

Maine
RuralHealth
ActionNetwork



We are: a group of concerned rural health experts and stakeholders from business, philanthropy, education, health, and social services.

Learn More: NewEnglandRHA.org/ME-RHAN | Contact Us: RuralHealthAction@gmail.com

Rural Health in Maine: A Call to Action

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Filled with hard-working families and neighbors helping neighbors, our rural communities are the heart of Maine - essential to our economy and our way of life

Our rural communities are facing a growing crisis. Every rural hospital, every rural provider, and every rural community is vulnerable. Action is needed to protect the future of rural Maine and our state. A group of concerned stakeholders made up of business, philanthropy, education, health and social services has been gathering for over a year to develop pragmatic, actionable steps to address this growing crisis.

Across the state rural communities are hit harder by challenges, like insufficient insurance coverage, the opioid epidemic, and an aging population with more chronic illnesses. Health-related workforce shortages place additional stress on the system.

The health of rural Mainers is compromised. Several hospitals are on the brink of failure. Health clinics and nursing homes have closed. Local emergency medical services are strained. The availability of fundamental health services, such as primary care, and even obstetrical services, is no longer assured. Many rural residents travel long distances for essential care and have limited access to specialty services.

Access to basic health care is central to the economic vitality of rural Maine. We can't sustain and build local economies without a healthy workforce. We can't attract businesses in the absence of accessible basic services. Further, health care is an economic engine in itself: local health-related spending and jobs help fuel Maine's rural economy and sustain rural communities.

Historic models for organizing and delivering rural health services are increasingly difficult to sustain. Traditional approaches must be reconsidered if Maine is to have a sustainable, high-performing rural health system.

We must act now. Some rural communities are collaborating and innovating to expand local services and make their system of care and coordination more efficient and effective. We must accelerate this momentum and confront the growing crisis in rural health and health care.

Everyone has a role to play in strengthening Maine's rural health care system. Working together, we can create opportunities for hard-working rural communities to raise healthy families, grow their economies, and build a hopeful future for generations to come.

Read more about our five priority actions to strengthen Maine's rural communities 

Five Priority Actions

to Improve Rural Health and Build a Strong System of Rural Health Care in Maine

1. Mobilize State and Local Leaders to Address the Crisis in Rural Health and Health Care

- a. Create and authorize a *Rural Health Commission* to lead stakeholders in building a modern, sustainable, equitable, and accountable system for promoting and improving rural health and for delivering fundamental health care services to rural residents.
- b. Empower and assist leaders in rural communities to find community-relevant solutions and partnerships for protecting rural health and access to services.
- c. Expand the role and capacity of the Maine Rural Health and Primary Care Program to work with rural leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders to support new approaches to providing essential care in rural areas.

2. Rethink Rural Health Service Delivery

- a. Produce a blueprint for addressing the driving forces that determine rural health, including the necessary restructuring of rural health care delivery. Incorporate the findings of the Rural Health Commission, MaineCare planning and other assessments and planning resources, including consideration of new models and methods, and ensuring that needs assessments and strategies are inclusive of all perspectives.
- b. Adopt a basic set of *Fundamental Rural Health Services** to ensure access to essential health services within reasonable distances and timeframes. *Sprague, J. (2018, October 31). [Building Blocks for Healthy Rural Communities](#)
- c. Create a *Rural Innovation Program* to identify and test new approaches to providing essential services; integrating physical, behavioral, oral, and public health care; and aligning delivery systems with future needs.

3. Redesign Payment Systems

- a. Develop a *Strategic Plan for MaineCare* that supports the accessibility of *Fundamental Rural Health Services* and that will influence health status, quality, and cost of services for rural populations.
- b. Engage MaineCare, other payers, and stakeholders in developing alternative payment models that overcome financial impediments to creating a more collaborative, integrated and sustainable rural health system.
- c. Explore Medicaid waivers and other options for integrating health, social, and public health services.

4. Leverage Data and Technology

- a. Advance the use of technology, including expanded broadband, Electronic Health Records, HealthInfoNet, and telehealth, to support decision-making, resource management, and access to core services.
- b. Promote the use of telehealth to expand access to health services as well as education programs that support communities and their healthcare workforce.
- c. Build data systems and data bases that foster accountability and learning; support the needs of defined populations; and inform local, regional, and system-wide planning and initiatives.
- d. Identify shared metrics for aggregating, tracking, analyzing, and reporting on rural needs and the status of essential elements of rural delivery systems.

5. Build the Essential Rural Health Workforce

- a. Create a comprehensive, cross-sector plan for assuring Maine's rural health workforce capacity, consistent with providing access to the *Fundamental Rural Health Services*.
- b. Create a blueprint for health providers working at the full scope of their licenses; strong and innovative credentialing and licensing; expanded support for team-based care; and the extension of lay care.
- c. Establish a continuum of health-related professional development opportunities, from pre-high-school-graduation pipelines through continuing education for working clinicians and health workers.
- d. Align and expand investments in innovative and targeted recruitment, retention, and loan repayment.

Legislative Priorities

PRIORITY #1: Create and authorize a *Rural Health Commission* to lead and engage stakeholders in building a modern, sustainable, equitable, and accountable rural health system in Maine.

- **Commission will include** elected officials, organizational leaders, and other stakeholders who can appropriately represent the interests of rural people and it will be informed by the recommendations resulting from the Community Engagement pilot (see Priority #2).
- **Commission will produce** tangible recommendations, including strategies, costs, and regulatory changes necessary, to address barriers; reduce fragmentation; promote collaboration and engagement; and align rural health services, resources, expenditures, and strategies.
- **Commission will specifically address** the following:
 - **Fundamental Rural Health Services:** Make recommendations for ensuring that state agencies and partner organizations adopt and plan for the delivery of a basic set of *Fundamental Rural Health Services* that are accessible to clusters of rural communities within reasonable distances and timeframes.
 - **Strategic Plan for MaineCare:** Promote and provide input into the development of a *Strategic Plan for MaineCare*, conducted by the department, that supports a more collaborative, integrated, and sustainable system that will improve health status, access to care, quality, and cost of services for rural populations.
 - **Delivery System:** Produce options for restructuring rural health care delivery, including the consideration of new payment and delivery models, and ensuring that needs assessments are inclusive of all perspectives.
 - **Data & Technology:** Make recommendations to expand and sustain technology and data systems to support decision-making, resource management, and access to core services throughout Maine's rural areas.
 - **Workforce Composition & Capacity:** Work with educational institutions, the health professions and others to examine innovative models for training and deploying the needed workforce (including the extension of lay care) to support access to high quality, efficient services in rural communities.
 - **Workforce Recruitment & Retention:** Make recommendations to align and expand investments in workforce recruitment, retention, and professional development.
 - **Rural Innovation Program:** Establish a *Rural Innovation Program* that will identify, develop, and test new approaches to providing essential services in rural areas; align current delivery systems with future needs; enhance integration of physical, behavioral, oral, and public health services; and include the ability to establish a Rural Innovation Fund in future years.

PRIORITY #2: Pilot a *Community Engagement & Self-Assessment Project* to catalyze rural health system transformation.

- **Identify and fund at least 5 rural communities** in which to convene an interdisciplinary, cross-sectional group charged with assessing needs and making recommendations to address barriers; reduce fragmentation; promote collaboration; and align services, resources, and strategies among rural health entities in order to catalyze innovative care delivery that improves, strengthens, and sustains their local rural health system in delivering Fundamental Rural Health Services and improving individual and population health.
- **Incentivize rapid replication** of standardized Community Engagement & Self-Assessments across the state, building on results of the pilot, with evaluation to support continual improvement and to inform the work of the Rural Health Commission.