

Transforming Rural Health and Health Care in Maine: A Call to Action

Goal: Maine DHHS will improve the health care and health outcomes of our rural communities by leading a bold, innovative, and collaborative effort to transform rural health and health care services that leverages the state's assets to provide care for rural populations.

Need for Action: Maine's rural communities face a growing crisis in meeting the health care needs of their residents. Over the past decade, many rural communities have experienced an erosion of fundamental health services, growing financial threats to their hospitals, and challenges to sustaining their health workforce. These forces have collectively resulted in serious threats to the economic, physical, mental, and behavioral health of rural residents, and the time for action is now. The limitations of current payment structures and rules will require us to develop new approaches and creative ways to organize, finance, and deliver rural health services to create a sustainable, and high-performing rural health system that better meets the needs of Maine's rural residents.

Foundational Work: Maine is well-positioned to successfully address this challenge. Many of Maine's rural health providers, including Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) and Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), have a long history of working collaboratively to improve care and are recognized nationally for their quality of care. A motivated group of thought leaders, the Maine Rural Health Action Network, has been meeting for the past two years to identify potential solutions, and is ready to support specific activities to test new payment and delivery system models, promote innovation, and engage communities. Some of Maine's largest health systems have also identified the need for better solutions to meet the challenges facing rural hospitals and communities, and are poised to participate in programs to develop new regional organizational and payment structures to better meet the needs of rural communities. Additionally, several rural Maine communities have been collaborating to expand local services and make systems of care more efficient and effective. Five of its hospitals are receiving technical assistance from Texas A&M's Center for Optimizing Health, funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health. Maine is well-situated to leverage these collective efforts and expertise as the state moves forward to design new solutions to these challenges.

Proposed Approach: Maine has a unique opportunity to accelerate the momentum of these collective activities by developing and coordinating new approaches to the payment and delivery of health care, behavioral health, and social services in rural communities. With strong leadership from Gov. Mills and Maine DHHS, we will lead a collaborative, statewide effort to build new models of care that will better meet the needs of rural populations. We specifically aim to develop pilot programs that test new payment and care delivery models to better meet the needs of our rural communities, in partnership with Maine communities, health systems, and provider groups. We anticipate that such new models will be organized around regional care models, will include innovative care delivery methods including telehealth, and will allow sufficient flexibility of current Medicaid and Medicare payment systems to provide stronger support for essential health services in rural communities, including primary care, behavioral health, oral health, emergency services, public health, and long-term care, as well as other supports. We recognize that this work must incorporate a workforce development and retention strategy, and may also require new capital investments to support a transition to sustainable future delivery and financial models, including global spending targets.

Summary: Mainers are innovative, hard-working, and solution-oriented. While the need to improve health and health care in our rural communities presents significant challenges, we are up to the task. By working together, we can improve health, eliminate rural health disparities, and create opportunities for rural communities to sustain healthy families, grow their economies, and build a hopeful future for generations to come.