Amid the opioid crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare has been at the forefront of most state policy priorities. However, rural healthcare has been facing a crisis over the past decade.

Over 60 million Americans live in rural areas. Rural communities make up over 50% of the state in numerous states such as Mississippi, Vermont, Maine and West Virginia according to US Census data. For example, Vermont’s rural population is 61.1% of the state.

According to a recent Forbes article, “Across the US there are currently 1,844 rural hospitals, so the closure of 120 of them over 10 years (about 7%) is a substantial hit to the rural healthcare system.” With rural hospitals closing around the country at a rapid rate and a lack of medical professionals in these areas, states are taking action to combat a rural health crisis.

Learn more about what innovative approaches states are taking to ensure healthcare is provided in rural areas!

**Vermont House Bill 528** mandated the creation of a Rural Health Services Task Force. The task force is responsible for evaluating rural healthcare in the state, identifying ways to sustain the healthcare system by overcoming financial, administrative, and workforce barriers and ensuring the state provides access to affordable, high-quality services. Numerous state leaders will participate representing a variety of fields. Examples of task force members include the Secretary of Human Services, Chief of the Office of Rural Health and Primary Care in the Department of Health, representatives of rural Vermont hospitals, a licensed physician from a rural Vermont practice, and mental health providers. The task force will conduct the evaluation and share their findings with the legislature at the end of a yearlong analysis.

**Georgia House Bill 769** dedicated funds to create the Rural Health Innovation Center. The Center serves as a research organization that utilizes Georgia’s academic, public health policy, data, and workforce resources to create innovative approaches for funding and delivering rural healthcare. The State Office of Rural Health released a request for proposal for interested applicants. In 2019 the Mercer University School of Medicine was awarded the grant funding and began its work. You can learn more about what the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center is doing here.

**Illinois Senate Bill 447** address the lack of adequate obstetrical care in rural Illinois. The bill emphasizes that the primary cause of this lack of care is the shortage of qualified practitioners. The challenge of recruiting and retaining in this field is due to the high cost of professional liability insurance. The legislation provides grants to physicians providing obstetrical care in designated rural areas. The grant is an effort to reimburse the cost of malpractice insurance for obstetrical care in order to reduce the barriers and recruit more physicians to practice in rural areas of need.

Nebraska’s Department of Health and Human Services developed a rural health website that hosts a variety of programs and resources for rural health providers, clinics and patients across the state. The website states that the resources, “assist rural Nebraskans get high quality health care through recruitment and retention, hospital maintenance, community planning, health care
networks and cooperative ventures, identifying community leaders, developing leadership skills, and having an information clearinghouse.” One program the website highlights is the loan repayment program. This loan repayment program serves primary care, mental, dental and allied health professionals who practice in underserved areas.

States across the nation are working hard to ensure rural Americans have access to critical high-quality and affordable healthcare in a time of desperate need.

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