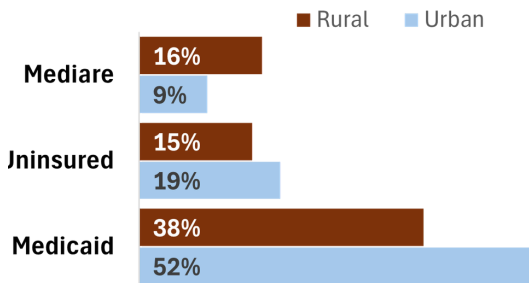


# Strengthening Rural Health Centers

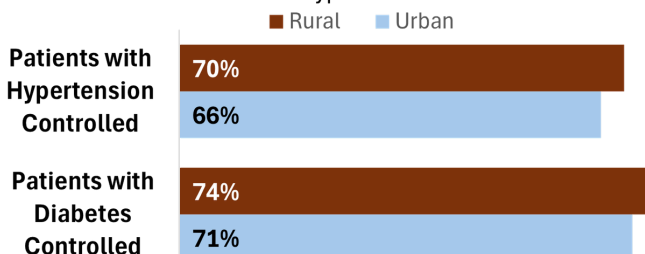
## CHALLENGES, INNOVATIONS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Rural communities are home to more than 66 million Americans, representing roughly one in five Americans<sup>1</sup>. Residents face many of the same barriers to care seen in underserved areas nationwide, including provider shortages, high costs, transportation challenges, and language barriers. In rural settings, these challenges are intensified by persistent workforce shortages, long travel distances between providers, and limited health care infrastructure. In addition, ongoing rural hospital closures have further reduced access, leaving many communities with few local options for care. Together, these factors contribute to poorer health outcomes and worsening health outcomes for rural populations.

Rural Health Centers See More Medicare, Fewer Uninsured or Medicaid Patients as Compared to Urban Health Centers



Patients at Rural Health Centers are More Likely to Control Chronic Diseases of Hypertension and Diabetes



### Rural Health Centers: Essential to Community Health

Health centers are a critical lifeline for rural America, delivering comprehensive primary care to medically underserved populations. Rural health centers serve communities with higher rates of chronic disease, greater socioeconomic challenges, and fewer health care resources.

Despite these challenges, rural health centers consistently deliver high-quality, cost-effective care through integrated, community-driven models. Rural health centers represent one of the most effective models for advancing access and improving health outcomes in rural America.. They are uniquely positioned to deliver comprehensive, integrated care, address social drivers of health, improve outcomes for high-need populations, and serve as trusted community anchors.

Sources:

2024 Uniform Data System, Bureau of Primary Health Care, HRSA, DHHS. (Includes 330-funded and look-alike health centers.)

1. USDA Economic Research Service <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural>

For more information, email [research@nachc.org](mailto:research@nachc.org)

# Workforce: The Critical Foundation for Care

The rural health center workforce is the backbone of care delivery in underserved communities, where provider shortages and geographic barriers limit access to services. Health centers in rural areas rely on multidisciplinary teams to deliver comprehensive care, including primary care, behavioral health, oral health, and enabling services. In many communities, health centers are the primary source of care, making workforce capacity essential to maintaining access and continuity of services.

## Persistent Workforce Challenges

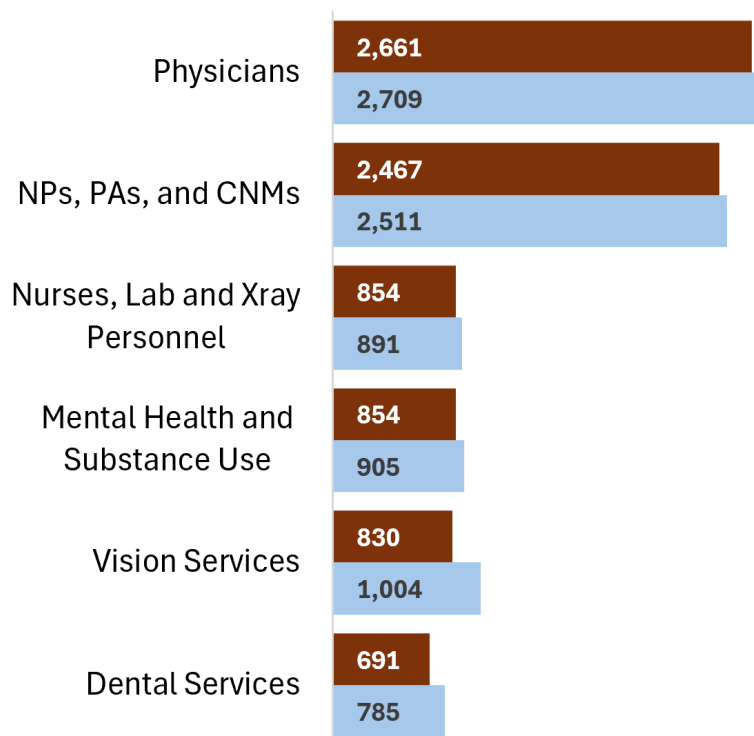
Rural health centers face ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining providers across disciplines. These challenges are driven by a combination of professional, financial, and geographic factors, including:

- Limited provider supply in rural regions
- Professional isolation and fewer opportunities for career advancement
- Lower reimbursement rates and financial constraints
- Competition with larger health systems and urban markets

These pressures affect not only physicians, but also behavioral health providers, dentists, nurses, and support staff, contributing to gaps in care and increased strain on existing teams.

### Rural Health Centers Conduct Fewer Visits per Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) on Average

■ Rural ■ Urban



Source: 2024 Uniform Data System, Bureau of Primary Health Care, HRSA, DHHS. Includes 330-funded and look-alike health centers.

While rural health centers report fewer visits per FTE across provider types, this pattern reflects the realities of rural care delivery rather than reduced efficiency. Providers in rural settings often spend more time per patient due to higher clinical complexity, greater social needs, and the need for care coordination and outreach across large geographic areas.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing workforce needs in rural health centers requires a coordinated approach that strengthens recruitment, training, and retention while expanding the capacity of team-based care. Teaching Health Center (THC) programs play a critical role in this strategy by training physicians and other providers in community-based, rural settings where they are more likely to remain in practice.

By employing a wide range of clinical and non-clinical staff, rural health centers create stable jobs and support local economies. They offer career pathways and training opportunities in regions with limited options, reinforcing their role in both improving health care access and supporting economic stability in rural communities

1. National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services. (2020). Policy brief: Rural health care workforce distribution and shortage issues. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

# Where Health Centers Serve Large Rural Populations

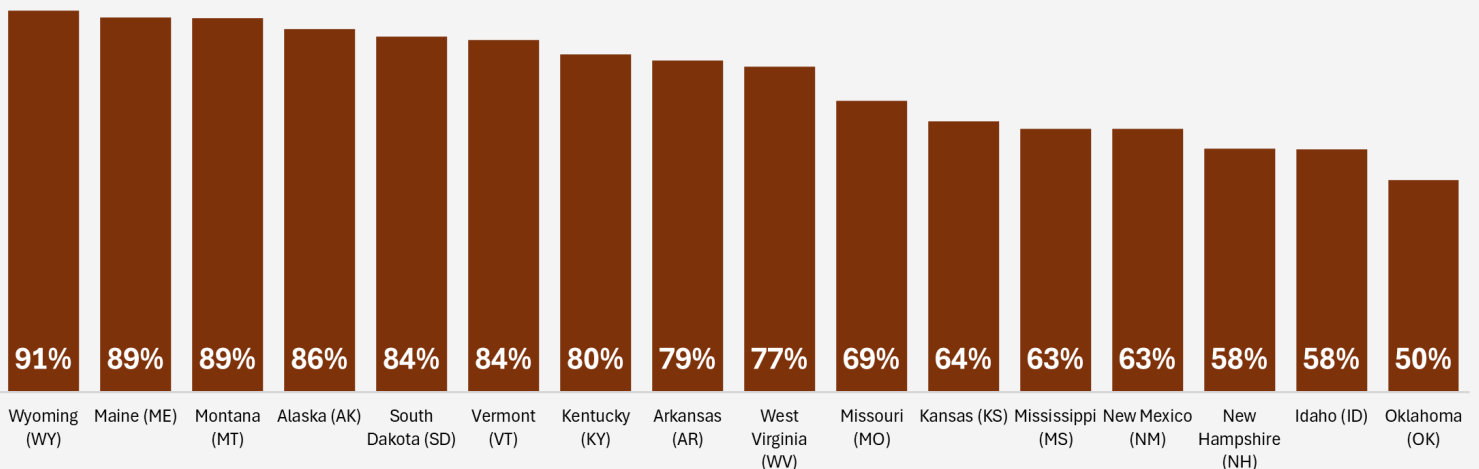
Access to health centers in rural areas is essential to ensuring that millions of Americans can obtain timely, affordable, and comprehensive care. Their presence strengthens local health systems, supports community stability, and plays a critical role in improving outcomes in rural populations.



The share of patients served by rural health centers varies widely across the country, reflecting differences in geography, population distribution, and state policy environments. In states with large rural footprints such as Wyoming, Montana, Maine, and Alaska, rural health centers are not just part of the system, they are the system, serving a substantial proportion of residents. This variation underscores how deeply place shapes access to care. In sparsely populated states, limited provider availability, long travel distances, and fewer alternative health care options drive a much greater dependence on rural health centers.

In addition to the states shown below, several U.S. territories and jurisdictions are classified as entirely rural under federal definitions, including American Samoa (AS), the Federated States of Micronesia (FM), Guam (GU), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (MH), the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (MP), the Republic of Palau (PW), and the U.S. Virgin Islands (VI).

## States with Over Half of Health Center Patients Served by Rural Health Centers



Source: 2024 Uniform Data System, Bureau of Primary Health Care, HRSA, DHHS.

# Geographic Barriers

Rural communities face persistent geographic barriers that limit access to timely, comprehensive care. Long travel distances, limited transportation options, and ongoing provider shortages can delay diagnosis and treatment, contributing to poorer health outcomes. Telehealth offers an important pathway to expand access by connecting patients and providers remotely; however, its impact in rural areas is often constrained by gaps in broadband infrastructure and digital access. Many communities lack reliable high-speed internet or cellular coverage, and some residents do not have access to appropriate devices or the digital literacy needed to participate in virtual care. These challenges limit the use of telehealth for visits, remote monitoring, and mobile health tools, highlighting the need for continued investment in broadband and digital inclusion as part of rural health strategies. Telehealth encompasses a range of technologies and approaches that support communication and care delivery between patients, providers, and care teams:



- Virtual visits are non-face-to-face interactions between patients and providers, typically conducted from home using online platforms. These may include real-time video visits or asynchronous communication, often referred to as direct-to-consumer telehealth.
- Remote patient monitoring (RPM) involves collecting health data in the home and transmitting it to providers to inform care decisions. RPM is commonly used to track conditions such as hypertension and cardiovascular disease.
- Mobile health (mHealth) uses mobile devices, including smartphones, apps, and tablets, to share health information, send reminders, and support communication and monitoring. It is used by both health care providers and public health agencies for education, engagement, and data collection.
- Telecare supports independent living, particularly for older adults and individuals with disabilities, through technologies such as wearable sensors, medication reminders, and fall detection systems.
- Telebehavioral health expands access to mental and behavioral health services, including both patient care and provider consultations, and plays a critical role in addressing behavioral health needs in rural and underserved communities.

# Strengthening Rural Health Centers

Health centers are central to the health and stability of rural America, providing comprehensive, affordable care in communities where access is often limited. As rural populations face high rates of chronic disease, provider shortages, and geographic barriers, health centers serve as essential care hubs that deliver primary care, behavioral health, dental, and vision services, reduce avoidable hospitalizations and improve long-term outcomes.

## **Expanding Access Through Technology**

Emerging technologies, particularly telehealth and remote patient monitoring (RPM), are expanding the reach of rural health centers and improving chronic disease management. However, the full potential of these tools depends on reliable broadband access, digital readiness, and reimbursement models that support long-term sustainability.

## **Addressing Workforce Challenges**

Workforce shortages remain a major constraint, underscoring the need for expanded training pipelines, loan repayment programs, and team-based care models that maximize the contributions of advanced practice providers and care teams.

## **Pathways Forward**

The future of rural health care depends on sustained investment in health centers through stable funding, modernized infrastructure, and policies that support innovation and prevention-focused care. Targeted investments in workforce and technology can help rural health centers scale effective models and close care gaps. Strengthening health centers is an investment in stronger communities, improved outcomes, and a more stable and effective health care system.