



ADDRESSING THE HEALTH CARE CRISIS IN RURAL TEXAS

TEXAS A&M HEALTH RURAL ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

"I WAS IMPRESSED BY TEXAS A&M'S COMMITMENT TO RURAL HEALTH CARE. AS AN A&M GRADUATE, IT'S INCREDIBLY REWARDING TO SEE MY TWO PASSIONS—**RURAL HEALTH AND TEXAS A&M**—WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY I SERVE."

Alfonso Ortiz '18, Director of Operations for Dimmit Regional Hospital

The Rural and Community Health Institute partnered with Dimmit Regional Hospital (DRH) to identify two initial priorities: ensuring the DRH Rural Health Clinics remain compliant with RHC federal regulations and raising awareness of DRH's service offerings. The institute developed an action plan that included bringing in industry experts to accomplish these projects. Services were provided at no cost to the hospital.



HOWDY!

Access to quality health care is not always an option for many of the 4 million Texans who live in rural communities. Rural hospitals and clinics face several ongoing uncertainties including physician shortages, financial and operational challenges, limited access to specialists and a large percentage of uninsured patients.

This crisis has a ripple effect that impacts the workers and their families who make up the backbone of our state—including small business owners, ranchers, farmers, and oil and gas employees—all who need adequate health care in order to support the vital industries that drive our economy.

As a land-grant institution, the Texas A&M University Health Science Center (Texas A&M Health) is answering the call to address this health care crisis.

With support from the 88th Texas Legislature, we established the Rural Engagement Program to help Texans in small towns and rural communities get the care they need. The program is a coordinated, interdisciplinary initiative that unites experts and resources from across Texas A&M Health—the **Rural and Community Health Institute**, the **Naresh K. Vashisht College of Medicine**,

the **College of Nursing**, the **Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy** and the **Telehealth Institute**—working together to close gaps in access from every angle.

Our accomplishments in the two years since the launch of the program demonstrate the success of this initiative in helping rural communities retain access to health care and grow the future health care workforce.

This collaboration of physicians, nurses, pharmacists, health care educators and leaders with rural health expertise has delivered services and programs to more than 150 counties throughout Texas. With additional support from the 89th Texas Legislature, we will broaden our impact through transforming projects that directly benefit rural Texas communities.

Our purpose is simple: **to keep rural hospitals open, inspire health care professionals to build their careers in rural communities, and to expand health care access for all rural Texans**. In true Aggie spirit, the Rural Engagement Program will continue working alongside its community partners expanding programs and services to ensure quality health care is available now and for generations to come.

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PROVIDING FINANCIAL, OPERATIONAL AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Having served as a health extension center for more than 20 years, the Rural and Community Health Institute understands the unique health care challenges of rural and under-served communities. Through the Rural Engagement Program it has established technical support programs across 100 counties leading to measurable improvements in financial performance, service line growth, and the accelerated adoption of value-based care initiatives.

Technical assistance coordinators travel statewide to rural health care facilities to identify, prioritize and implement strategies that promote financial sustainability. Together with local leadership teams and rural health industry experts, tailored action plans are created at no cost to the hospital/clinic. This hands-on approach ensures that improvements are not just recommended but are integrated into

the daily operations of the health care centers the Rural and Community Health Institute serves.

Additionally, workforce coordinators collaborate with health care facilities, the Vashisht College of Medicine, the College of Nursing and the Rangel College of Pharmacy and local communities to establish rural rotations for medical, nursing and pharmacy students.

“I am proud of the team’s commitment to strengthen rural health care in Texas, one facility at a time,” said Kia Parsi, MD, executive director Texas A&M Rural and Community Health Institute. “The institute will continue to identify ways to support rural hospitals and clinics, focusing on each facility’s needs and challenges.”

EXPANDING OB TRAINING FOR RURAL HOSPITALS AND CLINICS

The Maternal Health Initiative—a program with the Rural and Community Health Institute—is focused on improving access to care, strengthening emergency response systems and supporting the long-term viability of rural obstetric services.

More than 60% of rural counties are classified as maternity care deserts, lacking a hospital birthing facility and having few, if any, obstetric providers. Pregnant women are left without consistent access to timely, high-quality care which can lead to preventable emergencies and poor health outcomes.

This new initiative encompasses three programs aimed at reducing rural maternal health disparities: a Telehealth Prenatal Care Program, OB Emergency Simulation Training and Rural Hospital OB Service Line Evaluations.



“We’re not just responding to a crisis; we’re building a blueprint for sustainable maternal care in rural Texas. Every mother deserves access to quality care, regardless of her ZIP code. Our mission is to make equitable, evidence-based care a reality in every rural community,” said Jacquelyn Alvarado, DNP, APRN, CNM, FACNM, C-EFM, director of maternal health initiatives at the Rural and Community Health Institute.



“I’VE BEEN PRACTICING RURAL HEALTH CARE ADMINISTRATION FOR WELL OVER 30 YEARS. I CAN’T THINK OF ANOTHER SINGLE PROGRAM THAT HAS DONE **MORE GOOD FOR RURAL HEALTH CARE IN TEXAS** than Texas A&M and its Rural and Community Health Institute.”

Robert A. Pascasio, MS, LFACHE, Interim CEO, Concho County Hospital District

The Rural and Community Health Institute partnered with Concho County Hospital (CCH) to identify two initial priorities: to strengthen operational support and to raise public awareness of available services. The institute developed an action plan that included collaborating with industry experts to accomplish these goals. Services were provided at no cost to the hospital.

INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PHYSICIANS TO SERVE

As a founding member of the Rural Engagement Program, the Naresh K. Vashisht College of Medicine is dedicated to preparing the next generation of rural health care providers—leaders of character who will care for and advance the health of their communities.

Through strategic partnerships with local stakeholders—including physicians, hospital administrators and community leaders—the Vashisht College of Medicine provides students with essential clinical training and a rich, immersive experience of life and practice in rural Texas intended to inspire young physicians to build their careers in these communities.

To spark interest in health care careers early, the college launched the K-12 Rural Outreach Program. Through “School to Scrubs,” Mini Med Camps and ISD partnerships, students in rural communities get hands-on opportunities to explore what it’s like to work in the health care field.

“Every student across our great state of Texas deserves the opportunity to be made aware of careers in health care, particularly in medicine, and empowered to achieve this dream through some of our Rural Medicine Programs if they so desire,” said Amy Waer, MD, Jean and Tom McMullin Endowed Dean of the Vashisht College of Medicine.

EDUCATING NURSES TO LEAD IN RURAL HEALTH CARE



“We have a responsibility to ensure our students understand the unique challenges faced by our state’s rural communities. Through the Texas A&M Rural Engagement Program, the College of Nursing is bolstering the state’s nursing workforce so that geography is never a barrier to receiving the care all Texans deserve,” said Leann Horsley, PhD, MBA, RN, CNE, dean of the College of Nursing.

The College of Nursing is strengthening the rural nursing workforce and expanding access to care in medically underserved areas across Texas.

Through the Rural Engagement Program, the College of Nursing has formalized and expanded its rural-focused efforts, including scholarship opportunities, curriculum enhancements and clinical training programs tailored to rural health care needs.

Annually, \$375,000 in scholarship funds are available to rural nurses to pursue advanced degrees. Undergraduate nursing students have access to rural immersion clinical experiences that place them in medically underserved communities across Texas. The College of Nursing is also assisting with deploying unique simulations that help rural hospitals better address maternal care needs.



"BEING A RURAL DOCTOR IS MORE THAN JUST A JOB, BUT A COMMITMENT TO **SERVING A COMMUNITY** DURING THE GOOD TIMES AND THE BAD.

I had always felt a calling to serve people, and it wasn’t until these rotations that I realized that calling was to serve rural Texas."

Chloe Todd, MD '25

While a student at the Vashisht College of Medicine, Todd completed six weeks of rural rotations in Mason, Kimble, Menard, McCulloch, Llano, San Saba and Bee. She is currently a resident at Via Christi Family Medicine in Wichita, KS, and plans to return to Texas to build her practice in a rural community.



"THE TRED ECHO PROGRAM HAS BEEN SUPER BENEFICIAL

AS I'M EXPERIENCING MY FIRST YEAR AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR.

It provides critical training and relevant content which has made me more aware of how to approach mental-health related issues with my students."

Abigail Seale-Alvarez, High School Counselor, Riviera ISD

TRAINING TOMORROW'S RURAL TEXAS PHARMACISTS

The Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy has a mission to develop and inspire leaders in pharmacy practice and pharmaceutical sciences through transformational education, innovative research, holistic care and effective outreach and service.

Through its partnership with the Rural Engagement Program, the college provided enhanced clinical training opportunities in rural communities including Clifton, Hallettsville, Uvalde, Alice, Pearsall, Fredericksburg and El Campo. During these rotations, students participate in a wide range of patient-centered activities, including prescription dispensing and immunization administration.

"The aim of the College of Pharmacy is to continue its rural community engagement and identify key clinical partners to help provide an enriching experience for our students as they serve rural communities in Texas," said Asim Abu-Baker, PharmD, associate dean for clinical and professional affairs at the Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy.



Faviola Rios, P4 (left); Lynde Buras, RPh, Experiential Education Coordinator Rangel College of Pharmacy (middle) and Amber Zenner, PharmD, HEB Pharmacist - Fredericksburg (right)

DELIVERING VALUABLE CARE AND RESOURCES TO RURAL TEXAS

The Telehealth Institute advances interdisciplinary research, education and clinical services in telehealth. With a commitment to reduce disparities in access to high-quality health care for rural Texans, the institute has increased behavioral health access for 18 rural communities.

For two communities without health care facilities—Kenedy and Jeff Davis counties—shipping containers were transformed into fully functioning medical clinics equipped to provide both family medicine and behavioral health services. The institute partnered with BUILD (student service organization at Texas A&M), the Vashisht College of Medicine, the Community Action Corporation of South Texas (CACOST) and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center on this innovative and ground-breaking health initiative.

It also expanded its Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) programs. Via secure video connections, ECHO connects health care providers in rural communities with a live panel of subject matter experts who provide guidance and support.

"This year's growth is a testament to the power of our partnerships. Innovative programs like Project ECHO are a vital tool in this expansion, ensuring our partners—even in the most remote areas—can gain the specialized expertise and resources necessary to serve their communities," said Carly E. McCord, PhD, founding executive director of the Telehealth Institute, licensed psychologist, and clinical associate professor at the Vashisht College of Medicine.



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