

COUNTRY ROADS

Honoring the Stewards of
Health in Rural West Virginia

ISSUE 5





On the road to a healthier West Virginia

The West Virginia State Office of Rural Health is advancing access to care and driving measurable impact across our state by:

- Maximizing federal funding to expand and strengthen access to essential healthcare services in rural and underserved areas
- Supporting workforce recruitment and retention through targeted programs like loan repayment and J-1 Visa waivers to ensure a stable, local healthcare workforce
- Engaging communities directly to promote trust, responsibility, and participation in local health efforts
- Delivering hands-on technical assistance to public and nonprofit partners to support smarter, more sustainable healthcare delivery

This work is grounded in our shared commitment to personal responsibility, efficient government, and improving health outcomes for every West Virginian — especially those in our most rural communities.



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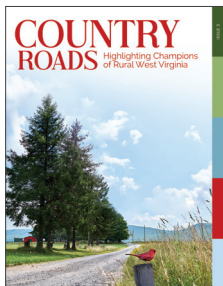
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Cover photo: Chris Gosses

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ON THE COVER

Davis, WV

Porch Talk Logo by Jennifer Lewis



with **Scott Eubank**

Director, Office of Community Health Systems and Health Promotion

Like many West Virginians, I have clear childhood memories of traveling curving mountain roads to visit family and friends. In my case, that meant traveling from Ravenswood, a relatively flat Ohio River community, through rolling hills and up Gauley Mountain to Fayetteville. As an adult, I continue to enjoy traveling the state, whether through short day excursions or weekend camping trips to our wonderful state parks.

It's during trips like these that you start to notice some real differences among communities in our state. For example, the economy in Ravenswood, a rural town, has had its ups and downs but is currently experiencing a resurgence. Ravenswood's location on the river and the modern four-lane highways that serve the town make it easy to get to and more attractive for investment. However, hard-to-reach southern and mountain towns that have historically depended on coal and lumber to support their economies have had a harder time.

Ease of access and economic status are just two of the ways "rural" can look different in different places. That's why a multifaceted and collaborative approach is essential – one that acknowledges the diverse realities of rural life and meets people where they are in the communities they know best.

In this issue of Country Roads, we highlight local champions who are doing just that: tackling hunger, expanding access to childcare, improving housing, and bringing health services directly to communities. You'll read about mobile clinics, innovative hospital leadership training, and how our state's medical schools are preparing the next generation of rural providers.

Together, these stories reflect a larger effort — one driven by personal responsibility, strong local partnerships, and a shared commitment to building a healthier, stronger West Virginia.

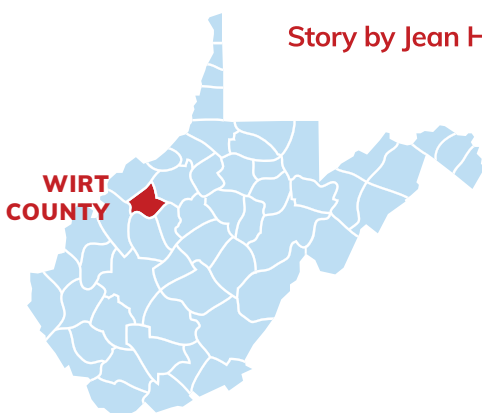
WELCOME



Looking out for each other

**Wild, Wonderful & Healthy
Wirt County facilitates
home repair projects to
ensure safe housing**

Story by Jean Hardiman



When Wirt County performed a needs assessment to determine where to dedicate its resources first, one issue rose straight to the top: safe and secure housing.

“We want a healthy, happy community, where children and families thrive,” said Kathy Dunbar, director of the Wirt County Family Resources Network and co-chairperson of Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Wirt County (WWHWC).

While the county is working to address many issues ranging from substance use to food insecurity and child care availability, increasing access to safe and affordable housing was at the top of the list.



Above: Shawn Ashby with Rock Solid Construction LLC conducts a home inspection.

Left: Kathy Dunbar (left) and Jessica Shaffer were instrumental in advocating for the installation of the Almost Heaven swing in Sportsmen's Park in Elizabeth, WV.

According to WWHWC, the lack of access to safe and affordable housing in the county can lead to increased rates of chronic disease and a reduced workforce that impedes economic growth.

To accomplish their goal of increasing access to housing, the group defined measurable objectives: ensuring that city code and county ordinances promote and sustain safe, affordable, and well-managed housing and increasing the number of safe and well-managed houses by 10 properties by June 30, 2026.

Making a plan

"We developed a Wirt County Comprehensive Plan with the Wirt County commissioners, and home repairs and home inspectors were written into that plan," Dunbar said. The Wirt County Family Resource Network then applied for and was awarded grant funds through the West Virginia Department of Human Services. Written in that grant was an opportunity to help repair unsafe housing for homeowners with children.

The \$250,000 grant will help address housing and other issues, such as providing a food pantry and family stabilization and early child care, said Dunbar, who has been with the Wirt County Family Resource Network since 2001.

"Through the efforts of the Wirt County Family Support Center, about \$110,000 was spent on home repairs in Wirt County during 2023 and 2024," she said, adding that another \$250,000 was awarded for 2024 and 2025.

The housing repairs have helped people and families of all kinds, including families with grandparents raising their grandchildren, she said. That includes Debbie Bibbee's family. She and her husband, Mike, live in Elizabeth, WV, with their 16-year-old granddaughter. Around the time their roof started leaking last fall, she heard about the program and made a call to see if it was real.



The Wirt County Community Health Improvement Committee met in a local church in 2023 where they selected safe and affordable housing as the focus of the Wild, Wonderful & Health Wirt County project.

"It was fantastic. I filled out the paperwork, and it wasn't two weeks and they came and put a roof on," Bibbee said. "I think it's a great program for people who need it. It came in handy for us."

It's part of the Wirt County tradition to look out for neighbors, Dunbar said. "I am a Wirt County resident, and I believe we are blessed to be living in this county. Families go back generations. Ours is a rich history of service. We take care of our own."

"Wirt County is the small community that feels like a big family. If there is a death in our community, people still show up with food and support. We want our children to thrive and be successful. Strengthening families benefits everyone."



Sharon Lansdale is the president/CEO emeritus of the Center for Rural Health Development.

"It was fantastic. I filled out the paperwork, and it wasn't two weeks and they came and put a roof on."

– Debbie Bibbee

A "wonderful" resource

Dunbar said the Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Wirt County outreach was beneficial because it gave her network the opportunity to connect with other communities facing the same challenges.

The Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Wirt County initiative got started with an email from Sharon Lansdale, president/CEO emeritus of the Center for Rural Health Development. She asked the Family Resource Network to host a community meeting, inviting different agencies and groups interested in community health.



Kathy Dunbar is the director of the Wirt County Family Resources Network.

They all showed up representing various segments of the community – workforce, local government, healthcare and education, and religious organizations. Led by the Wirt County Family Resource Network, they formed a core team, Dunbar shared.

“Sharon then introduced us to Allison Toler (program manager for Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia), who has been a continued resource and cheerleader for our group. Allison keeps us on track and helps build our plan of outreach. She has been a leader and a friend.



Allison Toler is the program manager for Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia.

“We have learned so much from this partnership. Going to the rural health conferences to speak with other community leaders has been a wonderful experience, and I am truly grateful,” Dunbar said.

The process of bringing the community together has been inspiring, Toler said.

“Wirt County’s dedication to collaboration and their willingness to identify and prioritize health challenges made them a natural fit for the Wild, Wonderful & Healthy WV program.

“It’s been incredible to witness how their commitment to improving health outcomes has evolved into tangible actions and partnerships,” Toler continued.

“Allison keeps us on track and helps build our plan of outreach. She has been a leader and a friend.

– Kathy Dunbar



Wirt County FRN sponsors and supports the upkeep of this barn to promote cancer prevention and awareness.

“Wild, Wonderful & Healthy WV is built on the idea that communities know best what they need to thrive. The program’s role is to provide the tools, resources and technical assistance to help communities identify priorities, set goals and implement solutions that will have lasting impacts.”

Wirt County FRN: www.wirtfrnfsc.com

The Center for Rural Health Development:
www.wvruralhealth.org

The deep sense of community in Wirt County is what makes their efforts so special, Toler said.

“Their pride in their heritage and their commitment to one another are driving forces behind health improvement efforts,” she added. “West Virginians’ resilience and connection to the land, their traditions and to each other are among our greatest strengths. It’s an honor to work alongside such passionate and dedicated community leaders who are building a healthier future while preserving what makes their community unique.”



Promoting healthier smiles

| Gina Sharps

**Oral health
community collaborates
on solutions for more
access, better care**

Story by Jean Hardiman

For many West Virginians, dental care consists of regular brushing and flossing. They get their regular check-up and cleaning at the dentist's office and go on with their lives. For others, including those without dental insurance and easy access to good dental education and care, oral health can decline quickly, leading to a host of other issues.

Promoting and advocating for optimal oral health for West Virginians from all walks of life is the mission of the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition (WVOHC). Its 60 members – which include local, state and national organizations – collaborate to improve oral health across the state.



Samantha Stenger gets a check up by Brittany Carver, DDS, who believes that access to adequate dental care is vital for addressing oral health issues and improving overall health outcomes.



"Until the WVOHC was established, no such forum existed," explained Gina Sharps, its executive director.

"The WVOHC has made great strides since its formation and fully recognizes that, at a time when staying healthy is more important to West Virginians than ever before, oral health remains a key component of effective healthcare delivery."

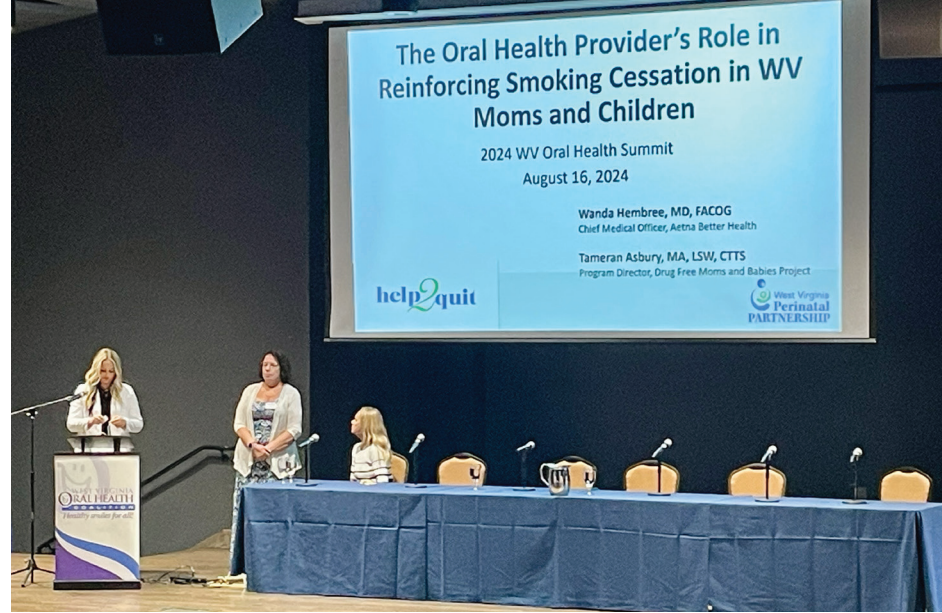
West Virginia's Oral Health Report Card, compiled with data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and several other health organizations, indicated upward trends in 2024. More children (ages 1 to 17 years old) had one or more preventive dental visits in the past year. More adults (ages 18 to 64) visited the dentist in the past year.

According to Sharps, more children enrolled in Medicaid to receive dental care, and the percentage of the population drinking optimally fluoridated water increased. There is still work to be done in all these areas and others. That includes increasing access to dental care.

“ Oral health remains a key component of effective healthcare delivery.

– Gina Sharps

A 2022 report from the then West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources indicates that the state has 49 dentists per 100,000 people; this falls below the national average of 61 dentists per 100,000 people.



Left to Right: Brianna Weis, dental hygiene student, BCTC; Wanda Hembree, MD, FACOG, chief medical officer, Aetna Better Health; and Tameran Asbury, MA, LSW, CTTS, program director, Drug Free Moms and Babies, presented at the 2024 WV Oral Health Summit at Summit Bechtel Reserve in Glen Jean.

According to a report shared by the coalition and the Harmony Health Foundation, 24.1% of West Virginia’s dentists are not accepting new patients. For those who are, the average wait for a first available appointment is 70 days.

While those statistics apply to the broader population, the coalition also focuses on efforts to increase access to dental care for specific struggling populations, including West Virginians with lower incomes, those who lack insurance, and those in recovery from substance use.

The WVOHC currently oversees initiatives with the following goals:

Improving the oral health outcomes of individuals in substance use recovery by creating a dental referral network and linking patients to direct dental services.

“We currently have 20 dental providers in our Smiles Across WV network providing direct services to individuals in substance use recovery,” Sharps said.

“This work is solely supported by generous funding from The Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation.”

Promoting the Medicaid adult dental benefit through partnerships with managed care organizations and community-based organizations, along with organized dentistry, including the West Virginia Dental Association and the West Virginia Dental Hygienists’ Association.

The WVOHC just completed a webinar series with 120 community-based organizations and dental providers to further promote the Medicaid adult dental benefit, Sharps said.

Creating training opportunities for tobacco training and oral health cancer screenings for dental providers. This includes education on detection, diagnosis, and prevention of oral cancer, as well as the annual WV Oral Health Summit, which is the coalition’s signature event for providers, health policy advocates, legislators, community health workers, and others. It covers various aspects of oral healthcare, and is a premier continuing education opportunity for dental public health.

Developing a dental referral network

to improve the oral health outcomes of individuals with bleeding disorders by linking patients to direct dental services. Bleeding disorders make dental care complicated and more costly, sometimes leading to hospital visits. Giving patients a way to know which dental providers are well-equipped to treat them can make their treatment more effective and inexpensive.

Implementing the Choosing Wisely initiative

within organized dentistry in West Virginia. This campaign has a series of best-practice guidelines with topics such as fluoride toothpaste for infants and children, the use of sealants, antibiotic stewardship, and the use of narcotics in pain management.

Overseeing a mini-grant initiative which the coalition will use to empower communities and organizations to initiate oral health promotion and disease prevention outreach efforts.

Creating two dentist maps that will show areas in need of more dental care providers that meet the needs of the population. The first map will overlay Census tract income levels with the number of safety-net dental clinics, which are Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) dental clinic locations providing affordable care for underserved populations or free clinics. The second map will illustrate the number of Medicaid recipients and the number of dentists serving Medicaid patients by Census tract, Sharps explained.

Goals for 2025

The coalition's goals for 2025 include promoting medical-dental integration to ensure optimal health for all West Virginians, maintaining and advancing policies and

activities to protect the health of the public from the impact of tobacco and nicotine-related substances with a focus on vaping, and partnering with appropriate agencies to address the substance use epidemic to alleviate chronic disease and reduce barriers to workforce participation.

Neglect as well as the use of substances, such as methamphetamines, can cause extreme damage to teeth.



Early intervention treatment is far more predictable and conservative than treatment for active disease.

“It’s often the last remaining effect of substance use, and restoring form and function can play a big role in providing the confidence to return to the workforce,” Sharps said.

This year, the coalition also aims to protect and advance the Medicaid Adult Dental Benefit to eliminate chronic disease and increase employability, to demonstrate support for policies and programs to improve oral health outcomes for West Virginia’s most vulnerable populations, and to advance and protect community water fluoridation.

The coalition will continue supporting strategies to develop West Virginia’s oral health workforce as well. It was recently



Vanessa Bowles, BSDH, is the dental program coordinator at Health Access, Inc., Free and Charitable Clinic located in Clarksburg, WV.

selected to participate in a project funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in partnership with organizations from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. The project couples \$192,050 in ARC's ARISE (Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies) grant funds with \$146,359 from those organizations to increase the number of dental health professionals in their region of Appalachia. Dental assistants are particularly needed in West Virginia, Sharps explained.

There are several organizations helping the WVOHC achieve its goals, such as the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation, the Pallottine Foundation of Huntington, Wells Fargo's Health Institute for Technology in Health Care, and the West Virginia Partnership for Health Innovation, all of which provide funding.

"Improving oral health outcomes is a marathon, not a sprint," Sharps said. "Investors (from these organizations) have recognized and not shied away from the challenge of addressing West Virginia's poor oral health status.

“Improving oral health outcomes is a marathon, not a sprint.

– Gina Sharps

Each of these funders has made significant investments into systems-level strategies, according to Sharps.

"Advancing oral health outcomes takes collaboration between a wide variety of health-based partners along with non-traditional partners, such as early childhood advocates, water system operators, educators and academicians to strategically and methodically improve oral health outcomes."

To learn more about the West Virginia Oral Health Coalition, visit www.wvohc.org.



Rural practice

Dr. Larry Rhodes

Dr. Larry Rhodes and WVU's Institute for Community and Rural Health introduce medical students to the rewards of rural healthcare

Story by Jean Hardiman

In the early 1990s, the West Virginia Legislature did something proactive for future generations of West Virginians: it voted to make it a requirement of students in West Virginia medical schools to do a rotation in a rural area, with the goal of not only preparing medical students for future careers in rural areas, but to encourage them to stay there.

Dr. Larry Rhodes wasn't involved in rural medical education in West Virginia at that time, but he's glad for that initial push. Although his career in pediatric cardiology took him out of state, he's been back in his home state for two decades now, and one

of his primary goals is to continue that effort and encourage future physicians to serve rural communities.

“I am where I belong,” said Rhodes, who serves as professor and James H. Walker, M.D. Chair in Pediatric Cardiology at the West Virginia University School of Medicine, as well as the executive director of West Virginia University’s Institute for Community and Rural Health.

Learning through experience

“There is nothing that makes me prouder and nothing I enjoy more than talking about rural health,” he added. “It’s like everything else. You don’t learn about it by reading about it. You learn about it by seeing it. We stress rural health in all three of the (state’s medical schools). We encourage people to go out and do it. We’re doing a little better than we were when we started, but there is still a ton of work to be done to get the best service to the people in need.”

When efforts started more than 30 years ago, Area Health Education Centers (AHECs) were helping with medical student rotations, as well as the Rural Health Education Partnerships (RHEPs). In 2010, the state dissolved the RHEPs and divided funds among West Virginia’s three medical schools, WVU, Marshall University, and the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine.

“That was called the Rural Health Initiative. Each medical school got a third of the money. That’s when I became involved,” Rhodes said. “I was the initial director of the Institute for Community and Rural Health and started in 2010. I’ve been involved with that from the beginning.”

Rhodes commended his counterparts at the other two schools, Jennifer Plymale, director of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health at Marshall’s Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine, and Bob Foster, associate dean of Osteopathic Education at the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine.

“ There is nothing that makes me prouder and nothing I enjoy more than talking about rural health.

– Larry Rhodes

“There is a fair amount of latitude for what the schools can do with the rotations,” he explained.

WVU’s Institute for Community and Rural Health incorporates rural rotations for students in WVU’s five schools in the health sciences: medicine, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, and public health.

“The medical students are required to do rural rotations during their third and fourth year. The institute works with healthcare providers in the rural areas of West Virginia to find students a place to both work and stay during rotations. The Higher Education Policy Commission helps pay rent for houses throughout the state.

“They go to a community and live in the community and work with a provider,” Rhodes said. “It’s basically shadowing a physician, but a little more than shadowing. They’re there 24 hours a day. It basically is an immersion to see what it’s like.”



Dr. Larry Rhodes speaks at WVU Rural Health Day on April 5th, 2025, as part of his role at the West Virginia University School of Medicine.

Rural rotation required

It's a requirement for all medical students, he said, even those who know they want to specialize in a field that has little to do with rural health.

"Someone who wants to be a neuroradiologist might say, 'Why should I waste two months of my medical school in a rural area?'" Rhodes said. "As someone involved with this a long time, I have a standing bet with medical students. If they go out and they don't feel like they got more out of it than what they gave, or they feel like it was a waste of time or the worst experience of their life, I'll give them a fifth of bourbon. I've bought a lot of bourbon in my life, but to this day, I have not bought it for a medical student.

"I talk to a fair amount of them and the majority of them say, 'I'm glad I had to do it. I wouldn't have done it otherwise.' I have not had anybody say, 'This was the worst experience of my life. I want my bourbon.'"

“ The students benefit because they get to go out and see how people in rural areas live.

– Larry Rhodes

The ultimate goal of this is to have students develop an interest in working in rural areas, he said.

"It works to a degree but it's not perfect," he said, adding that there are benefits regardless.

"The students benefit because they get to go out and see how people in rural areas live. They get to see what it's like to practice medicine in a place where you cannot order a test and have it done in 20 minutes," he said.

"The preceptors – experienced practitioners who supervise students during their rural rotations – get a chance to teach," he said. "I think good physicians are good teachers.



WVU Rural Health Day allows pre-health students to participate in hands-on workshops, panel discussions, and networking opportunities.

That's part of our job. Some of our preceptors have been doing this for 15 years or longer. I think it works."

Another impact is students simply becoming aware of what is happening in smaller communities and contributing in any way they can toward solutions. Whether it's a need for more mental health services or safe drinking water, medical providers can play a role in identifying needs and working toward solutions.

"We can't know what's going on until we get there and start talking to people," Rhodes shared.

There is important work to be done here, he added. He hopes for more doctors but is thankful for the physician assistants and nurse practitioners who are helping fill the gaps.

"There are still opportunities to find people to serve in these communities – and these are all types of healthcare providers. It's not just physicians and dentists, pharmacists and nurses – I believe nurse practitioners and physicians assistants may be the salvation for rural healthcare," he said.

"I think we've moved the needle a little bit, but we can't become complacent. We can't say, 'We've done this. We're done,' because we're not."

WVU Institute for Community and Rural Health:
www.hsc.wvu.edu/icrh/

Leading the Way for Rural Health



The Center for Rural Health Development, Inc. (Center) is a private, not-for-profit organization that has provided leadership on rural health issues in West Virginia since 1994. The Center works across the continuum of health care providers – from community health centers and hospitals to private physicians and dentists, as well as other health care providers – to ensure that communities have access to quality and viable health care services.

Our mission is to create a healthy future for West Virginia by improving the health of our residents and the strength of our health care delivery system, especially in rural and underserved communities.

To learn more please visit wvruralhealth.org or call (304) 397-4071.

THE CENTER'S PROGRAMS INCLUDE:





‘We will find a way to get to you’

Annie Kennedy

Health department makes the most of its new facility but still hits the road to connect with the county

Story by Jean Hardiman

When you know that your organization provides services that can change people's lives for the better, you don't let your neighbors miss any opportunities to benefit.

For the staff of the Grafton-Taylor County Health Department that involves getting out in the community often. One day, they might be at a local business or school, or they may be at the Taylor County Senior

Center providing blood pressure checks.

Another day, they might be at the school board office training school employees on how to use Narcan to reverse the effects of an overdose.

On Fridays, you can find them in downtown Grafton handing out information, answering questions, and letting the community know who they are and what they can do for them.

Those are just a few of the many examples of the outreach efforts undertaken by the employees of the Grafton-Taylor Health Department.

“In our county, there is a huge transportation barrier,” said Annie Kennedy, administrator for the health department. “Without getting into the community and meeting people where they are, they may go without the preventative services that they would really like to receive.”

“Being able to get out, talk to people, meet people, tell them about the services we offer, and educate them on things that they may not understand is always a plus for any organization and certainly not different for our health department. If you cannot get to us, we will find a way to get to you.”

New facility serves the area

It's not that they don't have an outstanding new facility to best serve their neighbors because – since March of 2023 – they do.

Previously located in a 100-year-old house with limited space and just one clinical room, the Grafton-Taylor County Health Department is now in a new facility with two clinical rooms, space for a waiting room, offices for the entire staff, and space for WIC to serve the community.

It also has a new boardroom equipped with the latest technology and a room available to community members for training purposes.

“The new building allows better access for community members and, if needed, (an area in the parking lot) in the event that a drive-through clinic is necessary,” Kennedy shared.

“In our county, there is a huge transportation barrier. Without getting into the community and meeting people where they are, they may go without the preventative services that they would really like to receive.

– Annie Kennedy

“Not only does this building serve as a great location for clinical, environmental, educational, and threat preparedness services, it's also a great location that outside organizations can use to host events for the community.”

The health department's services include family planning, testing for communicable and reportable diseases, and promoting community health, threat preparedness, disease prevention and epidemiology. They also play a key role in keeping the environment safe by conducting inspections, running tests, and issuing permits for everything from childcare facilities to campgrounds, pools, and tattoo parlors.

Assessing community needs

To stay on top of its biggest priorities, the health department recently completed its first Community Health Needs Assessment. “We were able to bring together numerous community stakeholders and community members to get a better understanding of the needs of our people,” Kennedy shared.



Nikki Underwood takes a patient's blood pressure at the Taylor County Senior Center.

“Our mission is to enhance the health and safety of all Taylor County residents by delivering comprehensive environmental and health services. We are committed to accessibility in providing education, prevention, direct care, and ongoing health support.”

According to Kennedy, they collaborate closely with other health, mental health and environmental agencies, as well as all levels of government to foster a well-informed, healthier community and to make Taylor County a safe, thriving place to live, work and play.

As nice as their new facility is, they still get out of the building a lot, participating in over 40 community outreach events last year alone. Sometimes, this involves visiting homes or participating in fun events, such as a back-to-school bash or a community-wide baby shower hosted at a church or helping at a local clothing shelter or providing needle cleanup at a local grocery store.

There is always more work to be done and improvements to be made.

“ Our mission is to enhance the health and safety of all Taylor County residents.

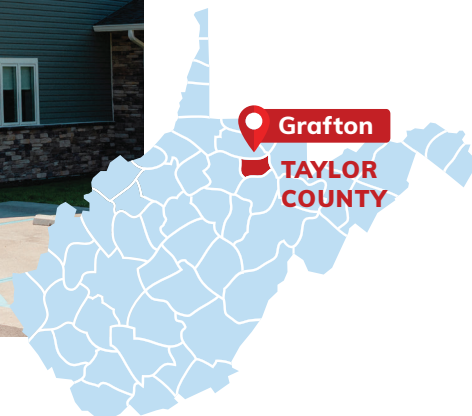
– Annie Kennedy

“Our health department is currently working to achieve Pathways Recognition through the Public Health Accreditation Board,” Kennedy said. The benefits of earning this recognition include supporting a culture of quality and performance improvement, strengthening the department’s ability to respond to public health emergencies, and identifying health priorities.

“We have worked to complete the numerous and, at times, rigorous work to be sure we are providing the best care for our community of the highest quality,” Kennedy said. “Our hopes are that we accomplish this goal by the spring of 2026, if not sooner.”



Grafton-Taylor County Health Department's new office at 718 W Main St. in Grafton.



The department is also seeking grant money to implement a new service model for expanding preventive care for children receiving Medicaid in rural West Virginia. “The Prevention Home Model was developed by Dr. Summer Hartley of Hartley Health Solutions,” Kennedy said. “The goal is to partner with the Bureau of Medical Services and WVU Children’s Hospital, along with Mineral County Health Department and Doddridge County Health Department.”

“ We have worked to complete the numerous and, at times, rigorous work to be sure we are providing the best care for our community of the highest quality.

– Annie Kennedy

Kennedy would love to see her community thrive despite many residents’ financial struggles and limited access to healthcare and transportation.

“I have a sense of duty to assist those who cannot help themselves, whether it is due to poverty, addiction, or lack of resources,” she said. “This mindset is what drives me to want to act the best way I know how. I am a born-and-raised West Virginian, and I feel a strong sense of wanting to protect and strengthen this community and future generations in this community.

“The staff here are truly dedicated to the people in this community and have a passion and love to serve and help people,” she said. “It is an honor to do the work we do for the community that we love.”

Grafton-Taylor County Health Department:
www.taylorcountyhdwv.gov



Creating and supporting hospital leaders

Brandon Williams

First West Virginian graduates from National CEO certification program

Story by Jean Hardiman

Leaders at rural hospitals face a unique set of challenges, one of which is simply having enough well-prepared leaders to take on those challenges.

One solution has been the National Rural Health Association's (NRHA) Rural Hospital CEO Certification Program, an online training program that guides current and future leaders through the vast labyrinth of issues that hospital executives contend with. Brandon Williams was the first West Virginian to graduate from the program.

Williams is the vice president of operations for West Virginia University Medicine's



Braxton County Memorial Hospital is a critical access hospital located in Gassaway.



Braxton County Memorial Hospital and WVU Medicine's Summersville Regional Medical Center (SRMC). He participated in the program between November 2023 and September 2024.

"The program was helpful for me because it exposed me to areas of healthcare management I had not previously been exposed to, but also elaborated on areas I was familiar with," he explained. "The impact was having a better understanding of how all facets of hospital operations impact your hospital, as well as constituents and community, including your employees and patients."

According to the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), today's rural hospitals and clinics face uncertainty and are closing at an unprecedented rate. One out of three rural hospitals are identified as "at-risk."

"Nearly half of rural hospital CEOs are first time CEOs," the organization reports. "Hospital turnover continues to lead all industries, and when turnover occurs, the pool of qualified candidates is limited."

"The NRHA Rural Hospital CEO Certification Program was developed by successful rural hospital CEOs to help current rural hospital

CEOs to strengthen their leadership skills to help lead their hospital to success," the organization says. "An individual with this certification will immediately be recognized as someone qualified to lead a rural hospital with excellence."

Williams, who earned his bachelor's degree as well as his master's degree in public administration from West Virginia University, has been working in a variety of healthcare-related jobs since 2014, beginning at Monongahela Valley Association of Health Centers in Fairmont as a certified application counselor helping West Virginia residents navigate the Affordable Care Act. He transitioned to skilled nursing facilities for several years and then to critical access hospitals in 2021, first as director of operations and then as vice president of operations for Braxton County Memorial Hospital and Summersville Regional Medical Center. Both are 25-bed critical access hospitals.

He became aware of the NRHA's Rural Hospital CEO Certification Program through his father, a hospital administrator in Florida,



Summersville Regional Medical Center is a critical access hospital serving patients throughout southern West Virginia.

and was able to attend through the support of Rich Sutphin, executive director of the West Virginia Rural Health Association (WVRHA), who helped secure funding for Williams' participation after he completed an application and interview process.

"When Brandon approached WVRHA for support to participate in the NRHA Rural Hospital CEO Certification Program, I knew we had to find a way to support him," Sutphin said. "West Virginia needs to continue to develop our pipeline of rural health leaders. With his commitment to serving rural communities through his leadership role in critical access hospitals in central West Virginia, Brandon was a great candidate for this program."

The program's range of topics was broad, including intra- and interpersonal leadership, organizational and community leadership, regulatory compliance, data analytics, cybersecurity, strategic planning, insurance, population health, fee for service, supply chains, patient and physician outcomes, physician engagement, and much more.

"The program is geared toward individuals aspiring to be CEOs and to current CEOs wanting to expand their knowledge," Williams said. "My cohort consisted of individuals from hospital administration, revenue cycle, provider relations, information technology, diagnostics, pharmacy. We also had an emergency department physician who was the first provider to participate."

“ West Virginia needs to continue to develop our pipeline of rural health leaders.

– Rich Sutphin

Williams' cohort met every other Monday, and members were able to attend up to three national conferences with the registration fees waived. Williams attended the NRHA Critical Access Hospital Conference in Kansas City, Missouri.



The infusion clinic at Summersville Regional Medical Center reduces the commute for many residents in Nicholas County.

An opportunity to serve

To Williams, hospital administration is an important opportunity to serve his community, and he wants to serve it well.

“I call myself a servant leader, believing in service before self,” he shared. “I am also a Rotarian, and this is part of our philosophy. My goal has always been to give back to the communities I serve, whether through my employment or civic organizations.

“Healthcare is a very prevalent industry, presenting both challenges and successes. The most rewarding piece for me is seeing the impact of the work I do in the communities I serve. For example, we just completed a project at Summersville Regional Medical Center (SRMC) including a hazardous compounding space, allowing us to infuse chemotherapy agents, reducing the commute for many residents in and around Nicholas County. Prior to our infusion clinic, most of these patients were traveling to Raleigh or Harrison counties.”

He's grateful to those who helped him earn his certification to continue doing this crucial work.

“Rich (Sutphin) used his connections with the West Virginia State Office of Rural Health to explore grant opportunities available to support my candidacy,” Williams said. “Ultimately, they were able to secure the funding for me, which I am extremely grateful for. I was able to cultivate a relationship between the national folks and state folks, and I am happy to announce, West Virginia is now earmarking money for other West Virginians to apply and participate in the program!”

For more information about the NRHA's Rural Hospital CEO Certification Program, visit www.crhleadership.com/apply-now.



A new hazardous compounding space at SRMC allows for the infusion of chemotherapy agents.



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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Help *Improve The Health Of All West Virginians.*



WEST VIRGINIA



The West Virginia State Office of Rural Health would like to thank this issue's champions. Together, we are working towards a brighter and healthier tomorrow for all West Virginians. Under Governor Morrisey's leadership, we are cleaning up our food, moving our bodies to change our lives, finding purpose in health, and ultimately rewarding healthy choices. What better place to start than rural, wild, and wonderful West Virginia.

