

SPRING 2022

PENNSYLVANIA RURAL HEALTH

**THE HEALTH
BENEFITS
OF BEING
IN NATURE**

**2021 RURAL
HEALTH AWARDS**

**FREE CLINICS IN
PENNSYLVANIA**

COVID-19 Surges

LEAVING RURAL COMMUNITIES IN A CRITICAL STATE

*By Rachel Foster, MA, BSN, RN, Rural COVID-19
Project Manager, Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health*



With increasing incidence and low vaccination rates, rural Pennsylvania faces serious consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during surges such as the Delta and Omicron variants. As of January 2022, the cumulative death rate from COVID-19 was 1.3 times higher in rural Pennsylvania counties than urban counties. Nine of ten counties in Pennsylvania with the lowest COVID-19 vaccination rates were rural.

COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective at protecting against severe disease and death from the virus. Unvaccinated individuals are five times more likely to be infected with COVID-19, and ten times more likely to be hospitalized or die from COVID-19. Rural communities are at greatest risk, especially as rural hospitals continue to be overwhelmed with patients, experience staffing shortages, and lack available beds. Furthering this rural urban divide, many rural Americans exercise rugged individualism, which creates a false sense of reality or optimistic bias.

Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Health Initiative for Rural Pennsylvania (HIRP) was established in June 2020 to reduce COVID-19 incidence and increase vaccination rates in rural Pennsylvania. With this funding, the program compiles research, implements a rural-specific education and outreach campaign, completes a community development process, and organizes a learning collaborative. These efforts engage community stakeholders to develop lasting infrastructure through cross-sector, county-specific COVID-19 Advisory Groups in twenty rural counties.

In the fall of 2021, program staff completed a rapid community assessment process in thirteen rural Pennsylvania counties to gather local attitudes, beliefs, and opinions regarding the pandemic and vaccine hesitancy. The sample included sixty-nine participants who indicated these most common reasons for vaccine hesitancy:

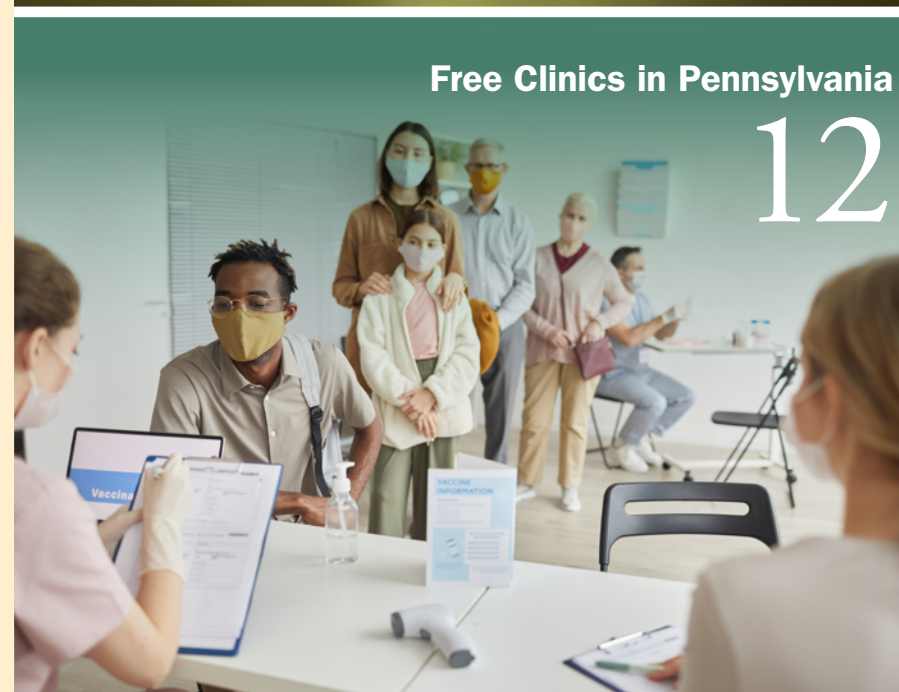
- Mis/dis-information;
- Perceived immunity from prior COVID-19 infection;

- Politically charged/motivated;
- “Wait and see” approach;
- Expressions of freedom and personal choice;
- Perceptions that the pandemic is an urban only issue;
- Lack of reliable, consistent information; and
- Concerns about ingredients in the vaccines.

As part of the HIRP community development process, community needs assessments and problem identification exercises have elucidated common issues across rural counties including:

- Absence of cohesive, reputable messaging and education;
- Lack of equitable access to COVID-19 testing and consistent guidelines for staying home after a positive diagnosis;
- Decreased government involvement in mitigation;
- Perceptions of lasting herd immunity as a safe alternative to vaccination;
- COVID-19 fatigue, overriding negativity, and lack of compliance;
- Pushing the vaccine too hard and losing sight of common-sense mitigation strategies;
- Negative political and faith-based influences;
- Overwhelmed health care systems and unrealistic expectations for health care access;
- Mixed perspectives and implementation of COVID-19 mitigation in schools, businesses, and faith-based organizations; and
- Inconsistent and unrelatable data.

It appears that many rural communities lack organized local or collective efforts to manage the pandemic. As the federal government backs away from population-wide strategies and begins the dialogue about “learning to live with the virus,” Pennsylvania can focus on local, short-term strategies in times of a surge.



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Pennsylvania Rural Health Lisa Davis, *Director*

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THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF Being in Nature

By Andy Shelden

Modern technology and a global pandemic forced many people to live and work without leaving their homes. Internet-connected devices have afforded virtual options to socialize, order groceries and meals, work remotely, and exercise. This isolation has, according to researchers, led to a better appreciation for being out-of-doors and enjoying natural surroundings.

There are many health benefits from spending time outdoors. Enjoying nature can have measurable impacts on personal health. Medical research and psychological studies show that those who spend more time outdoors tend to lead longer, healthier, and happier lives. Even simple, short interactions with nature, like going for a walk in a park, can be beneficial to physical and mental health.

This article explores the connection between nature and the impact it may have on overall health and well-being and highlights opportunities for Pennsylvanians to further their connection with the natural resources around them. The Keystone State has an abundance of natural areas to explore during all four seasons of the year.

The Connection between Health and Nature

Clinicians and medical researchers have long understood the significant connection between interacting with nature and personal health. Spending time in nature is beneficial to a person's physical health and to their mental health as well. When health care providers apply this concept to a course of medical treatment, they use the term "ecotherapy," meaning using nature as part of a toolkit to treat a patient's overall health. Ecotherapy is becoming an integral part of treatment modalities for some patients.

"The medical community really started to take note of ecotherapy, in my view, when drug and alcohol clinics began incorporating it into their rehabilitation programs, attributing it to promising results," says Lannette Fetzer, CRNP. Fetzer serves as the quality improvement

coordinator at the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health where she oversees quality-of-care metrics for over two dozen rural hospitals across the state. "Studies have found that patients who incorporate the environment and interaction with nature into their treatment plans have better outcomes. Those activities decrease blood pressure and heart rate, and offer so many benefits."

It is hard to overstate the importance of the connection between nature and physical and mental well-being. Research also has shown that exposure to nature is linked to a myriad of other benefits, such as lower stress, better moods, a reduced risk of psychiatric disorders, and higher levels of empathy and cooperation. Exposure to natural environments can improve working memory, cognitive flexibility, and attention control in adults. For children, studies have shown that having green spaces near schools promotes cognitive development and increased self-controlling behaviors.

Exposure to nature presents in many forms: green spaces in parks and forests, fresh air, clean water, and nature trails. The exposure provides the brain with a robust stimulus that is crucial for sensory input and better health. "There are apps that you can download on your phone that can help," Fetzer says. "Just by closing your eyes and listening to the sounds of nature—birds chirping, water flowing—has been proven to lower a person's hemodynamic measures, such as blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing."

Every little bit of interaction helps. As a result, Pennsylvania's health care providers are recommending new and innovative ways to encourage patients to interact with nature and the environment. Hospitals are building walking trails adjacent to their facilities so that patients can access the outdoors while receiving in-hospital care, and many of those trails are American with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant. Hospitals also have been active in setting up farmers markets and outdoor community hubs that encourage healthy eating and living. The nationwide program "Walk with a Doc" brings health care professionals together with their community in a fun, relaxed environment that encourages healthy living. More than a dozen Pennsylvania health care systems participate in that grassroots effort.



One of the most comprehensive approaches to incorporating the environment into everyday health takes place in a community in Erie County, located in northwestern Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Department of Health, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) health system, and Lake Erie College of Medicine (LECOM) Corry Hospital collaborated to bring the Blue Zone Project community health initiative to residents of Corry, Pennsylvania. The Blue Zones Project works with communities nationwide to develop public-private partnerships and create sustainable improvement to the environment, policy, and social networks, to encourage residents to live healthier, happier lives. There are roughly fifty Blue Zone communities nationwide, but so far, Corry is Pennsylvania’s only qualified community. Residents there are taking the pledge to make healthier choices across many aspects of their lives, and they now have access to walking groups, workshops, and more extensive healthy food choices at restaurants and grocery stores.

“It’s so impressive what they’re doing at Corry Hospital,” Fetzter says. “They are incorporating the environment into all of their treatment modalities and they’re having success with it. In municipalities that are designated Blue Zones, the residents begin to feel better.”

Despite challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, Erie County executives are encouraged by the results they’ve seen so far and hope to expand the Blue Zone initiative beyond Corry to the entire county. It’s this type of whole-community approach that can be the future of the ecotherapeutic movement. As climate change continues to pose a threat to our planet, linking the efforts of health care providers,

local governments, schools, businesses, and community partners can lead to healthier natural environments and healthier outcomes for individuals and communities.

Exploring Nature in the Keystone State

Pennsylvania includes a mix of urban, suburban, and rural environments. No matter where you live, there are places that promote the health benefits of nature. More than two-thirds of Pennsylvania’s counties are officially designated as rural, according to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, and as a result, areas with low population density are abundant throughout the state. Even densely populated areas such as Allegheny County in the southwest, the Philadelphia suburbs in the southeast, or the Capitol corridor leading from southcentral to northeast Pennsylvania are close to natural areas in the state.

The extensive trail network maintained by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) is a great way to experience the abundance of the outdoors. DCNR maintains more than 650 trails, totaling over 12,000 miles, with options for biking, hiking, and walking. Local parks departments and community outdoor groups also can help discover trails in areas that may not officially be maintained by DCNR.

An added bonus of the trails network that has grown exponentially, is the rails-to-trails system. This is a nationwide movement to repurpose abandoned rail lines into biking trails, promoting physical fitness and environmentally-friendly tourism. Previously inaccessible natural environments are now available to enjoy, thanks to rails-to-trails.



Currently, there are nearly 200 rails-to-trails lines in Pennsylvania, totaling more than 2,000 miles. One of the best reviewed rail trails in the state is the Great Allegheny Passage navigating southeast from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Maryland. For a shorter trip, the Heritage Rail Trail in York County, a twenty-five mile stretch of the old Northern Central Railroad Line, is recommended.

More than 229 miles of the Appalachian Trail (AT) run through Pennsylvania. The southern part of the state offers some of the gentlest, smoothest terrain of the entire AT, including the Cumberland Valley. Other highlights are the AT Museum in Pine Grove State Park (home to the “half gallon challenge” near the trail’s mid-point) and the charming town of Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania which houses the AT’s mid-Atlantic office. Don’t miss the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania in Tioga County, also known as the Pine Creek Gorge, which stretches for over forty-five miles with depths of nearly 1,500 feet.

Taking advantage of the abundant trail networks in the state can be great for physical health and can provide a welcome respite from the stress and congestion of a typical daily commute. There are 121 state parks and more than 2.2 million acres of state forests in Pennsylvania, which offer ideal places to connect with nature and nurture emotional health.

Research has shown that time spent on or near bodies of water also can be therapeutic. Many state parks feature freshwater lakes and rivers, perfect for aquatic activities like swimming, boating, canoeing, kayaking or water-skiing. Pymatuning State Park in northwest Crawford County is home to the largest lake in the Pennsylvania state park system. Other popular state parks for water activities include Prince Gallitzin State Park in central Pennsylvania, home to Glendale Lake, and Lake Raystown in Huntingdon County.

State parks are home to many of Pennsylvania’s best fishing spots, hence, the state’s reputation as one of the best fly-fishing destinations in the eastern United States. Miles of rivers and streams are available to the public within the state park and forest system and are abundant resources for anglers of all ages and levels of experience. Fly-fishing is a great activity to pursue while opening the senses to the environment.



Even former U.S. President Jimmy Carter loves the state for fishing, especially at Spruce Creek in Huntingdon County.

Pennsylvania’s winter weather doesn’t have to limit options for getting outdoors. Because of the diversity of terrain, a variety of activities are available that benefit health and well-being, including downhill and cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or ice fishing. The Pocono Mountains in eastern Pennsylvania are the state’s premier skiing destination, and there’s also great skiing in the western half of the state at Laurel Mountain in Westmoreland County.

Environmental Impact

There are so many great natural areas to explore in Pennsylvania. However, any positive health experience in nature depends on a public dedicated to keeping the environment clean and healthy in perpetuity. Local governments are emphasizing environmentally-friendly practices, to ensure clean air and water for communities to enjoy.

Having patients engage in nature has never been more significant. “Incorporating nature into your daily activities can tremendously help your health,” Fetzter says.



RURAL COMMUNITY HEALTH CARE:

Perspective from a Medical Student

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



Maddie Snyder

It is a joy to be writing this column again! This year, my second, is my clerkship year, the year in medical school where I rotate among physicians and patients across many different specialties. Having this experience in the second year, as we do here at the University Park Campus of the Penn State College of Medicine, differs from the traditional model of medical school where two years of classroom-based learning are followed by the clerkship year in the third year. The foundation of our curriculum is that learning is most relevant when classroom knowledge is applied to patients. I've found that my nightly textbook learning is much more robust because of the relationships I am building with my patients during the day.

One rotation this year is at the Family Practice Center located in Mifflintown, Pennsylvania, where I gain exposure to rural family medicine. This rotation is an important contrast to the experience of our family medicine clinics surrounding Penn State, in State College, Pennsylvania. I have been told that most family medicine physicians choose the specialty of family medicine because they enjoy everything medicine has to offer. I have found that sentiment rings especially true in the setting of rural family medicine. The scope of practice in rural settings reveals that rural physicians use every part of their medical training. During my first week at the Family Practice Center, I responded to a motor vehicle accident involving a school bus full of elementary school children. I ran onto the scene with the physicians at the same time as the emergency response teams arrived. This experience gave me valuable insight into the call to service of a physician practicing in a rural area. Rural providers have strong relationships with the community. I felt the love the physicians have for their

patients when they dropped everything, rescheduled their day, grabbed their rescue bag, and arrived on the scene as fast as possible. It's a blessing to report that no one was seriously injured.

The clerkship year provides a great perspective to a budding physician to experience health care delivery in various settings: from urban to rural, affluent to low-income. I reflect on a conversation I had with a patient at a weekend clinic in rural Tyrone, Pennsylvania. I asked what barriers her community faces in accessing health care. She told me of the loss the community experienced due to suicides of young adults, including those in her family and she emphasized the need for more resources and physicians in her community. What a powerful message for someone in a position to contribute in a positive way to a problem facing many of our rural communities across our state and country.

I am fortunate to receive a medical education from a program where I am learning from a variety of patient populations involving many demographics. I am training in various specialties across several locations in Pennsylvania—from Harrisburg, Hershey, Tyrone, and Mifflintown to State College. These experiences contribute to the anticipated outcome of becoming a well-rounded physician, equipped to provide patients with the health care each deserves. As I progress through this year, I feel an important shift in my mindset about how I will practice medicine when I become a physician. I fall back on the conversations with rural residents who do not have the same ease of access to care as in urban areas. I realize that it is in my control to make a meaningful contribution to the solution.

PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH PRESENTS

2021 Rural Health Awards

Continuing the annual Rural Health Week in Pennsylvania tradition, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH) presented the 2021 Rural Health Awards to individuals and organizations who took leadership roles and made a significant impact on rural

health in Pennsylvania. The 2021 Rural Health Week in Pennsylvania, proclaimed by Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf for November 15-19, was an excellent opportunity to present to and honor these award winners. Rural Health Week in Pennsylvania encompassed and celebrated National Rural Health Day, held on November 18.



Karen Cullen of Sullivan County displays the award she received during a virtual presentation

Rural Health Hero of the Year Award: Karen Cullen

The Rural Health Hero of the Year Award was presented to Karen Cullen of Sullivan County, Pennsylvania. 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. Cullen was commended for her incredible patient advocacy efforts, her commitment to providing high-quality patient care, serving as a liaison for specialized care, and promoting mental health services in Sullivan County. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Sullivan County was one of two Pennsylvania counties chosen to hold stand-alone community COVID-19 vaccine clinics due to Cullen's insistence. She spent countless hours reaching out to patients without access to technology and led her team of staff and volunteers with reassuring confidence. Cullen has been a strong ally for mental health services and works tirelessly volunteering for flu and COVID-19 vaccine clinics, and health fairs to ensure residents are getting the health care they need.



Lisa Davis, director of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, presents the award to Kendra Aucker, President and CEO of Evangelical Community Hospital in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

Rural Health Leader of the Year Award: Kendra Aucker

Kendra Aucker, President and CEO of Evangelical Community Hospital, in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, received the Rural Health Leader of the Year Award. This recognition honors an outstanding leader who has organized, led, developed or expanded an exemplary multidimensional state rural health program or initiative that benefits rural Pennsylvanians. Aucker's commitment and dedication to leading COVID-19 testing sites in the community was lauded as well as her support of staff at the hospital. When vaccines became available, the hospital began scheduling appointments for frontline workers and moved to offering vaccines to the public as quickly as possible through weekly clinics. Aucker was a vocal proponent for infection prevention mitigation efforts including masking, social distancing, and staying home when sick. She served as an advocate to local politicians, policy leaders, and the media on the need for strong support to stop the spread of COVID-19. Through Aucker's efforts, the hospital cared for the community and also for the staff, ensuring that both had access to the resources and supports needed during the pandemic.

Congratulations to the 2021 Rural Health Award Recipients!



Angela Harding, Clinton County Commissioner, receives the award from Lisa Davis, director, Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health

Rural Health Legislator of the Year Award: Angela Harding

The Rural Health Legislator of the Year Award was presented to Angela Harding, Clinton County Commissioner. The award recognizes an outstanding legislator from Pennsylvania for their work and support of rural health initiatives that address an identified need in their district or across the state. Harding was lauded for her commitment to identifying and addressing critical rural health issues including education, the environment, transportation, and equality; engaging younger professionals and women in leadership roles; and moving Clinton County forward through development, growth, recruitment, and retention. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Harding spearheaded the Community Emergency Coalition to address COVID-19 by engaging community leaders and institutions for sharing information, encouraging partnerships, creating a unified front in addressing community needs, and developing a pandemic policy handbook for all county employees. Harding developed a 'Relocation Incentive Program' using federal American Rescue Plan funds to encourage individuals to work and live in Clinton County. She collaborated with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation on a multimodal strategy to improve transportation opportunities to address the rural challenges of access to health care and other services.



Lisa Davis, director of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, presents the award to students representing the Lock Haven University COVID-19 Response

Rural Health Program of the Year Award: Lock Haven University COVID-19 Response

The Lock Haven University (LHU) COVID-19 Response was the recipient of the State 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. LHU developed a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to manage COVID-19 at the university. During the late spring and summer of 2020, LHU established special expert teams to investigate an approach to providing a safe and effective method of delivering an academic experience. Team findings were reported at the end of summer 2020, and the LHU COVID-19 Institutional Response Team was formed. This cohesive team of key university representatives shifted gears rapidly and changed course during unpredictable developments. Diverse talent and informed perspectives lead to a quick and effectively executed mitigation strategy. Students were engaged immediately in delivering messaging and creating solutions to address the uncertainties of a global pandemic. The creative and population driven robust strategy of behavior-based prevention included educational campaigns, student-led vaccine challenges, engagement of over 100 students in COVID mitigation efforts, the institution of low-density student housing, COVID-19 testing, rapid detection, case investigation, isolation, contact tracing, and quarantine strategies. A "Be the Solution" grant was developed and funded by faculty and staff to support student engagement in identifying and developing creative solutions to complicated challenges.



David Hoff, CEO (retired) of Wayne Memorial Hospital in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, receives the Community Rural Health Leader of the Year Award from Lisa Davis, director of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health

Community Rural Health Leader of the Year Award: David Hoff

David Hoff, CEO (Ret.), Wayne Memorial Hospital in Honesdale, Pennsylvania received the Community Rural Health Leader of the Year Award. This award honors an outstanding leader who organized, led, developed or expanded an exemplary multi-dimensional rural community health program or initiative and who demonstrated leadership to a rural community health program. Hoff was recognized for his dynamic leadership in molding the non-profit Wayne Memorial Hospital and Health System into a multi-faceted, fiscally strong, and medically sound rural health care system focused on community wellness, innovation, and collaboration. Hoff committed Wayne Memorial to adapting to local health care needs and based decisions on survey data which resulted in expanded behavioral health services, development of a Tick-Borne Disease Wellness Center, and an innovative Food Prescription Program for chronic disease management. Hoff was recognized for understanding the crucial role of the hospital in Wayne County as a key part of health, economic, and community development. Through Hoff's efforts, clinical partners and others created innovative solutions to rural challenges, such as Wayne Memorial Hospital's participation in the Pennsylvania's Rural Health Model.

Mark your calendars!

November 17, 2022 is National Rural Health Day



Robert Palazzo, Elementary School Principal at Panther Valley School District, was recognized as the 2021 Pennsylvania Community Star

Community Champion Recognized as 2021 Rural Health Community Star

Robert Palazzo, Elementary School Principal, Panther Valley School District, is Pennsylvania’s 2021 Community Star, designated by the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH). NOSORH, the member association for each of the 50 State Offices of Rural Health, leads National Rural Health Day. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health collaborates with NOSORH to recognize those who serve the vital needs of the estimated 57 million people living in rural America.

The nomination, submitted by Kerri Quick, St. Luke’s University Health Network, lauded Palazzo’s advocacy for the physical and mental well-being of the students of Panther Valley Elementary School, ensuring the students and staff feel supported. Quick notes, “Mr. Palazzo truly cares about his students and spends a lot of his own time planning community outreach events, raising funds, and general awareness of issues.”

Panther Valley School District partners with St. Luke’s Health System to provide comprehensive services that provide students

and their families with much needed resources in the area of health and well-being. Mr. Palazzo works to ensure students have a safe, healthy and enjoyable place to come to school, while providing families with support and resources for a healthy family system.

Panther Valley School District serves students in Schuylkill and Carbon counties in the northeastern part of Pennsylvania.

The National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health’s (NOSORH) annual Community Star recognition program is one of the most popular features of National Rural Health Day. Each person, coalition, and organization nominated to be their state’s Community Star represents the faces and grassroots initiatives that are working to address the social determinants of health and improve the lives of those who call rural their home. The 2021 Community Stars book can be accessed at powerofrural.org.



New Resource- Cancer Genetics/ Genomics Toolkit for Health Care Providers

The Genetic/Genomics Workgroup of the Pennsylvania Cancer Coalition (PCC) created a multi-component Genetics/Genomics Toolkit to provide health care professionals with the requisite tools to integrate hereditary cancer risk assessment into practice. The toolkit includes practical information on the role of genetics in care, appropriate referrals of individuals at risk for hereditary cancer syndromes, and strategies for talking with individuals about risk factors

The toolkit can be accessed at pacancercoalition.org/news-resources/156-pennsylvania-cancer-coalition-genetics-toolkit-now-available.



Pennie: Pennsylvania’s Health Insurance Marketplace

Pennie™ is Pennsylvania’s official health insurance marketplace and is the only resource that connects Pennsylvanians with financial assistance to help lower the cost of their monthly premiums and out-of-pocket costs.

Think of Pennie like the county fairgrounds at which a farmer’s market is taking place. The insurance companies are the vendors selling their various plans. Pennie ensures that the plans being sold are high-quality, and as a customer enters, Pennie gives out a coupon to make those plans more affordable. Over 90 percent of Pennie customers are taking advantage of financial assistance, which has increased and expanded thanks to the passage of the federal American Rescue Plan.

Pennie enrolled over 365,000 Pennsylvanians into high quality coverage during their most recent Open Enrollment, which is an increase of almost 10 percent from the previous enrollment period.

Insurance can be confusing, so Pennie is here to answer health coverage questions and connect Pennsylvanians with free assistance. Pennie believes that shopping for high quality health coverage should be accessible and stress-free which is why they offer free local enrollment assistance over the phone, in-person or virtually.

Pennie’s Open Enrollment period occurs every year from November 1 to January 15, but Pennsylvanians can enroll throughout the year if they have a Qualifying Life Event, like losing coverage from work, adding to the family, moving, and more.

For more information on Pennie™, visit pennie.com or call 1-844-844-8040.

FREE CLINICS IN PENNSYLVANIA: Safety Net Providers Serving the Uninsured

By Andy Shelden



Free medical clinics are an important piece of Pennsylvania’s health care system, with a mission of providing free medical care to low-income, uninsured persons. While the number of Pennsylvanians who lack health insurance has dropped over the last eight years, the demand remains for free medical services for underserved populations like the homeless, undocumented immigrants, and low-wage earners who struggle to be eligible for or can afford insurance through a government exchange or their employer.

“A lot of people have the misconception that you need to be indigent to qualify for services, but that’s not true,” says Paula Rock, director of social services at the Free Medical Clinic of DuBois in Clearfield County, Pennsylvania. “Whether you’re working or not, as long as you meet the income guidelines, you can become a patient here.”

In addition to providing free primary care health services, many clinics provide a range of complimentary services not covered by Medicaid and other insurance plans, including dental, vision, and behavioral health. In Pennsylvania, there are more than 40 free medical clinics operating across the state, funded by government grants, private donations from business and individuals, and in-kind support.

“Once you’re a patient here, we cover your physician visits, lab tests, and all types of diagnostic tests,” Rock says, explaining the breadth of their services. “We cover all of our patients’ medications. If your physician or your lab tests show you have type-2 diabetes, for instance, we’ll refer you to a specialist and we will cover the expense of that specialty physician.”

While there are limits to the services offered, free clinics provide patients with guidance on finding financial assistance for services such as emergency care or specialty treatments, and other procedures that might require an in-hospital stay. Many free clinics also offer consultation services to help patients navigate the health care system, whether they need help applying for government-sponsored insurance, meeting application deadlines or finding out which subsidies might be available to them.

If you are someone in need of primary health care services but you are unsure of whether you can afford them or where you might go, Rock says the easiest thing to do is to call a free clinic in your area and ask them any questions you may have.

“We encourage people to contact us with any questions or doubts. We’ll get you scheduled to do your eligibility screening and if you qualify, pretty soon—usually within a week—you’ll have a primary health care provider.”

To qualify financially, free clinics typically require an individual’s income to be at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, but those requirements can vary from clinic-to-clinic. In DuBois, for instance, they accept patients who earn up to 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines; for a household of two, that is approximately \$52,000 per year in earned income.

Free clinics are generally staffed by health care professionals who donate their time and expertise to serve populations who can’t afford primary care services. But you don’t have to be a medical professional to volunteer at a free health clinic. “We welcome any and all volunteers,” Rock says. “Whatever your level of experience, there’s work that can be done.”



For more information on free clinics in Pennsylvania, access the Free Clinic Association of Pennsylvania at freeclinicspa.org



Maira Nawaz, a student in the Integrated B.S. in Health Policy and Administration/ Master of Health Administration in the Penn State Department of Health Policy and Administration (HPA), received the 2022 Jennifer S. Cwynar Community Achievement Award in April 2022. Nawaz, of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, is also pursuing a minor in Information Sciences and Technology.

The award from the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH) recognizes community achievement by a Penn State senior majoring in Health Policy and Administration who has demonstrated service and commitment to a community or an underserved population, preferably, but not exclusively, in a rural area of Pennsylvania. The award was established in memory of Jennifer S. Cwynar, a 2008 graduate of HPA and a 2008 undergraduate intern at PORH.

Nawaz was nominated by Diane Spokus, Ph.D., M.Ed., MCHES®, associate director

Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health Presents Undergraduate Student Achievement Award

of professional development in HPA. Spokus lauded Nawaz for her dedicated and detail-oriented work ethic, commitment to community service, and her focus on public health. She noted that Nawaz can be depended on to follow through and who continually seeks professional development opportunities and service to others. “Students like Maira, who participate in various internship experiences, and who are involved in clubs and volunteer their time to worthwhile causes, are excellent role models. They will be great future health care leaders,” Spokus noted.

During her academic career, Nawaz expanded her knowledge through internships at Mount Nittany Physician Group Primary Care practices in rural central Pennsylvania; Atlantic Health System in New Jersey; the American Lung Association; and at WellSpan Health in York, Pennsylvania. Nawaz broadened her operational and administrative skills by standardizing the rooming process for patients, calculated Medicare net revenue, streamlined guidelines, analyzed and evaluated insurance enrollment data, assisted in improving interactive voice response systems and member websites, and created user stories for members to improve customer satisfaction during support calls. She also executed smoking cessation tasks such as Amazon’s Alexa project, a Juul costs project, and smoking prevalence in veterans; organized health promotion community events; wrote articles for local newspapers

on moral courage; and worked with the LatinX community to improve health care opportunities and awareness. These experiences gave her a deep appreciation for the social determinants of health and population health.

While at Penn State, Nawaz served as the guest speaker liaison for the Penn State Chapter of the American College of Healthcare Administrators (ACHCA) Club Executive Team. She participated in the UNICEF Club, was a member of the Pakistani Student Association, and volunteered at the Central PA Food Bank, Country Meadows Senior Center, and was a Holy Spirit Hospital Junior Volunteer.

“We are very pleased to present this award to Maira Nawaz and to honor the legacy of Jennifer Cwynar, who was an exceptional student and intern with our office,” said Lisa Davis, director of PORH and outreach associate professor of HPA. “This is one way in which we can encourage excellence in those who will become leaders in advocating for the health of vulnerable populations.”

To learn more about the Jennifer S. Cwynar Community Achievement Award and the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, visit porh.psu.edu.



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 more.

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

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