



Advancing Diagnostic Excellence in Rural Areas: A Workshop For the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine

October 14th , 2025

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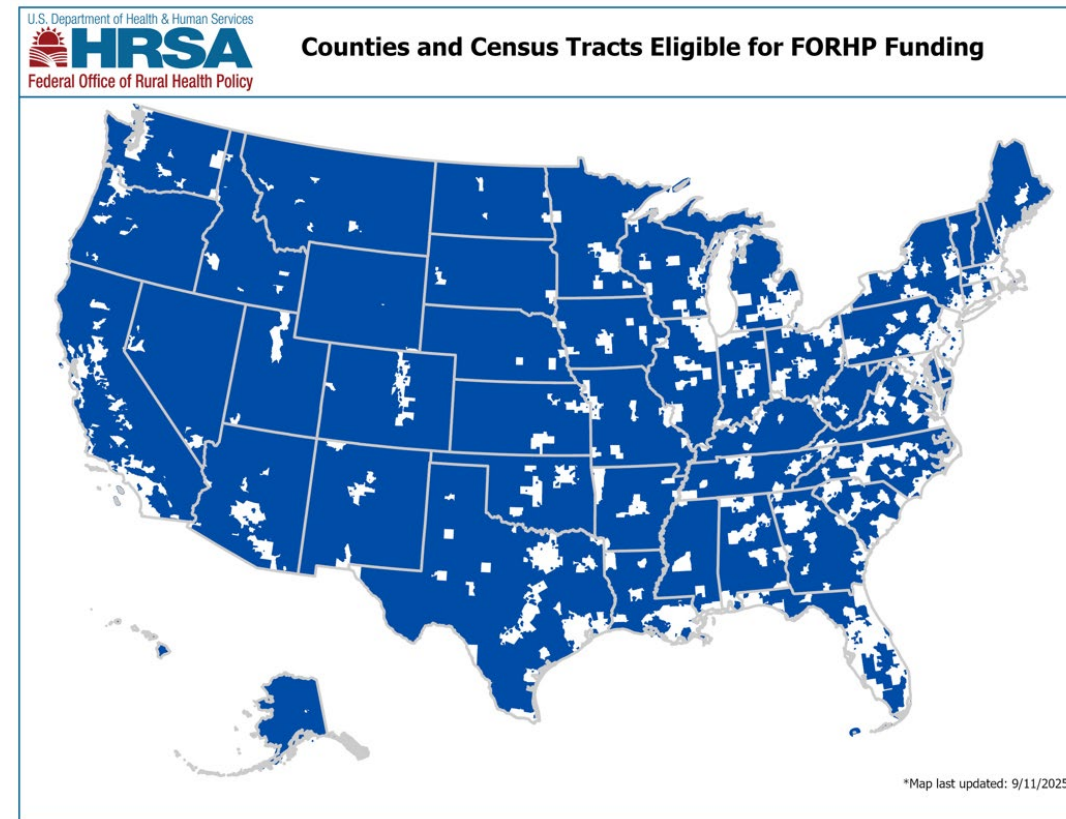
Vision: Healthy Communities, Healthy People



Rural Basics: Defining It

There are many different standards but common data points

- Multiple Definitions ...
 - OMB
 - Census
- Significant Portion of Western U.S. Also Considered Frontier
- Bottom Line:
 - Roughly 19% of the Population Spread across 80% of the Country's Land Mass



Key Considerations Between Rural & Urban

The Differences are Often Structural

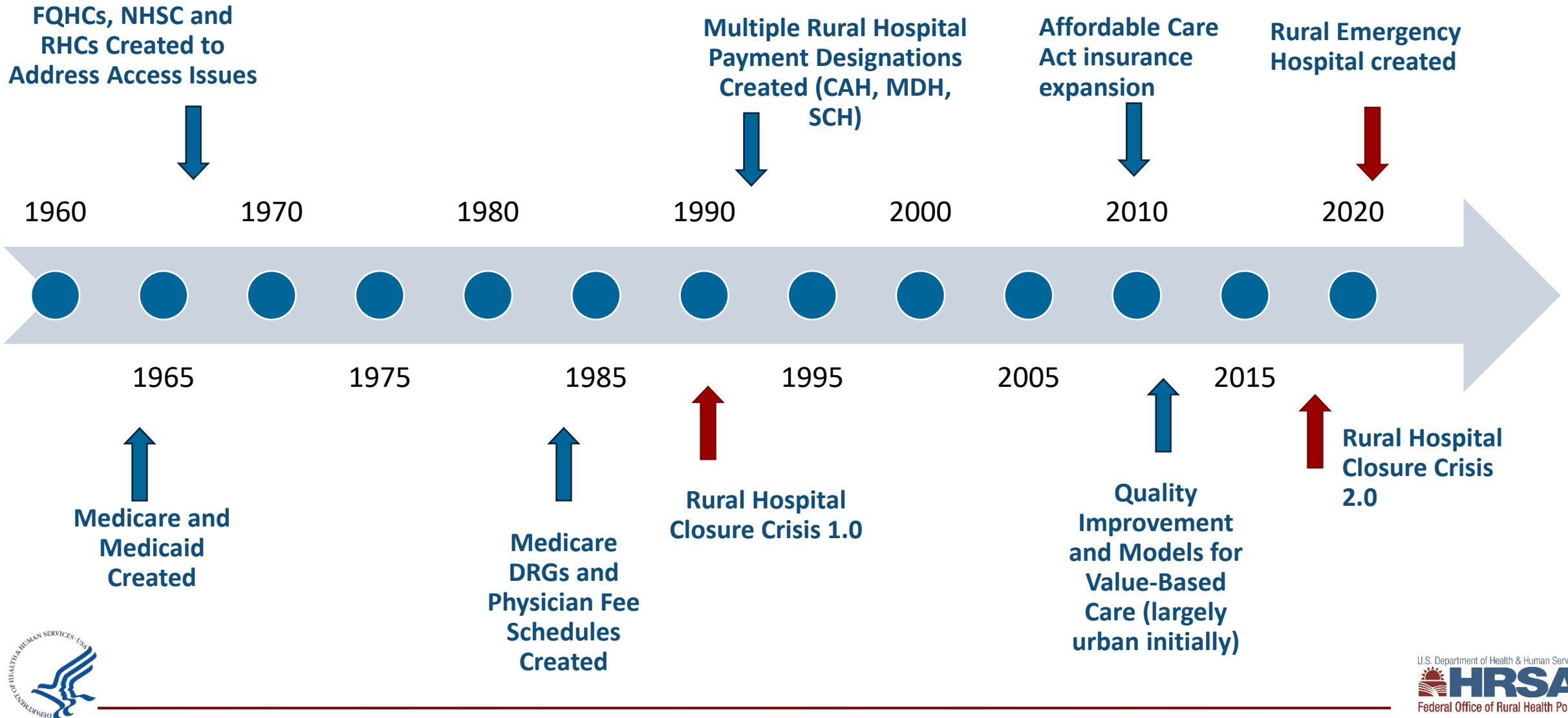
- Limited Clinical Infrastructure and Provider Shortages
- Older, Poorer and Sicker (Generally)
- Low Volume and High Fixed Costs
- Geographic isolation
 - Weather as a Risk Factor
- Limited Tax Base (Feds Own Large Tracts of Land)
- Unique Employment and Economic Mix
- Regional Variation
- Payer Mix Heavily Dependent on Medicare, Medicaid and CHIP



A Common Mistake: Rural Is Not a Smaller Version of Urban

Rural Health Policy Often A Byproduct of Unintended Consequences

A Common Theme as National Policies Struggle to Account for Rural Realities



Acknowledging the Challenges ...

Often-Cited Rural Health Concerns

People in rural areas **live 3 fewer years** than people in urban areas **due to challenges accessing health services.**

Growing loss
of hospital
obstetric
units.



Greater
challenges
accessing
behavioral
health services.



Higher rates of
hospital closure
and financial
distress.



Higher
death rates
for heart
disease and
stroke.



Higher rates
of maternal
mortality.



Rural children are more
dependent on Medicaid
and CHIP for insurance
coverage..



Greater distances
to care,
particularly for
specialty services.



Higher
rates of
overdose
death.



Data sources:

National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System. www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm

Singh GK, Daus GP, Allender M, et al. Social Determinants of Health in the United States: Addressing Major Health Inequality Trends for the Nation, 1935–2016. *International Journal of Maternal and Child Health and AIDS*. 2017;6(2):139–164. doi:10.21106/ijma.236. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29367890>

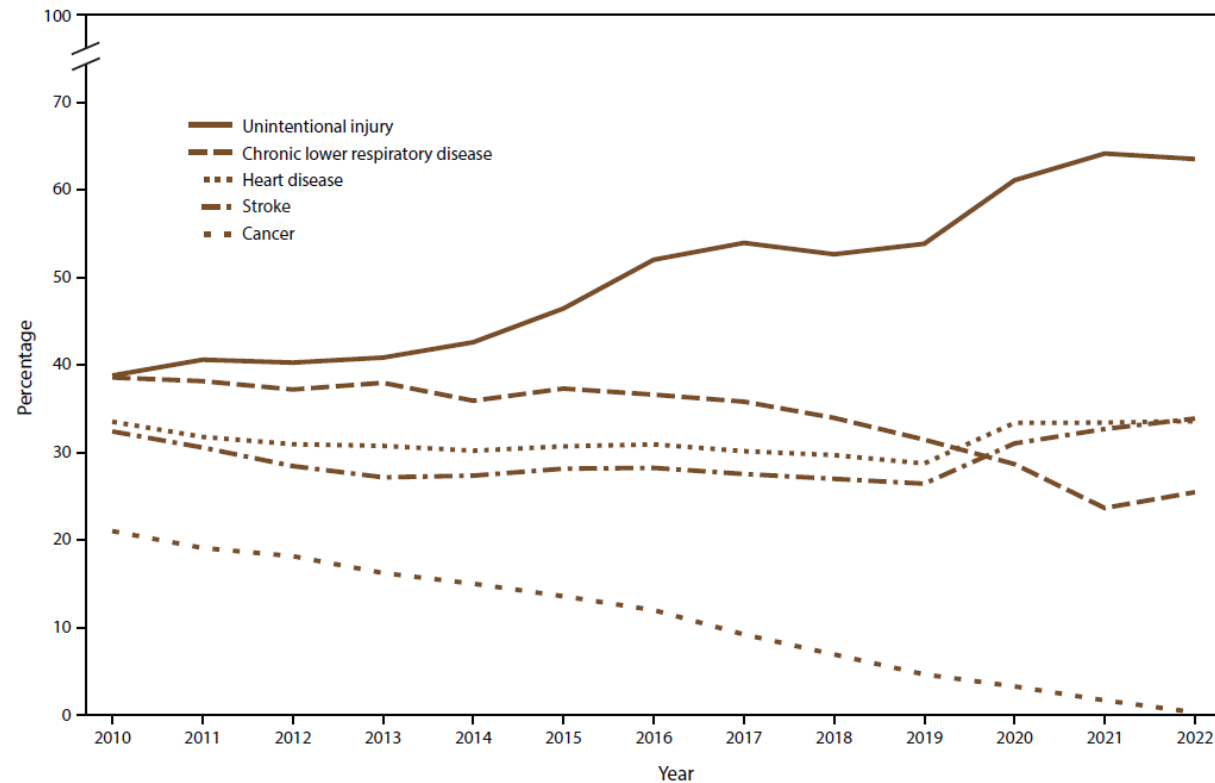


Rural Health Landscape

Higher Rural Death Rate for the Five Leading Causes of Death

For each disease condition, people in less densely populated rural communities experienced higher death rates than urban people.

FIGURE 1. Percentages of preventable premature deaths* among persons aged <80 years from the five leading causes of death, by year — National Vital Statistics System, United States, 2010–2022†

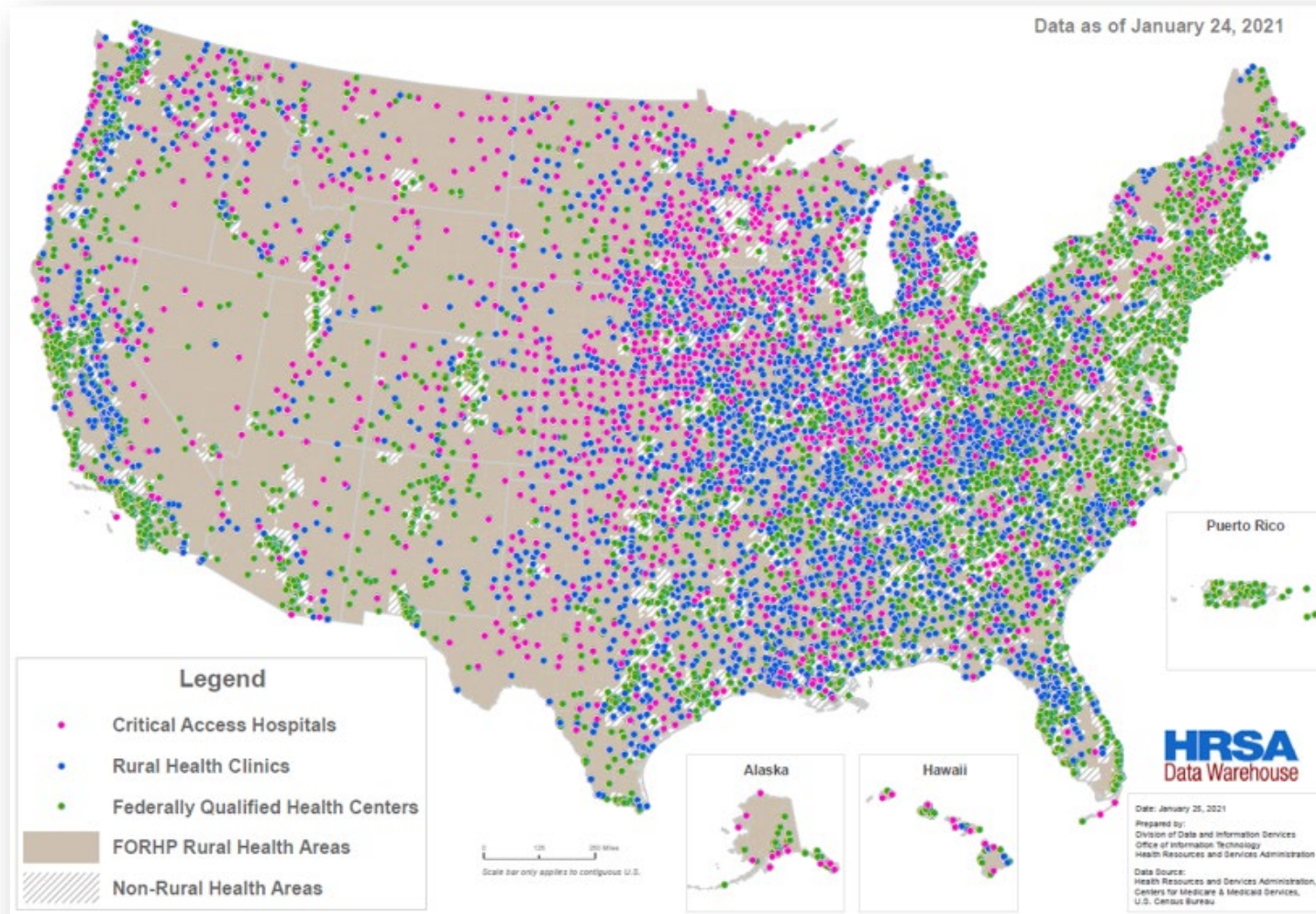


<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/ss/ss7302a1.htm>



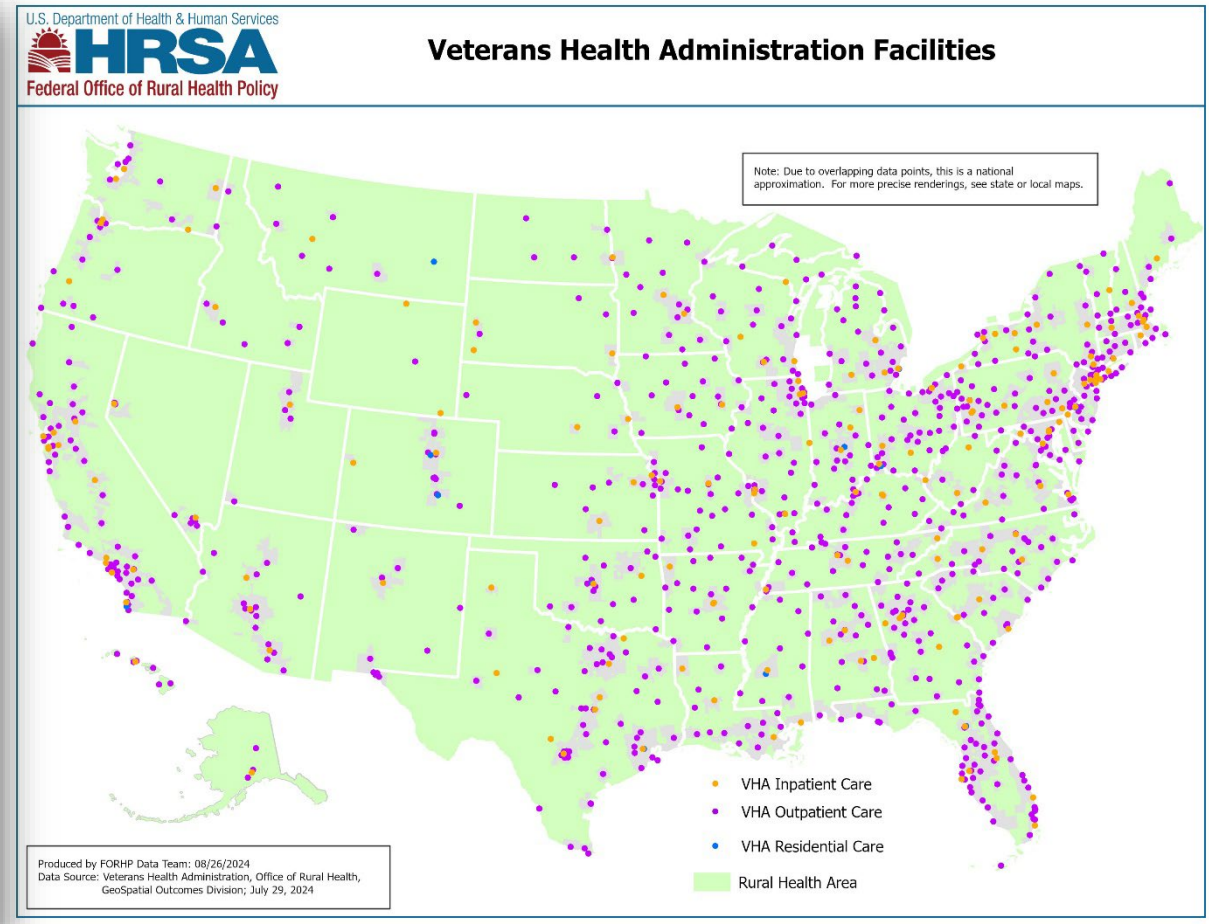
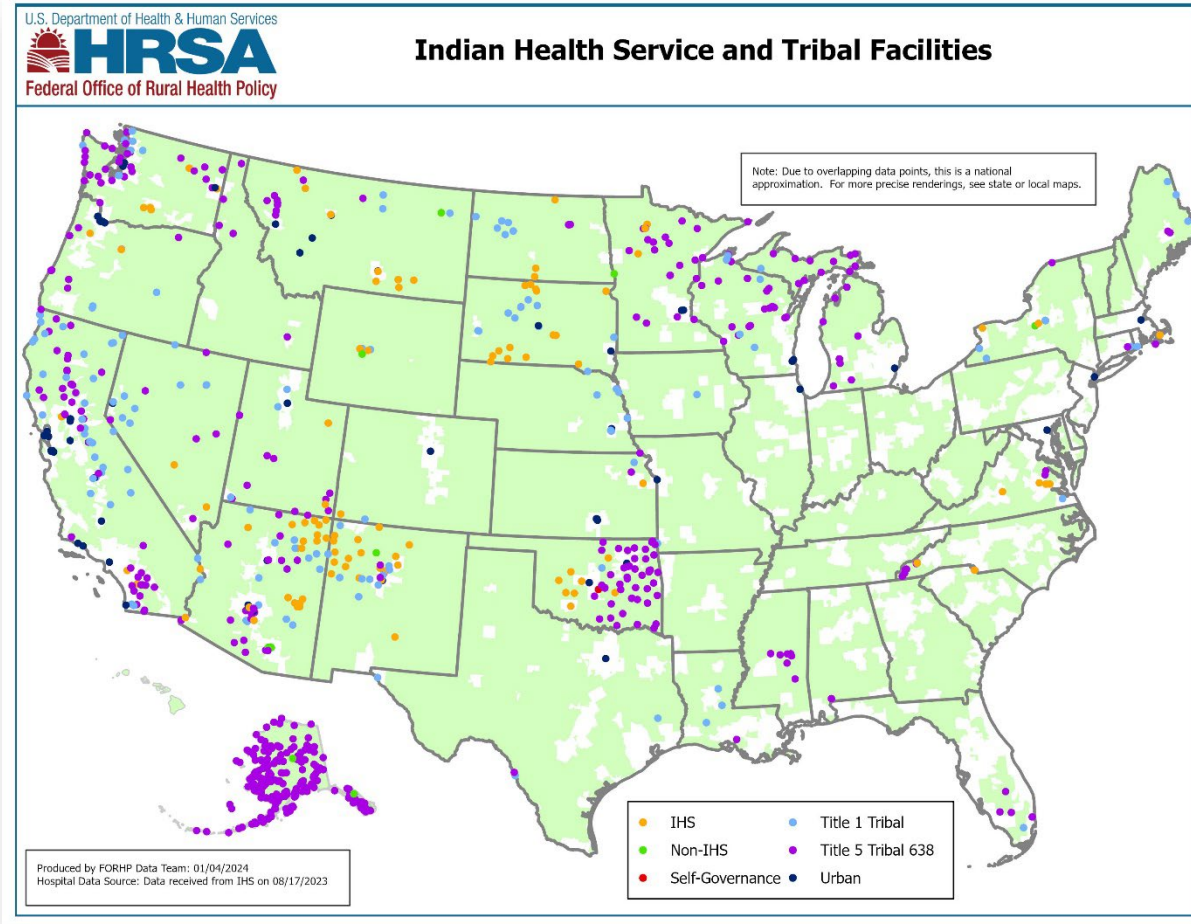
The Rural Health Landscape

Special Designations Play a Key Role



The Rural Health Landscape

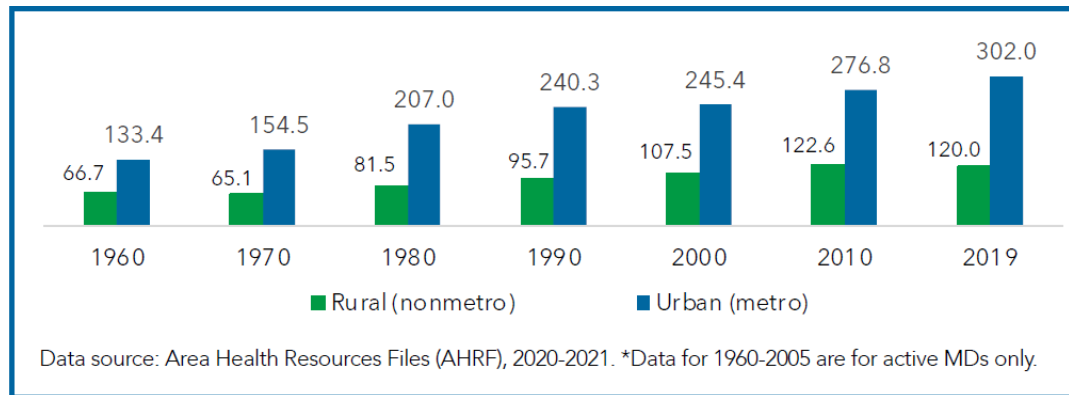
The Veteran's Administration and Indian Health Service Serve Rural Communities



An Ongoing Rural Health Issue

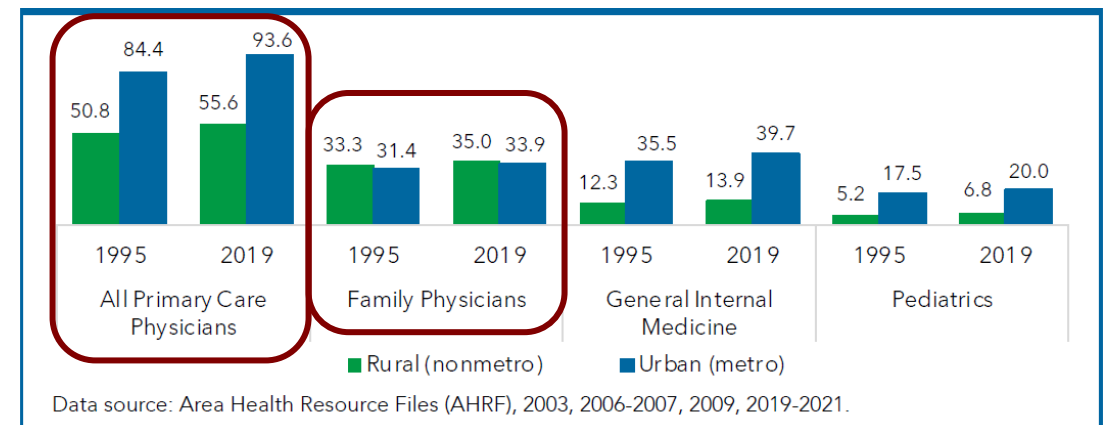
Historic and Ongoing Gaps for Rural Primary Care ...

Physicians per 100,000 Population in U.S. Rural and Urban Counties, 1960-2019



Note: Rural and urban defined as nonmetropolitan and metropolitan, respectively
Source: Andrilla CHA, Woolcock SC, Garberson LA, Keppel GA, Graves JM, Patterson DG. *Trends in Health Workforce Supply in the Rural U.S.* Policy Report. WWAMI Rural Health Research Center, University of Washington; October 2024.

Primary Care Physicians per 100,000 Population in U.S. Rural and Urban Counties, 1995 & 2019

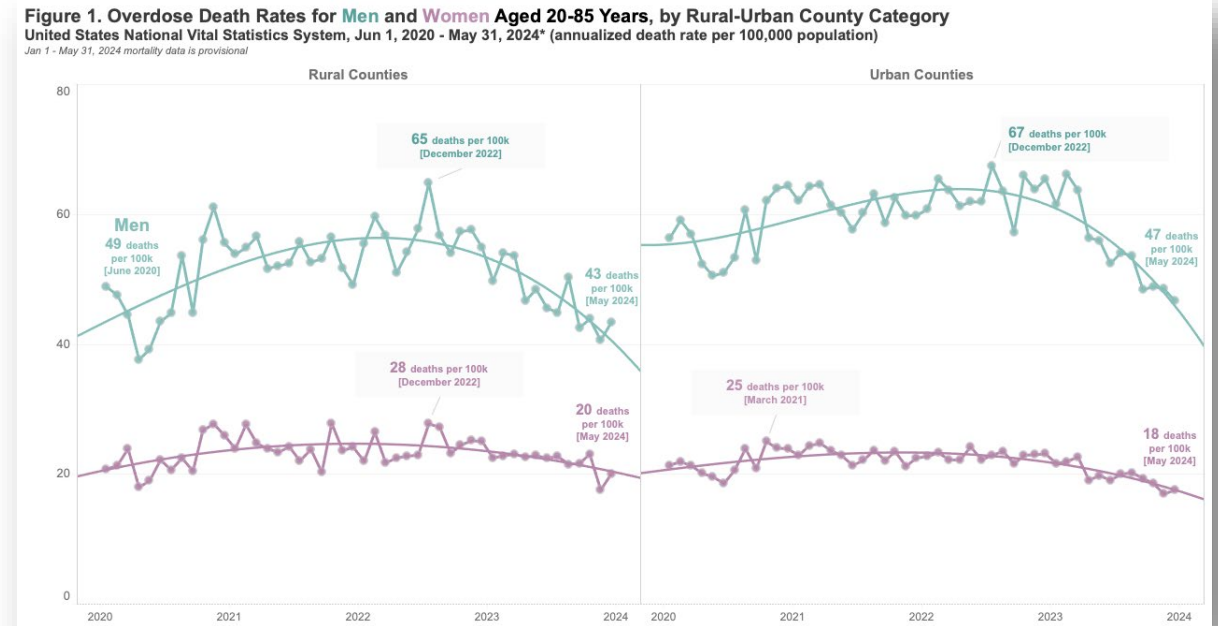


Current Rural Health Issue: The Opioid Crisis

Rural areas track urban areas closely on mortality trends

“Both metro and nonmetro have seen marked declines in death from opioids since the peak of 2021. But while urban have seen deaths almost return to the 2018 number (only 7.2 percent higher), rural deaths remain 27 percent higher than 2018.”

Analysis by Mark Holmes ... North Carolina Rural Health Research Center, May 2025



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Provisional Mortality on CDC WONDER Online Database. Data are from the final Multiple Cause of Death Files, 2018-2023, and from provisional data for years 2024 later, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10-provisional.html> on Feb 27, 2025

Current Rural Issue: Hospital Viability

New model offers another option but long-term concerns remain



Closure and Financial Risk

- 153 Rural Hospital Closures or Conversions since 2010
- 42 Rural Hospitals Have Converted to a Rural Emergency Hospital (REH)
- 72 Rural Hospitals Are Predicted to be at Highest Relative Risk of Financial Distress



<https://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/programs-projects/rural-health/rural-hospital-closures/>
<https://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/product/using-the-updated-financial-distress-index-to-describe-relative-risk-of-hospital-financial-distress/>

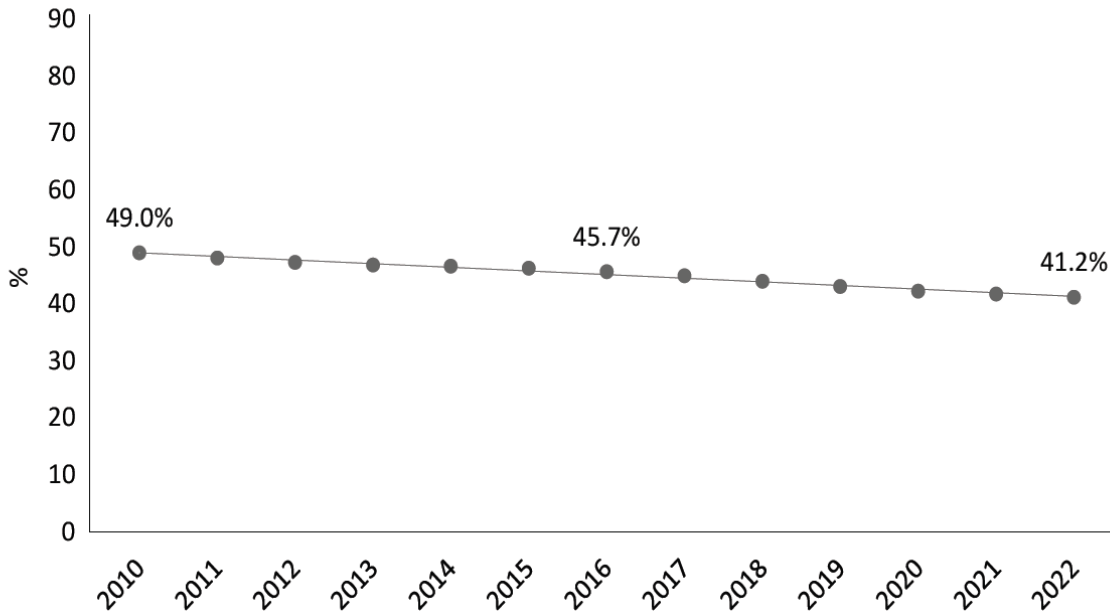
Current Rural Health Issue: Hospital Obstetrics

Ensuring Access and Being “OB Ready”



Loss of Hospital-Based Obstetric Services in Rural Counties in the United States, 2010-2022

Figure 1. Percentage of all rural counties with in-county hospital-based obstetric care, 2010-2022 (N=1,976)



<https://rhrc.umn.edu/publication/loss-of-hospital-based-obstetric-services-in-rural-counties-in-the-united-states-2010-2022/>



Current Rural Health Issue: Telehealth

Now a Mainstream Expected Service but Questions Loom

Amidst Continued Demand Several Policy Issues Remain

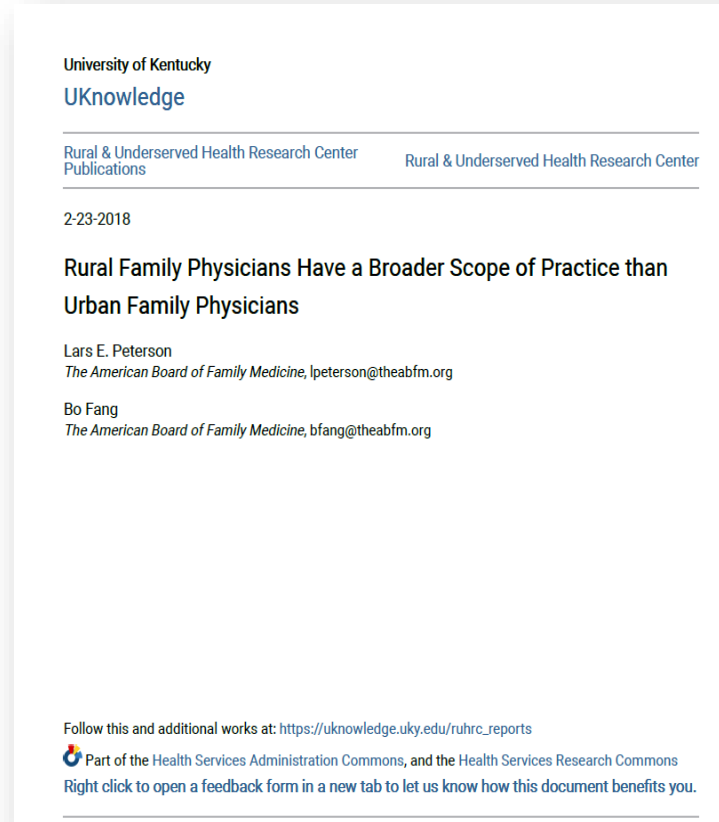
- Assessing the Future of Reimbursement
- Challenges of Evaluation (Savings vs Substitution vs Duplication)
- Addressing the Remaining Broadband Digital Divide



Considerations for the Committee

Accounting for the Unique Context of Rural Clinicians

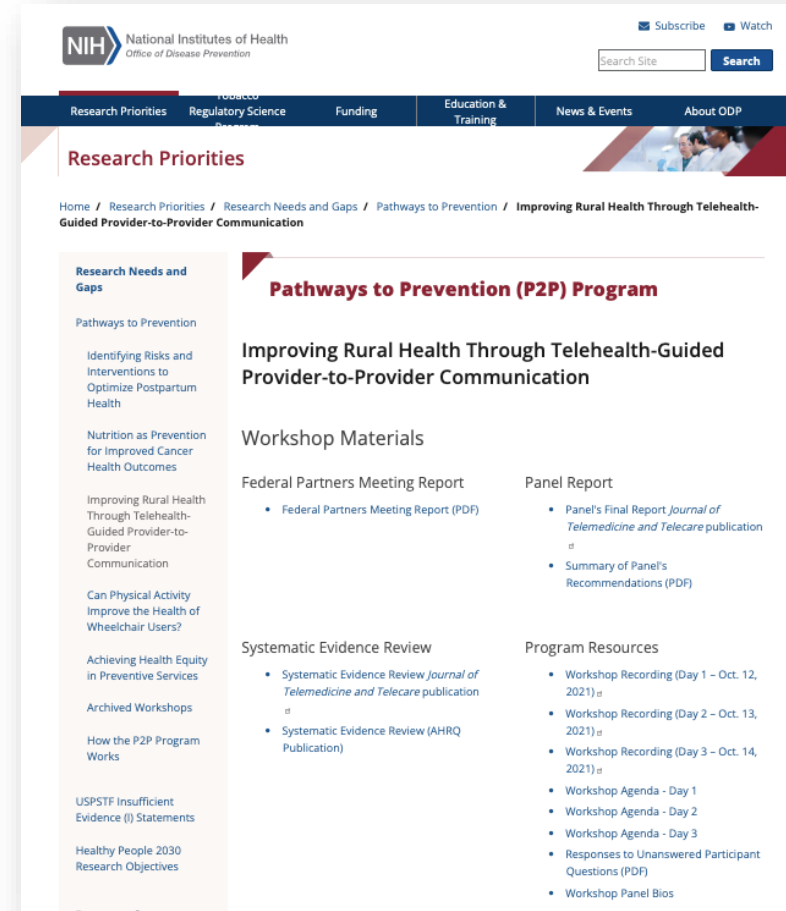
- Broader Range of Clinical and Diagnostic Services Provided
- May Be More Reliant on Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants to Provide Primary Care Services Relative to Urban Areas



Considerations for the Committee

Accounting for the Unique Context of Rural Clinicians

- Findings from the National Institutes of Health's Provider to Provider Telehealth Workshops and Reports May Have Implications for Enhancing Diagnostic Capacity in Rural Communities
- Includes Project ECHO Activities But Looks More Broadly
- Limited Research Base But Clear Benefits for Supporting Rural Clinicians and Enhancing Diagnostics



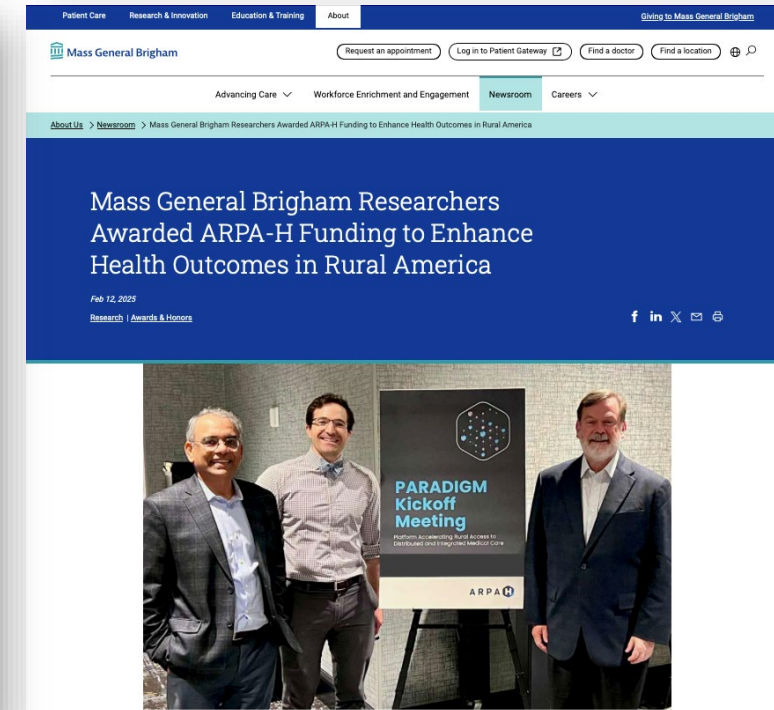
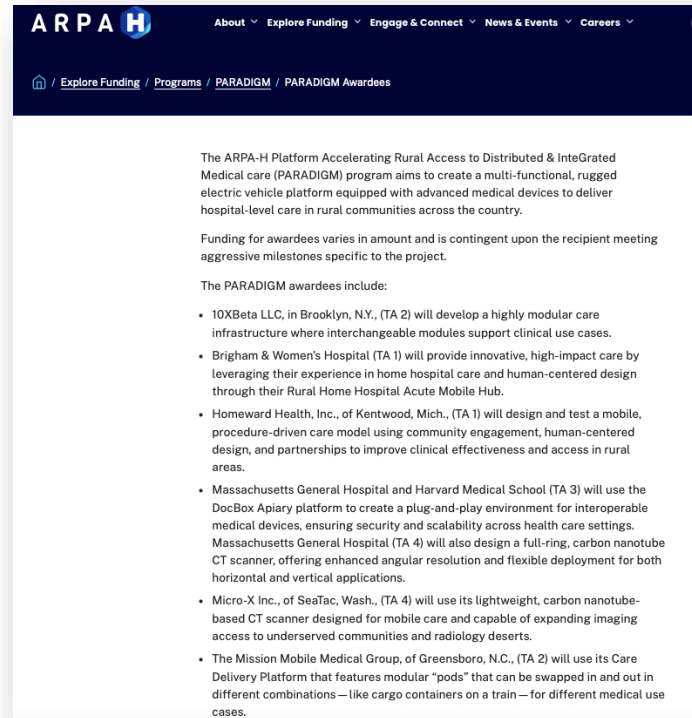
<https://prevention.nih.gov/research-priorities/research-needs-and-gaps/pathways-prevention/improving-rural-health-through-telehealth-guided-provider-provider-communication>



Considerations for the Committee

Emerging Technologies Can Address Challenges but ...

- Pace and Potential of Technology Could Address Long-Standing Structural Challenges in Rural Health
- Challenge:
 - Designing it in the Context of Supporting the Providers Who Are Already There
 - Accounting for the Financial Impact on the Existing System



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