



PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF  
**RURAL HEALTH**

**STRATEGIC PLAN  
2017 – 2019**

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# INTRODUCTION

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's programs, leadership, and staff are recognized as one of the most preeminent State Offices of Rural Health in the nation by federal, state, and community partners.

The 2017-2019 Strategic Plan provides the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health with direction for sustaining and expanding current programs and developing new initiatives to meet the demands of health care transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and serves as a tool for sharing its principles and plans with its constituents. The Plan allows for agility so that the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health can adjust its strategies 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's constituency includes professionals, organizations, and advocates whose actions and interests affect the delivery of health care services in rural areas and the health of Pennsylvania's rural people of the state and 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. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is a collaborator with all parties that have a sincere interest in the health of rural Pennsylvanians.

# SETTING THE STAGE

This section provides an overview of the important trends and issues that inform the mission and vision of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health. These trends and issues include topics that have been fundamental to the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health and to the delivery of rural health services in the state and across the nation.

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 factors that affect the delivery of health care services in rural communities.

Challenges include financially stressed health care delivery systems, shortages of primary and specialty health care providers, hazardous road conditions during the winter months, and a lack of public transportation systems. Rural Pennsylvanians also experience reduced access to health insurance options, health promotion and disease prevention programs, and services to address special health care needs.

## Core Assumptions and Guiding Concepts

There are several broad themes which provide the context for activities nationally and in Pennsylvania. These include:

- The transition from volume- to value-based payment for health care services.
- An increase in health care price and quality transparency.
- Health system transformation and redesign, including:
  - The consolidation of many critical access and other small rural hospitals and their providers into larger health care delivery systems; and
  - The emphasis on the need to promote inter-professionalism, including the integration of primary medical care, oral health, and behavioral health.
- An emphasis on population-based health care delivery strategies.
- The development and use of population health and “big” data in addressing health care price, quality, and outcome.
- The need for the greater integration of health service and public health strategies, including the consideration of policies and regulations that affect health, such as environmental policies..
- The expansion of health information technology, health information exchanges, and electronic health records.
- The continuing need for protecting programs and services that support the rural safety-net.
- The need for effective agricultural assistance to ensure the safety and health of agricultural producers

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

There are several 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 population and providers. These issues will 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 activities that contribute 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;
- Quality improvement and performance management;
- Oral health care services;
- Behavioral health care services;
- Rural emergency services;
- Transportation to health care and other services;
- The increasing 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, and high-speed data transmissions systems;
- The economic considerations of rural health and rural health services; and
- Agricultural health and safety.

## **TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF ADVANCING RURAL HEALTH**

Since 1991, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health has been committed to strengthening 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, professional associations, and health care consumers; providing information to policy makers, health care providers, educators, and administrators; and conducting applied 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 assisting in the recruitment and retention of health care providers. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health provides expertise in the areas of rural health, agricultural health and safety, and community and economic development.

Selected services provided by the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health include over 400 technical assistance encounters each year to individuals, organizations, and communities on funding opportunities, program development, referrals, rural health information, and more; conferences and workshops on issues relevant to rural health care providers; rural health advocacy in the state and nationally; administration of the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility program and other small rural hospital programs; compliance assistance to agricultural producers on safe pesticide use; the publication of *Pennsylvania Rural Health* magazine; and social media outreach. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health collaborates with many public and private health agencies including state organizations and federal and community partners

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 and is housed in the Penn State College of Nursing.

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

## **GOALS FOR 2017-2019**

In the next three years, 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. Our efforts will focus on the following six key goals and strategies.

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

- Continue to expand the focus of hospital- and community-based programs to include greater participation in addressing quality issues, with a focus on the needs of primary care and other components of the rural health delivery system.
- Promote programs that increase access to health care services in rural areas such as shortage area designations and other workforce development programs.
- Participate in health innovation planning, development, and implementation at the federal, state, and local levels.

- Expand the current understanding of the models of regional consolidation of providers and the implications of expanded systems development for rural populations.
- Shift the current focus from individual providers and hospitals to working with regional health systems.
- Increase technical assistance and other services to the state's Rural Health Clinics and other primary care providers.

## **II. 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 uses of population health data to drive and advance rural health systems change.
- Provide support to rural communities and health systems to assist in community health improvement efforts.

## **III. Address areas of unmet need**

- Continue to promote primary medical care, basic oral health and basic behavioral health as integrated components of primary care.
- Promote primary care and oral health inter-professional development.
- Expand existing programs and seek additional support to expand rural oral health programs.
- Advocate for behavioral health services targeted to rural populations.

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

- Expand the current understanding of the status and implications of federal and state payment and delivery systems reform initiatives affecting rural health and rural health care delivery.
- Develop a robust understanding of the models of regional consolidation of providers such as Critical Access Hospitals, other small rural hospitals and their physician practices, and other services as they becoming parts of larger systems and the implications of expanded systems development for rural populations (and by extension the Office).
- Increase partnerships with other organizations seeking to address rural health issues.
- Assess opportunities and develop programs to assist Rural Health Clinics and other rural primary care providers.
- Engage elected officials and key staff in advancing rural health.

## **V. Promote continuing education for agricultural producers, rural health care providers, and others**

- Expand the Pennsylvania Rural Health Farm Worker Protection 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 Lyme Disease, nutrition, oral health, and other current or emerging health issues.
- Expand continuing education programs to meet current and emerging issues.
- Develop new opportunities for conducting education and outreach.
- Increase partnerships to extend continuing education to new audiences.

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

- 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.
- Clarify and adjust staffing roles and responsibilities to meet current and existing needs.
- Continue to engage undergraduate and graduate students in initiatives.
- Secure functional space for current programs and additional space for expansion.
- Continue to secure current funding and diversify programs and funding sources to address emerging issues.



## **PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES**

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

The national State Office of Rural Health program, through which the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health 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 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. Through this program, 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. The program is supported by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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

The Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program was created by Congress in 1997. The program provides support for very small rural hospitals that are located in rural areas 35 miles from another like hospital, are licensed for no more than 25 beds, and serve high Medicare and Medicaid populations to be certified by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as critical access hospitals. Technical assistance is offered in the areas of quality improvement, quality reporting, performance improvement, and benchmarking; designation of facilities as critical access hospitals; and the provision of rural emergency medical services. Through these activities, the program ensures that residents in rural communities have access to high quality health care services. The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health is a leader in the nation in the implementation of this program and has added an emphasis on population health



to assist rural communities, critical access hospitals, and other small rural hospitals in conducting community health needs assessments and developing 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 Grant Program**

The Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program funds states to support rural hospitals with 49 beds or fewer. Funding helps small hospitals in several ways. These initiatives include Value-Based Purchasing and activities that support data collection to facilitate quality reporting; Accountable Care Organizations or Shared Savings activities that support the development of 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 used by eligible hospitals to purchase equipment to achieve these goals or purchase health information technology, equipment, and/or training to comply with meaningful use and ICD-10 standards. This program also is funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## **Rural Health Farm Worker Protection Safety Program**

The Rural Health Farm Worker Protection Safety 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.

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

In partnership with the DentaQuest Institute, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health implements the Medical Oral Expanded (MORE) Care Collaborative in Pennsylvania to identify solutions to the oral health disparities that exist in rural communities. Through clinic-based collaboratives and practice teams, the program supports oral health and primary care integration in Rural Health Clinics in the state. This project, the third project funded to State Offices of Rural Health, significantly expands the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's presence in the delivery of oral health care services in rural Pennsylvania and offers technical assistance to the state's Rural

Health Clinics. The project is funded through Safety Net Solutions, a subsidiary of the DentaQuest Institute.

## 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 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), "like" us on Facebook, and follow us on Twitter.

## Partnerships

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health collaborates with organizations, governmental agencies, and educational institutions including the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Rural Health Association, Pennsylvania Rural Partners, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Association of Community Health Centers, the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Trauma Systems Foundation, the Pennsylvania Area Health Education Center Program, and the DentaQuest Foundation. 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, National Association of Rural Health Clinics, and other State Offices of Rural Health.