and logistical/transportation barriers for parents, decreases the stigma of wearing glasses, and partners with schools to encourage ongoing use of glasses. The VTL screening and examination process includes several steps. The school

nurse or a VTL optician performs vision screenings to identify students experiencing vision difficulties. VTL's mobile clinic then visits the school, where trained opticians and optometrists conduct eye exams for every student and assesses those who do not pass the vision screening. Students needing glasses choose a frame from a wide selection at the clinic, and glasses are delivered two weeks later. If a child loses or breaks their glasses within one year, VTL replaces them free of charge. VTL returns to each school every two years.

VTL's success serving rural communities in southwestern and central Pennsylvania helped facilitate expansion to Ohio in 2021. VTL, in collaboration with the Ohio Optometric Association and the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, launched a program serving deeply rural counties in Appalachian Ohio in the southeastern part of the state. The region faces a significant shortage of

care, with more than 90 percent of students in need who historically do not receive vision care. Some counties in the region do not have a single practicing optometrist.

The program was made possible through the state's ResultsOHIO pay-for-success model, which reimburses programs upon successful completion of key program outcomes. Building on the success of this work, Ohio's most recent state budget includes a two year, \$2.5M appropriation for youth vision initiatives. This funding is a landmark investment in pediatric vision, and a template for other states, such as neighboring Pennsylvania, to invest in ensuring that all students have equitable access to vision care.

To learn more about Vision To Learn, see visiontolearn.org.

The Rural Health Research Gateway offers easy and timely access to research completed by the Rural Health Research Centers, funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy. The Gateway provides policy briefs, chart books, fact sheets, journal articles, infographics, and more for use by policymakers, educators, public health employees, hospital staff, and others.

To learn more, access the Rural Health Research Gateway at ruralhealthresearch.org.



Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health
The Pennsylvania State University
106 Ford Building
University Park, PA 16802



PennState

PORH HAS MOVED!

Our new mailing address is 106 Ford Building, University Park, PA 16802. Telephone, e-mail addresses, and website remain the same.

PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

Pennsylvania State University
106 Ford Building
University Park, PA 16802-2315



814-863-8214



814-865-4688 (fax)



porh@psu.edu



porh.psu.edu

