

09-25 Policy Matters

Subject: UPMC's Proposals for Transforming Rural Health Care |
RHT Program Funding

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More than 25% of Pennsylvania's population lives in rural areas, where access to affordable health care, providers, and telehealth remains a persistent challenge. Addressing these disparities requires coordinated investment and collaboration among health care systems, community organizations, and government to expand services and strengthen the rural health workforce.

As a leading integrated delivery and finance system, UPMC plays a critical role in driving innovative solutions and partnerships that improve health outcomes and build sustainable care models for rural communities.

Building on this commitment, UPMC is actively advancing the strategic goals of the [**Rural Health Transformation \(RHT\) Program**](#) — which include workforce development, sustainable access, innovative care, technology innovation, and making rural America healthy again — by working to reimagine care delivery and ensure long-term health and well-being for rural Pennsylvanians.

This special edition of *Policy Matters* summarizes UPMC's 14 proposal recommendations to strengthen the RHT Program and accelerate progress toward a stronger rural health system.



Workforce Development

Surgical Obstetrics Fellowship for Family Medicine Physicians

To help address the shortage of obstetric care in rural areas and reduce delays in emergency treatment, family physicians can be trained to offer a full range of services — including cesarean sections. This not only increases local surgical capacity and improves outcomes for mothers and newborns but also strengthens the rural health care workforce by encouraging residency retention and promoting leadership in quality and safety.

Addressing Rural Disparities in Maternal-Fetal and Women's Health

To tackle Pennsylvania's maternal health workforce crisis in rural communities, the "train rural, stay rural" model — supported by funding for fellows at UPMC Wellsboro and UPMC Cole — aims to stabilize the obstetric workforce, improve access and outcomes, and build a sustainable pipeline of long-term providers.

EMS Workforce Development

To address severe EMS staffing shortages in rural Pennsylvania — largely caused by limited access to affordable EMT and paramedic training — expanding fleets and personnel to provide in-home care, medication checks, discharge follow-ups, and telehealth coordination in partnership with local health care providers can help restore critical emergency services and strengthen the region's health infrastructure.

Family Medicine Residency Training Program

To build trust and ensure lasting access to care in historically underserved rural communities like Lawrence County, investing in training programs for family medicine physicians — who are more likely to remain where they train — can help address ongoing workforce shortages, expand primary care services, and strengthen long-term community health infrastructure.

Rural Behavioral Health Workforce Supervisor Learning Community

To strengthen training and support pipelines for behavioral health program supervisors in rural Pennsylvania, a collaborative, workshop-based professional development model is proposed. This approach aims to build leadership capacity, improve staff support, reduce turnover, and stabilize the behavioral health workforce.



Sustainable Access

Rural Scaling of Women's Health Service Line

To address the health challenges faced by women in rural communities, often due to limited access to specialized care and transportation barriers, UPMC proposes a comprehensive "rural women's health" model. By leveraging existing service line assets such as population health teams, remote monitoring, virtual health centers, eConsults, and targeted resources, this approach aims to improve access, enhance care coordination, and drive better health outcomes across underserved regions.

Center for Cognitive Health

To improve timely dementia diagnoses, especially among older adults with limited social support or education, a statewide network of specially trained primary care providers is proposed, using the Project ECHO model. This initiative aims to strengthen clinical guidance, accelerate diagnosis, and expand access to essential resources.

Non-Urgent Transportation Network

To reduce high rates of missed medical appointments in rural counties — often caused by a lack of public transportation, especially for elderly, disabled, and low-income populations — establishing a non-emergency Medical Transportation Network can improve access to care, lower emergency room visits, boost patient satisfaction, and enhance coordination across regional health agencies.

Mobile Integrated Health Program

To continue addressing missed medical appointments in rural counties, enhancing EMS capacity to deliver in-home services, support telehealth, and coordinate post-hospital care can improve efficiency, strengthen care continuity, boost patient satisfaction, and generate cost savings for providers by reducing emergency department visits.



Innovative Care

Geriatric Psychiatry Consultation Service

To address the psychiatrist shortage in rural north central Pennsylvania, UPMC proposes expanding its Geriatric Psychiatry Consultation Service to provide timely, reimbursable support to primary care providers. This initiative aims to improve diagnosis, enhance care planning, and strengthen behavioral health outcomes for older adults.

Community Outpatient Behavioral Wellness Center

To overcome service limitations and recruitment challenges caused by an outdated outpatient behavioral health unit at UPMC Williamsport's Divine Providence campus, a new state-of-the-art, community-based center is proposed. Developed in partnership with a local college and focused on prevention, wellness, and engagement, the center will expand the workforce, improve access and appointment availability, and strengthen regional mental health support.



Technology Innovation

Telemedicine Center

To overcome transportation barriers, workforce shortages, and geographic isolation affecting rural residents, UPMC proposes establishing a Regional Outpatient Telemedicine Center at UPMC Cole. This initiative will expand virtual care across five counties, aiming to increase telemedicine visits by 20%, reduce missed appointments, grow the provider network, and improve care coordination for chronic and behavioral health conditions.

Children's Connected Primary Care

To enhance convenience, continuity, and comprehensive pediatric care, UPMC proposes an innovative model that integrates high-quality, family-centered virtual visits into primary care. By leveraging telemedicine and peripheral devices, this approach aims to improve access, enrich the quality of visits, and adapt to the evolving needs of families.



Making Rural America Healthy Again

Rural Primary Care Management of Hypertension

To improve hypertension management in rural communities, where provider access, transportation barriers, and inadequate follow-up care often delay treatment, UPMC proposes expanding a PCORI-backed initiative across 130 primary care sites in Pennsylvania. By integrating best clinical practices with technology-enabled, longitudinal patient tracking, this model aims to strengthen care delivery and improve patient outcomes.

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