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# Rural Health at the Georgia Health Policy Center

From its inception, the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) has provided support to rural communities to expand access to care for rural residents, improve the development and sustainability of rural health systems, and, ultimately, better the health status and well-being of rural populations.

Rural communities possess a strong sense of community, a culture of caring, and a commitment to strengthening local capacity. This translates into a shared responsibility to patient care, building a resilient safety net system, and an innovative spirit to do more with less.

Yet, rural areas face real challenges. Rural residents are older, more likely to be poor and uninsured, and generally less healthy than their urban counterparts. Additionally, rural residents face challenges in accessing care due to provider shortages, transportation issues, and geographic isolation. Evidenced-based policies, programs, and practices are often created in urban settings and may not work, as designed, in the rural context.

GHPC brings an informed perspective to the rural conversation and works as a thought partner to rural stakeholders as they navigate innovation in rural community health system development. Core to building GHPC's knowledge of rural health is the center's longstanding, on-the-ground work with rural communities. Through tailored technical assistance, GHPC has been able to assist more than 1,000 rural communities across the nation to improve program strategies, build local system capacity, and sustain collaboratives and services.

Below are a few of GHPC's core offerings.

## Services

Technical assistance

Strategic planning

Evaluation

Meeting design and facilitation

Policy and economic analysis

Workforce development

## Topic Areas

Sustainability planning

Developing effective partnerships and networks

Program development and implementation

Resource diversification and financial infrastructure

Using data to drive action and demonstrate impact

Community needs assessment



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# Project Examples

## Understanding the Rural Landscape

There is a fundamental difference in the structure and context of health care in rural versus urban communities. While not monolithic, rural communities generally face similar challenges, such as limited access to health care services, workforce shortages, lack of transportation infrastructure, and geographic isolation.



Rural communities provide an interesting opportunity for innovation and research in health care, as many evidence-based practices do not translate to the rural context. GHPC has developed a rural health module intended for policymakers, researchers, and public and private funders. This hands-on learning opportunity is designed to promote rural-relevant research, policies, and programs. Specific objectives include:

- Building a shared understanding of the rural landscape in health
- Defining the key challenges and opportunities for conducting health research, policy, and program development in rural communities
- Identifying the resources needed to support new efforts and initiatives in the rural context

## Office of Rural Health Policy Technical Assistance Program

To date GHPC has partnered nationally with more than 1,000 grantees of the Health Resources and Services Administration Office of Rural Health Policy's programs. GHPC supports grantees through tailored technical assistance designed to build local capacity with a focus on long-term sustainability. GHPC has become a thought partner to rural champions as they implement strategies and achieve impact through:

- Expanding direct services
- Improving appropriate use of services, including screenings
- Tailoring evidence-based disease management and education practices to local context
- Changing awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors through outreach and education
- Building community and health system capacity through workforce and partnership development
- Initiating policy, systems, and environmental change with an emphasis toward improving population health measures and early childhood education settings



## Proposed Medicaid Changes: Analysis of the Implications for Rural Georgia

Health reform efforts have attempted to change the current financing arrangement for the Medicaid program, including proposals to convert the Medicaid program into to a block grant, a per capita cap, or a hybrid finance system.

GHPC created an index of regional health care system dependency on Medicaid in Georgia and then generated a model to estimate how changes to Medicaid financing would affect Medicaid enrollment and spending in different regions of Georgia with varying levels of Medicaid dependency.

The analysis found that Georgia's rural areas, particularly those designated as in persistent poverty, have higher levels of Medicaid dependency than urban areas. Furthermore, these areas also are likely to incur higher per enrollee Medicaid costs in the future due to the greater proportion of residents 65 years and older living in rural areas. Thus, these areas' health care systems and local economies are particularly vulnerable to any potential cuts to federal and state spending on Medicaid.

