Four Positive Trends for Rural America

By Carrie Abner [1]
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It lags urban areas in education—with 32 percent of urban dwellers having achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher, while only 18 percent of men and women in rural areas have, according to the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Economically, even as urban America has experienced employment growth over the past few years, rural rates remain in the doldrums. Similarly, rural poverty rates seem to be stuck in place, while the number of people below the poverty line has been declining elsewhere.

But, to paraphrase Mark Twain, “the reports of Rural America’s death are greatly exaggerated.” In fact, at least four major trends are helping improve the future of rural America: broadband, telemedicine, job training and new methods to attract young people to farming all offer hope.

Here’s the heart of the story for each:

BROADBAND

Dee Davis, president of the nonprofit Center for Rural Strategies, said access to broadband is a “critical issue for rural communities to have kids compete in school, ... to bring goods and services to the market, to participate in the democratic process. It is increasingly a civil right. Those without will not be able to fully participate in modern democracy.”

The federal government is taking steps to help Americans in rural areas reap the benefits of broadband. The Federal Communications Commission released a 2015 Broadband Progress Report in January that...
created a new definition for broadband Internet service. It’s now considered a utility, much like electricity and water. That allowed the FCC to require a standard that calls for higher Internet speeds for broadband, which can result in better access in rural areas.

In addition, over the past 18 months or so, the FCC has expanded its Connect America Fund—which is valued at $4.5 billion—so that it will subsidize high-speed Internet in high-cost, often remote, areas.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration—the federal branch agency primarily responsible for advising the president on telecommunications issues—also is pitching in. The agency has developed and maintains a public searchable map of broadband availability across the country. The benefit of this kind of work is that it will provide easily available information to organizations attempting to close the digital divide, including those in rural areas.

JOB TRAINING

Nationwide, many experts believe there is a mismatch between the jobs that are available and the skills of the workforce. Providing appropriate job training for positions available in rural areas has the potential for being a strong economic driver for these regions.

Back in 2011, the White House took clear note of this problem and issued an executive order to create the White House Rural Council. The council offered loans and grants for rural communities and businesses designed to drive job growth, as well as some 526 one-step career centers in rural locations.

One of the keys to these kinds of efforts is that they work best when they are established regionally. Starting in central cities—small and large—the training can expand out to surrounding rural areas. But that’s not always the easiest thing in the world. A culture of competition between the geographic areas that comprise a region easily can stand in the way of this kind of cooperative enterprise.

YOUNG FARMERS

The average age of American farmers is advancing. Difficulties in borrowing money and shortages of land suitable for the creation of new farms have been dissuading young men and women from going into the business. If that trend continues, the nation will be left with a growing shortage of farmers to help keep many rural areas thriving.

It’s a simple matter of math. When older farmers leave the business without being replaced, a decline is inevitable. Fortunately, this trend is not inexorable, and there are some countercurrents creating a revitalized interest in farming for young adults. Among them is a desire to go back to the land to develop sustainable food practices.

What’s more, state and federal programs aim to bring more young people into farming. Two of them have been developed by the USDA. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program helps fund the education and training of neophyte farmers and ranchers. The Value-Added Producer Grants Program is a competitive grant program for new farmers who produce certain specific products, like wine, jams and grass-fed beef.

TELEHEALTH

This legislative session alone, 100 telehealth-related bills have been introduced in state legislatures to remove barriers to bringing medical care to men and women who live far away from big, urban hospitals and the expertise they offer. A growing number of private businesses in the health care arena are investing in this field, while the number of states making coverage mandatory for private insurance plans continues to grow.

This work is seen to have widespread potential for helping rural areas retain their populations. Imagine,
for example, a patient with chronic heart disease who can go to a local clinic and have his EKGs transmitted automatically to a center-of-excellence physician who can interpret the findings from hundreds of miles away.

There are, as always, a few obstacles here. One is that there are complicated reimbursement issues that need to be worked out so that providers are incentivized to participate in telehealth. Also, there isn’t necessarily reciprocity of various kinds of medical licenses across state lines; so even a highly experienced high-tech doctor in one state may not have the legal right to practice medicine in another one.

CSG is working to find a solution for just that. Working in partnership with the Federation of State Medical Boards, CSG’s National Center for Interstate Compacts [2] has led the development of a new interstate compact that would enhance the license portability of physicians, with the ultimate goal of increasing patient access to health care. Thus far in 2015, the Interstate Medical Licensure Compact was been introduced in 17 states and adopted in 6 states.

ABOUT BARRETT AND GREENE

CSG Senior Fellows Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene founded the Government Performance Project, a 10-year effort by The Pew Charitable Trusts to improve state government management. As CSG senior fellows, Barrett and Greene serve as advisers on state government policy and programming and assist in identifying emerging trends affecting states.
