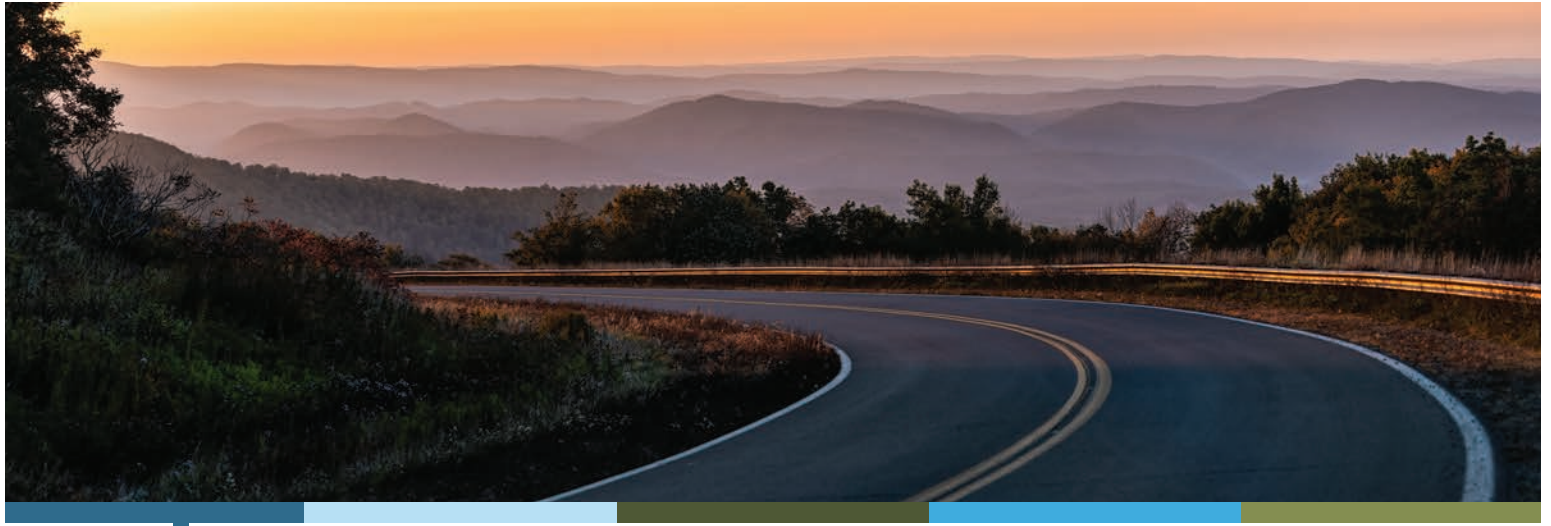


COUNTRY ROADS

Highlighting Champions
of Rural West Virginia





On the road to a healthier West Virginia

The State Office of Rural Health works to ensure access to healthcare through:

- Leveraging federal funds to improve access to healthcare services
- Supporting workforce recruitment and retention including loan repayment and J-1 Visa waivers
- Promoting community engagement
- Providing technical assistance to public and non-profit groups

Partnerships, Service and Quality



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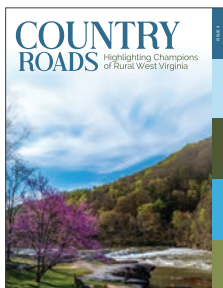
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Photography by Chris Gosses



ON THE COVER

Valley Falls State Park, Fairmont, WV

Cover photo by Shutterstock

Porch Talk Logo by Jennifer Lewis



with Elaine Darling, MPH

Co-CEO and director of programs, The Center for Rural Health Development, Inc.

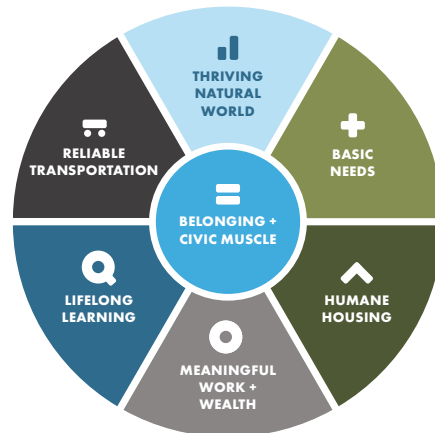
Welcome to this new edition of Country Roads magazine! We're delighted to have you join us to share in these stories of the people and organizations across our state who are making great strides in improving health and healthcare in their communities. Indeed, the strength of rural lies in its communities.

As you read through these stories, experiences, and achievements, we invite you to consider how their efforts positively impact their communities' Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being – the major conditions within our communities that enable us to live healthy lives and have thriving communities. These distinct but collective conditions affect our opportunities, influence our ability to make healthy decisions, and impact us on a daily basis, where we live, work, play, and pray.

When these conditions are lacking, we have higher rates of illness, unemployment, loneliness, and more. When they are fulfilled, we have healthy, thriving communities.

For more information about how your West Virginia community measures up on the Vital Conditions for Health & Well-being, visit wvruralhealth.org/programs/wwhw/seven-vital-conditions/.

7 VITAL CONDITIONS FOR HEALTH & WELL-BEING



WELCOME



Working proactively to provide care where it's needed | Sigel

War Memorial, Hampshire Memorial hospitals recognized as top Critical Access Hospitals

Story by [Jean Hardiman](#)

Two West Virginia hospitals, War Memorial Hospital in Berkeley Springs and Hampshire Memorial Hospital in Romney, were named to the National Rural Health Association's (NRHA's) Top 20 Critical Access Hospitals for 2024.

Though both hospitals have received numerous distinctions in recent years, it's the first time they have received this particular recognition, which is based on the results of the Chartis Rural Hospital Performance INDEX. Both hospitals are part of Valley Health, a not-for-profit health system based in Virginia.

"We are both thrilled and honored to have the hard work and dedication of our team members recognized on a national level," said Heather Sigel, vice president of operations for War Memorial and Hampshire Memorial hospitals.



Hampshire Memorial Hospital opened in 1959 and serves more than 23,000 residents living in the area.



The recognition is a result of ongoing efforts to continually improve services and to provide quality healthcare, she said.

A federally designated Critical Access Hospital is a rural hospital that meets standards set by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services such as being located at least 35 miles from the next nearest hospital and providing emergency care every day of the week, among others.

Hampshire Memorial Hospital

Opened in 1959, Hampshire Memorial Hospital has 14 acute-care/transitional-care beds and a 30-bed long-term care facility. A 65,000-square-foot facility was opened in 2011 after the hospital joined Valley Health in 2008.

In addition to inpatient care, the hospital offers 24-hour emergency department service, advanced medical imaging, comprehensive outpatient rehabilitation, surgical services, and a wellness and fitness center. Outpatient services include laboratory services, diabetes management, wound care, infusion therapy, sleep medicine, and respiratory care.

Its services are available to more than 23,000 residents living in the greater Hampshire County area, as well as parts of Mineral, Grant and Hardy counties, Sigel said.

War Memorial Hospital

War Memorial Hospital originally opened its doors

in 1934 as The Pines Crippled Children’s Hospital. Today, it provides 25 acute-care/transitional-care beds and a 16-bed long-term care facility.

War Memorial joined Valley Health in 2010 and moved into a state-of-the-art facility in 2012. It offers 24-hour emergency services, advanced medical imaging, comprehensive outpatient rehabilitation, surgical services, and the same outpatient services as its sister hospital in Romney, Sigel said.

The hospital provides care to more than 17,000 residents of Morgan County, she said, including the cities of Berkeley Springs, Paw Paw, Great Cacapon, and Rock Gap, as well as bordering towns in Berkeley County, West Virginia, and Washington County, Maryland.

Local services are vital

“Offering services locally is vitally important as many residents either lack access to reliable transportation or would need to choose between paying for gas to travel to a more urban area or paying for other daily expenses,” Sigel said. “Offering preventative healthcare services is as important as offering life-saving emergency care. If comprehensive primary care services are not available locally, many people would opt not to seek out this type of preventative care until the issue becomes an emergency situation.”



War Memorial Hospital joined Valley Health in 2010.

“Offering preventative healthcare services is as important as offering life-saving emergency care.

— Heather Sigel

Over the past several years, both Hampshire and War Memorial have invested in expanding telemedicine capabilities so patients can receive specialized care without having to travel, she said. These services use both video and audio technologies to communicate with and monitor patients remotely.

“These include ‘telestroke,’ ‘telepsychiatry,’ ‘telesitter’ (for inpatients), ‘teleconsults’ for palliative care as well as virtual visits through Valley Health’s system of Urgent Care Centers,” Sigel said.

It’s all part of their mission to improve the health of all people, despite their geographic, financial, and transportation challenges. “Residents living in rural communities throughout the country face a number of challenges, including access to high-quality, affordable healthcare,” Sigel said. “Valley Health remains committed to lessening this burden by ensuring that its community hospitals operate efficiently so that they can remain viable.

“Valley Health invests considerable resources into being a Highly Reliable Organization, which means that we continually work proactively to ensure that what should happen, does happen, 100% of the time,” she continued. “One example of this is the system’s recent transition from an accreditation process that happened every three years to one that takes place every year, which helps promote a constant state of readiness leading to higher quality of care.”

Recognitions such as their recent Top 20 listing “would never be possible without the daily commitment and determination of our staff to offer this level of care to the communities we serve,” she said.

The Chartis Rural Hospital Performance INDEX is a comprehensive assessment of rural hospital performance in the United States.

“Amidst uncertainty, transition and strain, these top performers are excelling in managing risk, achieving higher quality, securing better outcomes, increasing patient satisfaction, and operating at a lower cost than their peers,” the organization says online. “These groups serve as a benchmark for other rural facilities as they strive to achieve similar results and provide a blueprint for successfully navigating the uncertainty of the new healthcare.”

Sigel said it’s crucial to continue supporting Critical Access Hospitals.



Gary Phennicie, a respiratory therapist at War Memorial, explains a pulmonary test to a patient.

“We offer much needed services to the public to which many community members would not have access,” she said. “We save lives every day. We are very fortunate to be part of Valley Health’s strong network of providers and services. However, many Critical Access Hospitals throughout the state are independent and do not have this same type of support or safety net.”

Future plans and projects

- Beginning in 2024 and continuing into 2025, both hospitals are doubling down on their efforts to combat substance use disorders in general and opioids specifically. Partnering with local agencies, both hospitals are offering more support to those experiencing substance use challenges. Most recently, both hospitals placed Narcan distribution boxes in public areas. The goal is to offer a judgment-free resource for those in need.
- In late 2024, both Hampshire and War Memorial introduced Hospice in the Hospital programs in partnership with Hospice of the Panhandle. The programs ensure that eligible patients and their families receive comprehensive care for serious illness and end-of-life services both during and after their hospital stay.

Recent honors

Recognitions recently received by War Memorial and Hampshire Memorial hospitals:

- National Rural Health Association’s Top 20 Critical Access Hospitals for 2024
- Both War and Hampshire Memorial received the 2024 Silver Award from the West Virginia Hospital association for participation in the Honors Program for High Quality/Best Practice
- Becker’s Healthcare Top 350 Cleanest Hospitals for 2024: War Memorial Hospital
- Morgan County Chamber of Commerce Large Business of the Year 2023: War Memorial Hospital
- Becker’s Healthcare Most Recommended Hospital 2023: War Memorial Hospital
- The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Five Star Award, Nursing Home Services 2022: War Memorial Hospital Nursing
- The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Four Star Award, Nursing Home Services 2022: Hampshire Memorial Hospital Extended Care Facility
- Hampshire Memorial Hospital and War Memorial Hospital were recognized by the Chartis Center for Rural Health with 2024 Performance Leadership Awards for Excellence in Quality, Outcomes and Patient Perspective



Offering the latest in robotics close to home

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CAMC's Plateau Medical Center the first in W.Va. to use the da Vinci 5 surgical system

Story by [Jean Hardiman](#)

OAK HILL – In 2024, Plateau Medical Center became the first hospital in West Virginia to begin using the da Vinci 5 surgical system, the most up-to-date version of da Vinci's robotics offerings. It's a game-changer, particularly for patients in Oak Hill and the surrounding area, to have world-class treatment close to home, according to Dr. Scott Kilmer and Justus Smith, vice president and chief nursing officer for CAMC Plateau Medical Center.

Before robotic surgery became available at Charleston Area Medical Center's Plateau Medical Center more than a decade ago, Kilmer could get through most routine abdominal surgeries without much trouble, but not all of them. And what he's learned since then is that when complicated procedures have arisen in a particularly sick patient, robotic surgery has made a world of difference.



Yancy Short, MD, is a surgeon with CAMC Plateau Medical Center who uses the da Vinci 5 surgical robot in his practice.

In robotic surgery, a surgeon uses a computer that controls a robotic arm equipped with very small instruments to conduct minimally invasive surgery on a patient. This latest model of the surgical system optimizes vision for the surgeon, reduces force on the patient's tissue, and has enhanced computing power to make surgery more effective than ever.

"The robotic tools are just more precise," Kilmer said. "The camera is even more amplified. What I'm looking at has three-dimensional camera pictures, which compared to a regular laparoscope (a slender tube that allows surgeons to see inside the body and use smaller incisions), it's all just better than the previous stuff.

"It has a distinct advantage of being easier to do difficult surgeries," Kilmer said. "Every fifth or eighth gall bladder surgery or every fifth hernia surgery presents a surprise difficulty, and having the tools, the robot, makes it so much easier."

"It enables us to do things that we couldn't do before, like sew. To sew laparoscopically is difficult or impossible, but to do so on the robot is routine. So we sew hernias closed; we can sew intestines back together. Basically, almost all abdominal surgeries now are done on the robot."

Along with Kilmer and Dr. Yancy Short, a gynecologist at the hospital uses the systems, and there have been discussions about an otolaryngologist (ENT) and a urologist using it.

"Having the system in place gives you the opportunity to attract and recruit other high-level specialists to do procedures as well," Smith said.

When robotic surgery began several years ago, there was some push back, he recalled.

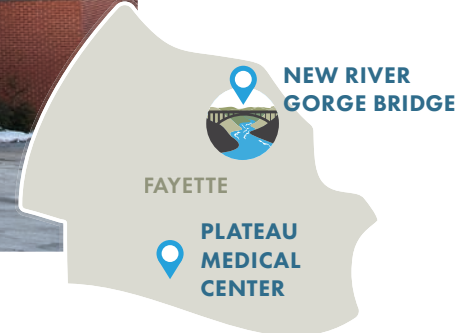
"It is more expensive compared to laparoscopic, but my honest personal evaluation is it does reduce the healing time," Smith said. "We do see patients go home quicker with less pain and less complications. After years and years of watching patients, we can attest to that."

And for the rural patient population that the medical center serves, it literally can mean the difference between life and death.

"Being rural means we're out, we're separate," Smith said. "For a lot of these folks, they're driving far just to get here, and not on the interstate. It's back roads over mountains. Some people put chains on their trucks this time of year trying to get here, so it's huge. People would not have that procedure sometimes if they had to go farther.



Located in Oak Hill, CAMC Plateau Medical Center is only a short distance from the New River Gorge Bridge.



“We’re talking about cancer. We’re talking about life-changing surgical procedures that are now closer to where somebody can actually get to that doctor’s office, get that pre-treatment, get the procedure, get follow-up in a rural setting,” Smith continued. “It’s unbelievable that we can deliver this quality of care to patients in a rural setting so they’re getting the exact same or better care as they would any other place in the world.”

“**We’re talking about life-changing surgical procedures that are now closer to where somebody can actually get to that doctor’s office, get that pre-treatment, get the procedure, get follow-up in a rural setting.**

— Justus Smith

Frequently, people living in rural areas get to the doctor less often for health maintenance, Smith said, so illnesses often end up being more severe. Those health disparities among rural populations mean that access to more skilled surgery is critical.

“Again, the robot saves us when the patients are sicker, and the case is more difficult. That’s when the robot shines,” Kilmer said. “By the time you’re sick enough to come to the hospital, the hernias are bigger, the gall bladders are more scarred. Our population presents those difficult cases more often than when you go to the cities.”

Smith encourages policymakers and others to support local healthcare right where it is.

“That drive back and forth is huge. If you have Mamaw and Papaw driving – they might be able to get there by ambulance, but how are they going to get home if they’re on a fixed income or the weather or the roads are bad?” he asked. “Try to keep healthcare in the community. I think you’ve got really good buy-in.”

Plus, it’s helpful for recruitment and retention of the excellent physicians that West Virginia needs, Smith said.

“Support legislation for physicians that attracts physicians,” Smith said. “Make sure they have all the tools and resources they need.”



Workplace wellness

Kelly Fox

Active Southern West Virginia drives workplace and community wellness initiatives

Story by Jean Hardiman

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends 2 ½ hours of moderately intense exercise every week, including muscle-strengthening activities two days per week.

Ask many Americans if they're meeting those recommendations, and they're going to say no. Ask them why, and many are going to cite their jobs. After all, it's the 21st century. A lot of today's jobs require sitting still in front of a computer.

But there's an organization in West Virginia that, along with driving other initiatives to improve wellness, is addressing the issue of work getting in the way of wellness.

Active Southern West Virginia (Active SWV) has a popular Workplace Wellness program that gives businesses and organizations tools they can use to make worksites more wellness-friendly.

“People spend a significant amount of their lives at work, so it stands to reason that the worksite is an important place to introduce wellness initiatives,” said India Tarleton Krawczyk, director of operations for Active SWV.

“Many adults with busy schedules have a hard time fitting that recommended activity into their time outside of work, so one way people can benefit from Workplace Wellness is by including some of that activity in their workday,” she said. “Workplace Wellness initiatives can increase worker productivity, decrease their risk for developing chronic disease, and even lower healthcare costs.”

Creating a "culture of health"

It's also beneficial for mental health, Krawczyk said.

“Workplace Wellness initiatives can tackle mental health challenges workers face and make them feel respected and valued,” she added. “When worksites address employees’ health needs, they start to create a culture of health that can help employees continue healthy initiatives in other parts of their lives outside of work.”

Different industries can benefit from different wellness initiatives, Krawczyk said, which is why Active SWV’s Workplace Wellness program uses CDC-backed and evidence-based Work@Health Program.

“At the core of this program is the CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard, which has questions across 18 health topics that help worksites identify where their gaps are,” she said.

Through this assessment, the program provides employers with knowledge, tools, and resources they need to start a successful Workplace Wellness program based on their needs.

“ **Workplace Wellness initiatives can increase worker productivity, decrease their risk for developing chronic disease, and even lower healthcare costs.**

– India Tarleton Krawczyk

“We have seen worksites offer a variety of Workplace Wellness initiatives to their employees tailored to what their worksite needs,” Krawczyk said. “Someone who is sitting at their job all day has different Workplace Wellness needs than a warehouse worker who is constantly on their feet and moving.”

Active SWV’s Workplace Wellness Director Kelly Fox offers free training to businesses in West Virginia. They complete a six-week course with Active SWV to build a Workplace Wellness plan that suits their needs.

Building capacity

Active SWV also offers capacity-building grants in partnership with the West Virginia Department of Health. The Bureau of Public Health’s Division of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease will award businesses \$1,500 to help build and sustain their wellness program, Krawczyk said.

“We have used our grant money to purchase equipment and incentives and to create Wellness Resource Centers at each of our worksites across the state with things like exercise equipment and light up breathing buddies to help them regulate breath to stay calm and focused,” said Tracey Suppa-Todd, human resources director for HealthNet Aeromedical Services. “The most popular component of our program is the monthly challenge piece, which invites participants to earn points and gifts by completing small tasks and working towards an annual bonus.”



Betty Bennett and Bridgit Arnold are working together on their wellness goals at the Wellness Resource Center located at their worksite.

Aiding recruitment and enhancing productivity

All this can help recruit talent for your organization while increasing productivity, Fox said.

“A Forbes article from 2018 revealed that 87% of job seekers are now choosing employment based on an organization’s health and wellness program,” Fox said. “The article went on to state that organizations that offer wellness programs and invest in their employees see increased productivity and employee engagement.

“West Virginia organizations have an opportunity to provide a unique benefit package that not only includes a Workplace Wellness program, but also promotes the natural outdoor recreational opportunities that our state has to offer, easily making West Virginia a great place to work.”

Workplace Wellness is just one example of the many activities that Active SWV has launched to promote wellness and increase quality of life for West Virginians.

The nonprofit, which is based in Beckley, focuses on Raleigh, Summers, Nicholas, Fayette, Kanawha and Boone counties, but has been expanding statewide to provide communities with free physical activity opportunities that improve health outcomes and prevent chronic disease.

Active SWV was founded in 2015 as part of the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority’s (NRGRDA) economic development plan.

The goal was to create an organization that could focus on improving the health of the workforce to attract businesses and economic opportunities to the area, Krawczyk said. As Active SWV has grown through the years, its mission has broadened.

“We meet people ‘where they are’ to work towards this goal,” Krawczyk said. “Our Community Captain program engages community members to lead free physical activities. Our Kids Run Club program provides schools with a program curriculum and training to start and sustain free after school run clubs for kids.”



End of season medals are given to participants of the Kids Run Club.



Kelly Fox, Workplace Wellness director, and India Tarleton Krawczyk, director of operations, discuss a plan for a new member.

That program has more than doubled in the past year or so, said Melanie Seiler, executive director of Active SWV. In the fall of 2023, Active SWV had 17 elementary schools participating in the six-to eight-week program led by a volunteer coach. By the fall of 2024, it had 37 elementary schools participating in the program, which focuses on building confidence as well as increasing physical activity, Seiler said.

Active SWV's biggest success just might be how much the organization has grown since it began a decade ago, Seiler said.

"Over the past 10 years, the evidenced-based programs have reached thousands of people in West Virginia," Seiler said. "Part of the recent growth is due to a new online membership. Participants can easily create a profile and search for programs in their area."

"The needs of rural families are complex and require multiple resources," she said. "There is a hierarchy of needs to meet, and physical activity and social connection go a long way to improving the quality of life for individuals."



Grant funds can be used to enhance workplace wellness plans for members.

Learn more

- New businesses or organizations that want to enroll in Work@Health to start their own Workplace Wellness programs can learn more at activeswv.org/workplace-wellness/.
- Active SWV's Kids Run Club Mini-Grant program is an opportunity for schools and community groups throughout West Virginia to receive training, support, curriculum, and funding to start or continue a free Kids Run Club at their school. Learn more at activeswv.org/kids-run-club/.
- To learn more about fundraising and other events, visit activeswv.org/signature-events/.

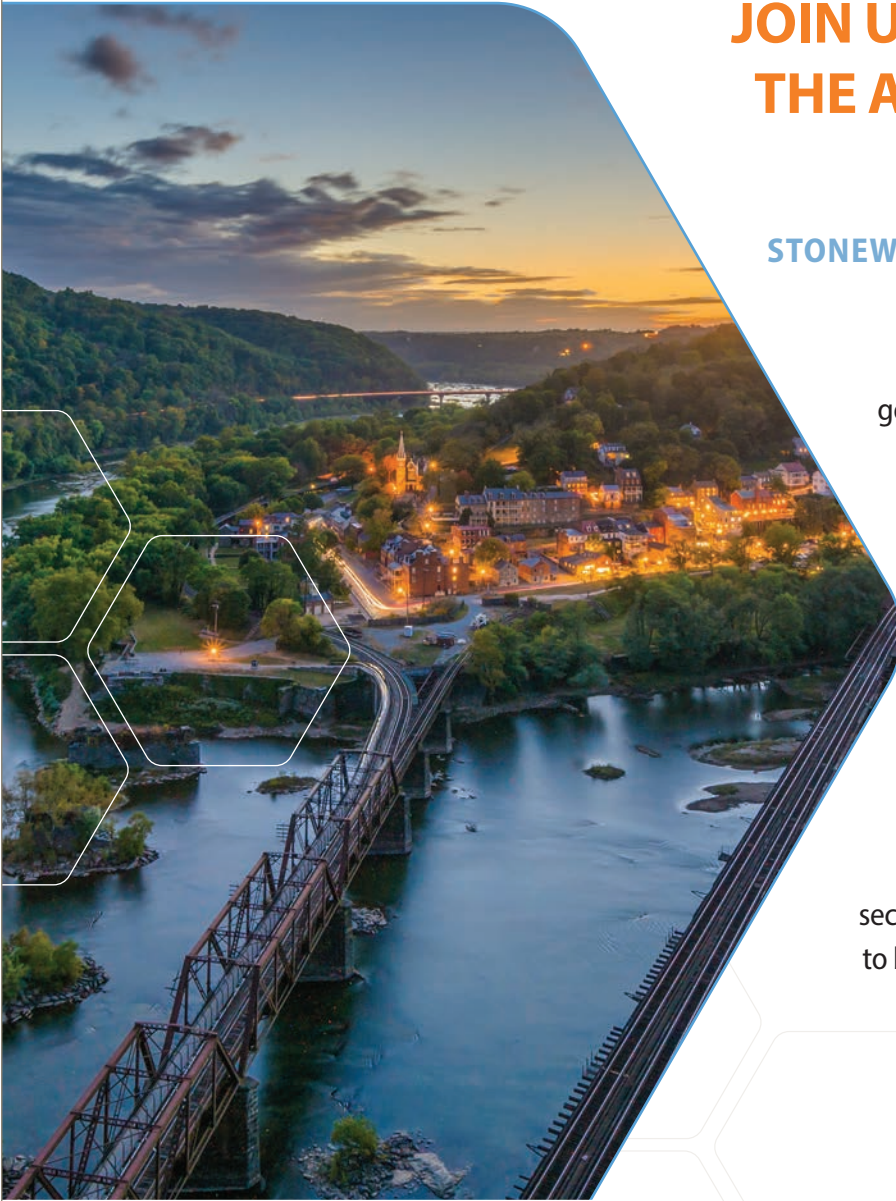
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Building trust, changing lives

Derek Hudson

Three community groups take multifaceted approaches to serve Charleston's West Side

Story by Jean Hardiman

When Derek Hudson walks down the street on Charleston's West Side, he's going to have a few conversations along the way.

He's going to stop and say hello to friends. Some will have jobs and homes. Some won't. Many will have questions, and if he can help or connect them to the right person, that's exactly what he will do as quickly as he can.

Building that trust is something that he's been working tirelessly toward for the past few years. Hudson is the founder and executive director of the Bream Neighborhood SHOP is one example of the many programs that serve Charleston's West Side. The Bream Neighborhood SHOP helps with basic needs and access to an array of services for low-income families and the unsheltered population.

This is the first story in an occasional series about Charleston's West Side.

Other organizations address the health-related issues that impact the community, from housing to food insecurity.

Keep Your Faith Corporation also offers a multi-dimensional approach to helping the community through services that include behavioral health and food system development in the community, with special attention to culturally sensitive issues for the black community.

Cabin Creek Health Systems (CCHS), which strives to provide care to underserved populations, recently opened a new clinic on Charleston's West Side, providing primary care, behavioral health services, and dental care on a sliding scale.

And there are others providing valuable services, such as Aspire Achievement Project, the West Virginia Breast Health Initiative, West Virginia Health Right's West Side Clinic, West Side Together, and many more.

Organizations serving the West Side

- **Aspire Achievement Project**
aspireachievementproject.org
- **Bream Neighborhood SHOP**
breamchurch.com/new-page
- **Cabin Creek Health Systems**
cabcreekhealth.com/westside-health/
- **Charleston CARE**
charlestonwv.gov/care
- **Family Care Health Centers**
familycarewv.org
- **First Choice Services**
firstchoiceservices.org
- **Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation**
tgkvf.org
- **Jobs & Hope WV**
jobsandhope.wv.gov
- **Kanawha Valley Collective**
kanawhavalleycollective.org
- **Keep Your Faith Corporation**
kyfc.org
- **Mountain State Justice**
mountainstatejustice.org
- **Mountain State Recovery Center**
msrcwv.com
- **REACH**
tccwv.org/Our-Programs/REACH.aspx
- **Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program**
oepls.wv.gov/rwp/pages/default.aspx
- **United Way of Southern West Virginia**
unitedwayswv.org
- **West Virginia Breast Health Initiative**
wvbhi.org
- **West Side Together**
westsidetogether.org
- **West Virginia Health Right West Side**
wvhealthright.org/locations/west-side-clinic
- **Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Charleston West Side**
wvruralhealth.org/programs/wwhww/wwhwestsidewv/
- **YMCA Resolve Family Abuse Program**
ywcacharleston.org/resolve



Cabin Creek Health Systems' new clinic on Charleston's West Side provides primary care, behavioral health services, and dental care.

“Addressing health disparities requires a multifaceted approach, in primary care, behavioral health and community-based services,” said Travis Stephens, director of communications for Cabin Creek Health Systems. “Especially in underserved areas, it’s essential to closing the gaps in building healthier communities. That’s what I would love to see on Charleston’s West Side, and the success that we’re seeing demonstrates what’s possible when healthcare is made accessible and affordable and is tailored to the unique needs of the population.”

Despite being within city limits, Charleston’s West Side has a lot of similarities to West Virginia’s rural areas. According to the 2017-2021 American Community Survey, the percentage of the population living within 2.8% of the poverty level on Charleston’s West Side was 46%, more than double the statewide percentage, which was 17.9% in 2022.

Physical health is a concern as well. The estimated incidence of high blood pressure is 58%; diabetes is 19%; and obesity is 47%, all of which exceed the national average.

What comes with poverty-related trauma is a general distrust of some of the systems meant to provide assistance. Building it back up is a long game, Hudson said.

“...the success that we’re seeing demonstrates what’s possible when healthcare is made accessible and affordable and is tailored to the unique needs of the population.”

— Travis Stephens

“One thing I tell my staff is we cannot do anything without building a foundation of trust,” he said. “You have to show up, build a routine, introduce yourself. You have to listen. You have to do all these things.”

Meeting basic needs

The Bream Neighborhood SHOP (Showers, Health Care, Outreach Program) opened in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic when the neighborhood was experiencing an increased rate of infections.



Dural Miller, founder and executive director of KYFC, stands in Miss Ruby's Corner Market, a nonprofit named after his late grandmother.

Hudson wanted to help for many reasons. He grew up on the West Side without much, so he understands, and he cares. Further, he has a rare kidney disease with a dire health prognosis and wants to spend the time he has doing as much good as he can.

As a member, he knew Bream Presbyterian Church had extra space and might be able to help.

"I thought, 'If anybody will help somebody during the pandemic, the church will.' They didn't hesitate then, and they haven't hesitated once," Hudson said.

The SHOP started by offering showers.

"It went well," he said. "We were open three days a week for a couple hours. ...and then in three months, I added a clothing closet. They already had a food pantry, but I moved it with their permission.

The SHOP offers hot lunches, cold drinks, and hygiene products. It also offers a mini-laundromat and lockers, which are especially helpful for those who are fleeing domestic violence, he said.

There are no shelter options yet, except on days colder 20 degrees when the SHOP serves as a warming station, but Hudson envisions offering a shelter someday.



Amber Slater helps by serving food to people at the SHOP.

After people check in and have their basic needs met, they can start getting connected to services.

"That gets everybody in the door. Once they're in the door, we have 15 to 16 agencies that do everything you can imagine right here," Hudson said.

Kanawha Valley Collective does assessments for the unsheltered and helps people navigate and understand HUD and Section 8.

“We also help with financial literacy. We’ve almost doubled our numbers this year for clientele,” he said, adding that they’d seen about 2,000 individuals in 2024. “United Way of Southern West Virginia has really educated us on this part. We teach people how to manage.”

A Cabin Creek Health Systems mobile unit stops by; the clinic has opened a new center down the street. “They can do just about everything. It’s like a rolling exam room. And they have a behavioral health person, which is key because mental health is probably the biggest obstacle,” Hudson said.

Mountain State Justice helps people understand their legal rights, whether it involves an eviction or a trespassing charge for sleeping under a bridge. Resolve Family Abuse Program helps those who have experienced domestic violence. And there is a representative of REACH, which offers rape crisis services.

The SHOP partners with the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program and provides testing, prevention services and counseling.



The Bream Neighborhood SHOP provides an array of services for low-income families and the unsheltered population.

“We do a lot of peer recovery and addiction help,” Hudson said. “We do it ourselves, but we have agencies come help us: WV Peers, First Choice Services, Mountain State Recovery.”

The SHOP works with the Charleston CARE (Coordinated Addiction Response Effort) team to get patients into rehab and to help them stay on the course to recovery.

The SHOP works with a First Choice Services navigator who helps individuals get insurance “within five to 10 minutes,” Hudson said. “They can sign people up with Medicaid immediately if it’s an emergency. “

“We see about 70 to 100 people a day. We’re close to 14,000 or 15,000 check-ins this year,” he said.

They also have an outreach team that visits senior living facilities and low-income housing complexes and encampments to bring supplies and healthcare.

“It’s really a beacon of hope for this community. We don’t advertise. Everybody finds us. I believe it’s a sanctuary for those who don’t have any other sanctuary.

“Sometimes, we have to be that bridge to open the door for them because so many doors have been shut,” he said. “We’re like a handrail. You can use us for support, but you’re going to have to walk the steps. We can’t do that for you.”

The SHOP is open from 1 to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Providing a point of engagement

Even before Miss Ruby’s Corner Market opened in November 2024, the site was often visited by a local boy who stopped by after school to check things out, talk to folks, and just hang out.

And that was fine with Dural Miller, founder and executive director, and Alecia Allen, clinical director and co-executive, of the Keep Your Faith Corporation (KYFC), a nonprofit that operates the store.



Alecia Allen, MA, LPC, is not only a counselor but also the clinical director at KYFC.

“ We’re like a handrail. You can use us for support, but you’re going to have to walk the steps.

– Dural Miller

They hope that people stop into their new market, get to know them, and learn more about what KYFC has to offer.

KYFC has a four-part approach to strengthening the West Side community: providing culturally sensitive behavioral health services, improving food access and systems development, offering community outreach events, and providing workforce development opportunities.

“If kids come here and get to know us early, we can start helping them with their development and talking to them about reaching their goals early on,” said Miller, founder and executive director of KYFC.

His journey of helping people on Charleston’s West Side goes back almost two decades when he was volunteering in schools and noticing that delays

in school were a symptom of kids needing more positive connections with adults in the community.

He started volunteer-led, school-based gardening and mentorship programs, teaching children gardening concepts that not only helped them build those positive connections but got them outside exercising while learning about fresh-grown vegetables and nutrition.

Meanwhile, Allen, who is now the clinical director and co-executive of KYFC, was working on a master’s degree in counseling at Marshall University and joined forces with Miller as part of her internship.



Dural Miller has been moving forward school and community-based social programs since 2006.



Elliot Holstein, a cashier at Miss Ruby's, helps to make sure fresh, local food is accessible.

“When we saw behavioral issues at these schools related to academic difficulties, I was able to apply a horticultural therapy concept, and that is just healing in the garden and using gardening concepts to address social-emotional issues,” she said.

“(Allen) could talk to them and advocate for them,” said Miller, who also runs an agricultural apprenticeship with college students. “Sometimes, they don’t have anyone to advocate for them.

That was something special and that was missing for them. Seeing that grow into a whole agency – it’s what we needed. It’s important.”

About 10 years ago, they received their first grant from the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation for the West Side Grown program, which focused on horticultural therapy.

“We had nutritional literacy and agricultural literacy, so people knew how to use the food that they were harvesting to increase their access to fresh and healthy foods, because this area is also a food desert,” Allen said, explaining that sometimes in low-income areas, grocery stores offer more unhealthy, processed foods than healthy options. “There’s a trauma-informed community development framework. One of the symptoms of community-level trauma is that you don’t have products. A food desert leads to academic issues and social issues.”



Chef Ke, market and deli manager, prepares fresh produce for sale at Miss Ruby's Corner Market.

It's all connected, she said, which is why their approach is multi-faceted.

“If people learn to eat well early on, they’re going to be healthy enough to implement other healthy living activities,” she said. “If there is more green space and you can come to the grocery store, when you’re healthy enough to sustain yourself and you know how to advocate for yourself, go to the doctor, those kinds of things – it’s all part of healthy living, and there’s a whole other layer of trust.”



Alecia Allen (left) speaks with Cassandra Cummings, the office manager and billing specialist at KYFC.

“It’s about access to culturally sensitive care, and it’s important for a lot of reasons. It creates a level of trust and relatability.”

– Alecia Allen

They opened Miss Ruby’s Corner Market in late 2024. It was named for Miller’s grandmother and is located on Central Avenue in a building donated by the city and renovated through grant monies. Offering produce from their garden and from other local farmers, the store provides affordable, healthy food to the community while serving as a point of engagement so community members can learn about the other services KYFC offers.

“There is an intersection between wellness and economic development, community building and workforce development,” Allen said. “If humans aren’t well enough to sustain their workability, then you see a downturn in economic trends and community-building.”

KYFC operates on grants, including one from the Appalachian Regional Commission that is funding a feasibility study on culturally sensitive workforce development practices.

“We do everything through a public health lens and everything we do is centered on wellness,” Allen said.

They hope to provide good jobs, teach about healthy living and provide mental health services that will all help in building the community. They also offer outreach events, like a Thanksgiving dinner and a block party.

“You increase levels of trust through these positive social connections. If people come in here because their kids get off the bus and spend time with us, they’re not afraid to go upstairs for therapy,” she said. “I like to think that we’re bridging a gap to create culturally sensitive spaces that are engagement points for people to come in, shop healthy, eat healthy foods, connect with a therapist, learn their workability, increase their professional opportunities, find academic support if they need it – whatever those wrap-around services look like. You need an engagement point that you can trust to be open enough to have your needs met. That’s what this sort of model is all about.”



The new center provides regular health maintenance for patients.

Making healthcare welcoming, accessible

In the spirit in which it was founded in the 1970s to help underserved populations, Cabin Creek Health Systems opened the doors to its new clinic on Charleston's West Side on Sept. 15, 2024. In its first couple of months, CCHS West Side Health had almost 1,000 encounters related to its Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Program (CARP). It also had a few hundred primary care encounters after its first month and about 170 dental care encounters.

Fees for care are determined on a sliding scale, depending on a patient's ability to pay.

"We chose this location because Charleston's West Side has historically lacked accessible and affordable healthcare services despite a significant need," Stephens said. "There are other facilities in the relative area, but the need is much greater than what was being offered.

Beyond the need for addressing health concerns related to substance use disorder, "This area in particular has a high prevalence of chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, COPD, underlined with a poverty rate of around 46%, which far exceeds both state and national averages."

Just like those living in rural areas, patients struggle with transportation and access to other clinics, Stephens said.

"Establishing a comprehensive health center here allows us to bridge these gaps and provide quality care close to where people are living. This decreases the burden of time they face with every visit."

In terms of primary care, the new center provides regular health maintenance and helps patients manage chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, which are prevalent on Charleston's West Side.

"Dental care is one that I'm personally excited about. There is not a lot of dental care available to people at or below the poverty line," Stephens said. "This lets us address an area with extremely high rates of tooth loss among older adults."

Behavioral health services include traditional counseling, as well as an integrated care approach, in which the behavioral health team works in conjunction with medical providers. For example, if a patient isn't taking medication properly, a behavioral health consultant can consult with the patient and help him or her establish an action plan so that new habits become ingrained.



Tawndalay Robinson, PSR; Kelli Hupp, FNP-C; and Mikayla Estep, medical assistant, discuss a treatment plan.



Cabin Creek Health Systems' new clinic on the West Side provides dental care as a new service.

Cabin Creek's addiction recovery program serves individuals with substance use disorders through evidence-based care and ongoing support.

"A lot of folks in our CARP program are using suboxone to be able to live lives in which they are able to hold down 9-5 jobs," he said. "They're able to go home to their families. It's just amazing."

A special program for patients going through recovery involves helping them build new, healthy connections," he said. "This week, they're all getting a frying pan as well as all the ingredients used to make (a meal), as well as a recipe card. Then they can take the ingredients and cook for their friends or the people who live on their floor if they live in an apartment. They can help rebuild connections.

A care navigator connects patients to essential services such as housing or transportation to ensure access and continuity of care. The center also offers showers and a washer and a dryer for established patients.

"If individuals say, 'I really don't want to be seen today. I don't feel right and want to get clean before I get seen,' we can say, 'We have this private spot back here and we can get you towels and toiletries and you can get yourself comfortable so that you can be seen,'" Stephens said. "I love that. It's part of our greater trauma-informed design."

Cabin Creek used a trauma-informed approach to design the entire facility, he said. That also includes strategic use of natural light, even in the clinical rooms, as well as breakout waiting rooms or smaller waiting rooms with fewer stimuli.



Brandon Williams (left), an outreach coordinator at The SHOP, coordinates with Bernard Slater, a care manager at Cabin Creek Health Systems, to connect a patient with a care plan for recovery.

“ We hope to create a healthier, more empowered community.

– Travis Stephens

“This is beneficial for patients who have some anxiety,” Stephens said. “Let’s face it, if you’re going to the doctor, even if you’re not an anxious person, there is still going to be some anxiety. Smaller waiting rooms help create a safe and welcoming environment to promote a sense of security and comfort.

“These services and features reflect our commitment to addressing not only medical needs but also the social and environmental barriers that impact health outcomes.



“We hope to create a healthier, more empowered community,” he said. “We want to improve access to essential healthcare services. We aim to address disparities, manage chronic conditions and, at the end of the day, enhance overall quality of life. Our work goes beyond treating illnesses. We strive to foster trust and ensure that everyone just feels welcome and supported in receiving the care that they need.”



Finding a role in healthcare

Pictured: Community Stars award-winner Debbie Curry is pictured here with (from left) Amber Vance, grants program coordinator; Jennifer Plymale, director; and Curry all with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health. At the far right is Kristin Dial, CEO and president of the Logan Healthcare Foundation.

Community Stars Award-winner puts legal expertise, problem-solving skills to use finding rural healthcare solutions

Story by Jean Hardiman

PRINCETON – When Debbie Curry shifted her legal career toward healthcare, she was a bit intimidated at first.

“I would find myself talking to people who had maybe just saved somebody’s life two hours before, and there I was thinking, ‘I can write a contract.’ It puts things into a different perspective, and I got a little worried about what I had to offer in this world when I didn’t even understand all the time what they were talking about clinically,” Curry said.

But she learned that she absolutely can bring value when she applies her skills to find solutions.

“What I would say to people now is that everybody can have a role in rural healthcare,” Curry said. “I’ll never medically save somebody’s life – that’s for darned sure – but I might be able to write a contract to help an FQHC (Federally Qualified Health Center) get a provider into a rural area, and they may save somebody’s life.”

For more than 20 years, she has put her legal skills and knowledge to use as the program director for Rural Outreach and Development at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health, part of Marshall University’s Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine.

Curry was recently honored as the recipient of the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health Community Stars Award for 2024 for her contributions to improving rural healthcare throughout West Virginia.



It is well-deserved, said Jennifer Plymale, director of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health and associate dean of admissions and special programs for the medical school. Plymale has worked with Curry for the past two decades.

“Debbie’s enthusiasm for rural health is infectious,” Plymale said. “She approaches every challenge with a positive attitude and a relentless drive to find solutions. Debbie’s recognition in rural healthcare is a testament to her deep understanding of the unique challenges these communities face and her innovative approach to addressing them.”

“**What I would say to people now is that everybody can have a role in rural healthcare.**

– Debbie Curry

For Curry, it’s been a career that has not only allowed her to stay home near those she loves but also to help the people of her home state have access to good physicians.

She didn’t know that she’d be headed for a career in healthcare, but she did feel an immediate call to higher education. After graduating from Concord University and leaving West Virginia to attend the Washington and Lee University School of Law in Virginia, she decided to come back to the Mountain State.

“My family was here, I loved the community, and it’s a beautiful place, so I did come back less than a year after law school and have been here ever since,” she said.

An early career in higher education

She’s been an attorney for about 40 years, spending much of her early career with Concord University, her alma mater.

“I had this thing about teaching and higher education,” Curry said. “I got a taste of it my last year of law school. I was asked to teach some first-years some things about legal research and writing, and it just lit a fire in me about higher education and how it can change people.

Curry worked at Concord in a variety of roles, eventually serving as vice president for student and staff affairs and in-house legal counsel.

“I loved it,” she said. It was hard to leave Concord, but the opportunity at Marshall allowed for more flexibility in her schedule.

“Marshall’s med school came along, and it’s a wonderful place. This year I have been there 21 years,” she said. “It was everything I could have hoped – still getting to be involved in higher ed, still getting to work with students. It’s been kind of an unusual path, but I’ve loved it.”

Curry has stayed in Mercer County, serving as a representative of the Center for Rural Health in the southernmost counties of the state. Her job has different aspects to it, she said. One is tending to the pipelines and pathways that support people who want to go to medical school or into other healthcare careers. She also works on outreach helping rural health organizations.

She brings her legal skills to her small but mighty team at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health, all of whom have worked there for about 20 years, she said.

“I can help in policies and help in writing an MOU (memorandum of understanding) and things of that sort – grant writing, problem-solving. We all bring our strengths to the table.

Improving access to care

Their mission is to improve access to quality healthcare for rural people and rural communities.

“We really believe everyone – whether they’re young, older, have financial or transportation issues, if they’re marginalized, maybe on the outskirts of society – should have the dignity of access to quality healthcare. That’s really our mission,” she said.

“

I love people and looking at the variety, creativity, and the potential in people.

– Debbie Curry

“We try to help recruit and retain healthcare providers in rural communities. We collaborate and bring resources to the table and say, ‘What can we do and how can we help to serve rural communities and make them attractive to rural providers?’ We try to advocate for rural communities particularly in the way of improving access to healthcare.”

She enjoys talking to medical students and helping them see their place in rural communities.

“One of the things I always say (to medical students considering rural healthcare) is you will not believe how valued you will be. People will be so thankful you’re there, and you will have a chance to be a leader in that community, if that’s what you want to be,” she said.

Collaboration is key

She encourages everyone involved in rural health to collaborate and to remember that others might have the same concerns, and collectively, they can advocate together and find solutions.

“Don’t try to do this alone, ever,” she said. “Make sure you get a network. Find a mentor. Make sure you’re learning from your mistakes.”

She also encourages medical students and healthcare providers to learn enough about the law to know when and how they can create change.

“We all have a responsibility to understand how our government system works and how we can intervene,” she said. “Find those ways to advocate for your patients. Taking care of patients is taking care of their bodies, but also it means advocating for their needs, and sometimes, that takes a bigger stage.

Whatever your role in helping improve rural healthcare, Curry says to try new things because you grow and you meet more people interested in the same cause. As an example, she offers her work with the West Virginia Rural Health Association where she served on the board of directors and as board president.



From left, Drew Kemp, WV Division of Primary Care; Jill Hill and Susan Giles, WV State Office of Rural Health; Curry; Lisa Lewis, State Office of Rural Health; Brandon Carman, Center for Local Health.

“I’ll be honest with you. I had never done anything like that before, and I was nervous about working with all these seasoned health professionals. I thought, ‘What in the world am I trying to do in leading them?’ I think anybody with any sense of humility at all would be a little scared about that. But I will tell you, that was one of the most meaningful things in my professional life that I have ever done.

“It was hard, but I met so many wonderful people who all cared about rural health, and I made lifelong friendships but gained a real respect for all the different roles that people can play in healthcare.

No matter how far removed from patients we may seem, there is a role for everybody whether it is in employment or volunteering. You can make a place, and people will embrace you in rural healthcare if you’re trying to solve problems with them. You have to be humble about it because none of us has all the answers, but we can help where we can.

Her commitment to bringing people together to improve rural health contributes to her success in the field, Plymale said.

“What makes Debbie exceptional is her ability to combine legal acumen with a genuine passion for helping others,” she said. “She doesn’t just see problems. She sees opportunities to make a difference.”



Our Mission

The West Virginia Rural Health Association (WVRHA) advocates for empowering all West Virginians to advance their quality of life, their well-being, and their access to excellence in rural health care. Our mission is to unite people, communities, and organizations to strengthen rural health in West Virginia.



Become A Member

By being a member of the West Virginia Rural Health Association, you become a powerful advocate for empowering all West Virginians to advance their quality of life, their well-being, and their access to excellence in rural health care.

The WVRHA is a non-profit, grassroots, member-driven organization. A membership with us includes a variety of people and organizations that are interested in the health of rural West Virginians throughout the state. The WVRHA membership works together to identify the health care concerns of rural West Virginians and find ways to improve services in our communities.

The West Virginia Rural Health Association strives to represent the diversity of West Virginia, and we encourage people of all ethnicities, genders, and lifestyles to join.



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