

America's Rural Healthcare Crisis

Reality, Resilience, Renewal & *Resistance*

Rural health is an essential piece of the American healthcare system

*SEPTEMBER 12
2026*

*TACOMA
WA*

THE OBJECTIVE

What this day asks of us.

Respect *the history.*

Understand *the challenge.*

Defend *what communities need.*

SO THIS IS THE DAY

to turn a
broadening
crisis

*into a meaningful
commitment*

WHO IS THIS GUY?

Dave Pearson

CEO

Washington Association for Community Health

Leads Washington's Primary Care Association which supports our Community Health Centers.



My rural perspective spans hospitals, community health centers, advocacy, public programs and regional collaboration in MO, KS, TX, OK, LA, AR and WA.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE



American Hospital Association

Hospitals and associations across AR, LA, OK and TX.



TX Organization of Rural & Community Hospitals

Association leader for rural and community hospitals in TX.



TX State Office of Rural Health

Coordinated statewide rural health programs in TX.



Med-OP Rural Hospital Cooperative

Led a rural hospital network serving northwestern KS.

Rural America is not just a place to go. It's our country's connective tissue.

46M

people live in rural America

Nearly 1 in 7 Americans spread across 97% of the land area that produces a vast majority of our food, energy, natural resources, recreation and more.

RURAL BACKBONE

Rural healthcare is a truly vital resource.

It is a major employer, emergency service, trusted community player—and a large part of what makes our rural areas livable.

The rural crisis is cumulative.

Four pressures have grown from a local concern to a potential system-wide failure.

FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

Lowering revenue, high fixed costs and very little margin for error.

LONG DISTANCE

Closures cause travel burdens, delays in care, handoffs and other risks.

Crisis

*The failure is no longer local,
it is systemic.*

SHRINKING WORKFORCE

Too few clinicians, less training options and higher potential for burnout.

GROWING DEMAND

Older populations, more chronic illness and greater behavioral-health needs.

For example, distance is a significant risk.

When a rural health services disappear, the risk changes before the outcome does.

35%

of U.S. counties are
maternity care deserts

Rural communities are disproportionately exposed when maternal services consolidate or close. **A big issue in WA.**



SERVICE CLOSES

Prenatal and delivery services move farther away

TRAVEL INCREASES

Time, travel and coordination challenges rise

RISK COMPOUNDS

Urgent needs continue, but risks grow even greater

Rural areas are being asked to "do more with less"

THE NEED KEEPS RISING

Aging residents

Chronic disease

Behavioral health

Emergency readiness

CAPACITY IS NOT KEEPING PACE

Declining training

Shrinking budgets

Federal funding cuts

Lower capital investment

A different geography requires rurally-focused, dedicated, long-term solutions.

Resilience is a rural resource.

The strongest models redesign around place—not just a smaller version of urban.

Centered not scaled. Therefore, we must consider how to...

RECRUIT DIFFERENTLY

Local pipelines · shared staffing · team-based approaches

CONNECT DIFFERENTLY

Technology · community navigators · referral resources (CIE)

PARTNER DIFFERENTLY

CHCs · Hospitals · EMS · public health · schools · employers

ADVOCATE DIFFERENTLY

Story telling · grassroots · embrace diversity · build relationships

AN OPPORTUNITY

Transformation

The Rural Health Transformation Program or RHTP exists to put some money toward sustainable changes in rural healthcare.

But it's not enough.

What if there was a better path?

RENEWAL

A way to **refresh, restore and rebuild**

- Leverage existing strengths
- Address community needs
- Foster new opportunities

The 'Rural Renewal' can start right here.

Silver Bullet Myth: No single grant, solution or organization can solve the whole problem.

STABILIZE

Protect our most essential services, prevent further closures and develop a strategy.

STAND UP

Tell your story to elected officials and policymakers. Invite them to come see it.

CONNECT

Work across regions and networks to share viable solutions and best practices.

LOOK WITHIN

Involve local residents and stakeholders in safeguarding what they value most.

OUR CHARGE FOR THIS DAY

Resistance Is The Way Forward

Rural communities do not need to
a handout.

They need to be well resourced,
respected and regarded.

Panel 1

**Cuts to Medicaid and Closing Rural
Clinics and Hospitals**

Key ? - How do we blunt the impact?

Panel 2

**Vaccinations and Public Health
Effectiveness**

Key ? - How do we restore the trust?

Panel 3

**Compounding Deficiencies in Mental
Health Services**

Key ? - How do we meet the need?

Panel 4

**Public Health Responses Without a
Reliable Federal Partner**

Key ? - How do we help ourselves?

Then, Let's Take Action Together.

Turn the urgency into a commitment.

Carry these three questions into every panel that follows.

- 01** — How can we best protect the health of our community?
- 02** — How can we build on our potential growth and success?
- 03** — How can we ensure a better future for the next generation?

Protect our places. Promote our potential. Invest in our future.

Thank you!