



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Alabama to celebrate Rural Health Day Nov. 20

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Alabama Department of Public Health Office of Primary Care and Rural Health will join the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH) and other state and national rural stakeholders in celebrating National Rural Health Day on Nov. 20. This observance was created as a way to showcase rural America, increase awareness of rural health-related issues, and promote efforts to address those issues.

Fifty-five of Alabama's 67 counties are considered rural and 44 percent of the entire Alabama population live in rural areas. Nationally, nearly one in five Americans live in rural and frontier communities throughout the United States. Eight rural Alabama counties (Bullock, Coosa, Bibb, Sumter, Wilcox, Winston, DeKalb and Randolph) are among the 250 U.S. counties with the lowest per capita incomes among all 3,113 counties in the U.S. Marion County is currently ranked number 251. Studies have shown that economic barriers have a direct impact on the health of a community.

"These small towns, farming communities and frontier areas are wonderful places to live and work; they are places where neighbors know each other and work together," notes NOSORH Director Teryl Eisinger. "The hospitals and providers serving these rural communities not only provide quality patient care, but they also help keep good jobs in rural America."

These communities also face unique health care needs. "Today more than ever, rural communities must tackle accessibility issues, a lack of health care providers, the needs of an aging population suffering from a greater number of chronic conditions, and larger percentages of un- and underinsured citizens," Eisinger says. "Meanwhile, rural hospitals are threatened with declining reimbursement rates and disproportionate funding levels that makes it challenging to serve their residents."

Access to health care is a critical issue in Alabama. In 2014, 1.7 million Alabamians experienced a lack of adequate primary care services, only 17 of the 54 Alabama counties considered rural had hospitals providing obstetrical services, and Alabama had the sixth highest depression rate in the country. Concerns remain for the future: the average age of a family practice physician in Alabama is 55.1 and the projected increase of the Alabama elderly population between 2010 and 2040 is 82.4 percent.

The Office of Primary Care and Rural Health supports rural citizens through programs such as the National Health Service Corps Scholarship and Loan Repayment Program for Health Professionals, the J-1 Visa Program, designation of Health Professional Shortage Areas, telehealth initiatives, resource development and technical support, and recruitment and retention.

"The Office of Primary Care and Rural Health takes great pride in working with rural communities, and welcomes questions and inquiries about the programs that are available to improve access to quality health care," Director Chuck Lail said.

The office has assisted with 35 health care placements since January 2011, increasing the health care workforce by 18 physicians, 6 dentists and 11 nurse practitioners. The office provides technical assistance for grant applications that resulted in \$1 million in grant awards last year.

Additional information about National Rural Health Day can be found on the Web at www.celebratepowerofrural.org. To learn more about NOSORH, visit www.nosorh.org; to learn more about the Office of Primary Care and Rural Health, visit adph.org/ruralhealth.