

RURAL HEALTH

HRSA is the lead federal agency responsible for monitoring and improving historically scarce health care services for 60 million people living in rural areas.

KEY FACTS

In FY 2009, HRSA invested \$169 million to improve health care in rural America, where access to medical services is often limited. HRSA's rural health grant programs help fund rural hospitals, health centers and local clinics. Approximately 20 percent of the nation's population lives in rural areas, yet only 7.7 percent of the country's physicians work there.

The agency's Office of Rural Health Policy serves as a "policy voice" within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to make sure regulatory actions take into account the special conditions faced by rural health care providers.

Rural citizens make up approximately 20 percent of the population and are spread across 80 percent of the country's land mass, typically in isolated communities not large enough to support their own health care workforces, far removed from major urban medical centers.

HISTORY

Congress created the Office of Rural Health Policy in 1987 and charged HRSA with advising the HHS Secretary on health care matters affecting rural hospitals, coordinating activities that related to rural health care, and maintaining a national information clearinghouse for state governments, federal policymakers, and providers.



ASSISTING STATES

HRSA funds state-run Offices of Rural Health in each of the 50 states to collect and disseminate health-related information about rural areas, provide technical assistance to rural providers and hospitals, and work with communities to recruit and retain health providers.

RURAL GRANT PROGRAMS

Through the Outreach and Network Development grant programs, HRSA funds improve the delivery of rural health care by encouraging greater collaboration and the creation of networks among local health care providers. Agency funds also strengthen "Critical Access Hospitals," small rural institutions that serve as key access points for Medicare beneficiaries. Other grants help rural hospitals and clinics acquire computer file-sharing systems and telemedicine equipment, which allows physician-to-physician and doctor-patient consultations over great distances.

HRSA also administers the Black Lung Clinic program, which provides treatment and rehabilitation for people who have occupation-related respiratory and pulmonary disease, and the Radiation Exposure Screening and Education Program, whose grantees educate, screen and refer for treatment people who were harmed by above-ground nuclear tests in the Southwest in the mid-20th century or by the mining, milling or transport of uranium.

RURAL HEALTH

CONDUCTING RESEARCH

HRSA supports rural health research centers to conduct short and long-term studies on rural health issues. The centers study critical trends facing rural communities in their quest to secure adequate, affordable, high-quality health services for their residents. The centers' research findings inform a wide audience of national, state and local decision-makers concerned with rural health.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

HRSA offers technical assistance to more than 3,500 Rural Health Clinics. Through quarterly conference calls, HRSA helps these small ambulatory clinics react to regulatory and market changes in health care. The agency also supports the Rural Recruitment and Retention Network, which helps locate qualified health care professionals to work in rural communities.

RURAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

HRSA oversees services provided by the University of North Dakota's Rural Assistance Center. The center serves as an "information portal" to help rural communities and other rural stakeholders access the full range of available health care programs, funding and research.

REGIONAL COMMISSIONS

HRSA works with the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority, the Denali Commission, and the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission to improve service delivery and reduce health disparities.

Two programs, the Delta States Rural Development Network Grant Program and the Delta Rural Hospital Improvement Project, target resources to improve health care in the Mississippi Delta.

BORDER HEALTH

HRSA's rural health focus has expanded to include managing HRSA's Border Health Activities. Much of the U.S.-Mexico border is rural, and the few urban areas located on the border often face challenges similar to those affecting rural communities, such as ensuring an adequate workforce, infrastructure development and improving poor health outcomes. Lessons learned on the U.S.-Mexico border may provide insight to communities everywhere that seek to improve services amid changing demographics and forecasts of long-term health workforce shortages nationwide.