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A healthier future for rural areas

Transforming rural healthcare to create a more robust future.

A system under strain

America's rural healthcare system is in crisis. Life expectancy in rural areas is lower[1] and the financial stability of rural healthcare is a major concern. Demographic trends suggest that without action, these problems are likely to get worse. Can improved connectivity offer a solution to this conundrum?

According to a recent report by Chartis, nearly half of rural hospitals are operating in the red. It also found that 432 are vulnerable to closure—18 have closed or converted to an operating model that excludes inpatient care in the last year alone, making a total of 182, about 10% of the total, since 2010.[2] These changes often leave communities without convenient access to essential services like emergency, obstetric and specialty care.

Nearly half of rural hospitals have a negative operating margin.[18]

It's not for want of demand

If rural areas had the same degree of access to grocery stores, banking facilities and other civil infrastructure as cities they wouldn't be rural areas. But disparities in healthcare are very different than having fewer cinemas or late-night bodegas. Access to healthcare is not a lifestyle choice, but a universal requirement.

In fact, there are several factors that mean that the need for healthcare services in rural areas is actually higher than in urban areas:

- U.S. Census data shows that the share of the population aged 65+ in rural (non-metro) areas is more than 26.8% higher than in urban (metro) areas. This disparity is growing.[3]
- Rural areas suffer from higher rates of chronic diseases including diabetes and residents are more likely to die prematurely from five of the leading causes of death than those in urban areas— heart disease, cancer, stroke, unintentional injuries and chronic lower respiratory disease.[4]
- Nearly half (48%) of adults in rural areas are living with obesity— a major risk factor for many diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, cancers, type-2 diabetes mellitus and metabolic disorders—compared to just 41% in urban areas.[5]
- Rural areas have consistently higher poverty rates (16.1%) versus urban areas (12.6%) and greater food insecurity rates (12.1%) than the overall population (10.5%).[6]

7x

after rural hospital closures, the median distance rural residents needed to travel for care grew from 3.4 miles to 23.9 miles for general inpatient care. The distance was even further for specialized care.[19]

The digital divide exacerbates the problem

The persistent digital divide—unequal access to and effective use of technology— is hindering the adoption of telehealth, remote patient monitoring and efficient electronic health record (EHR) systems in rural areas. While rural access has improved, 22.3% of Americans living in rural areas and 27.7% of Americans living in Tribal lands are outside the coverage of fixed terrestrial Broadband, compared to only 1.5 % of those from urban areas.[7] The significance of this gap is likely to worsen as the reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) and other nascent technologies in healthcare grows.

This paper explores how networks are key to building sustainable ecosystems that help improve access to care, patient outcomes and financial viability.

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What's wrong with rural healthcare in America?

Healthcare in the U.S. faces growing pressures from multiple directions, including mounting costs, rising chronic disease rates, aging populations and workforces and growing cybersecurity threats to patient data. Some of these challenges are more pronounced in non-metro areas. Rural areas also face some additional challenges:

- **Rates of chronic diseases**
  Rural areas face increased rates of many chronic diseases. Even after adjusting for demographic factors, like age and gender, the prevalence of diabetes is significantly higher than in urban areas.[8]
- **Travel distances**
  Patients in rural areas travel two to three times further to obtain healthcare than their urban counterparts.[9] Following rural hospital closures, the median distance rural residents needed to travel for general inpatient care grew from 3.4 miles to 23.9 miles—and even further for specialized care.
- **Rural flight**
  There's long been a pattern of younger generations leaving rural areas for the opportunities of more populated areas. Conversely, many people aspire to retire to the country. U.S. Census data shows that the share of the population aged 65+ in rural non-metro areas (17.5%) is more than 25% higher than that in urban metro areas (13.8%).[10] According to USDA data, non-metro counties lost 10–20% of 15–29 year-old residents in each decade: 1990s, 2000s and 2010s; over the same period, there was a net immigration of over 50s.[11] As well as increasing the demand for medical care, this demographic shift has affected the availability of caregivers, both professional and voluntary (such as family members).
- **Staffing shortages and provider burnout**
  Shortages of trained healthcare staff are pervasive, but they are particularly acute in rural areas. . In 2022, there were nearly three times as many active physicians per 100,000 population in urban areas (286) than in rural areas (98). By 2030, the supply of OB/GYNs is expected to meet only about 50% of the demand in rural areas.[12]

To address these multifaceted challenges, healthcare services must extend beyond the traditional hospital and clinic walls; a transformation that relies on secure and resilient digital infrastructure.

Clinicians per 100,000 population

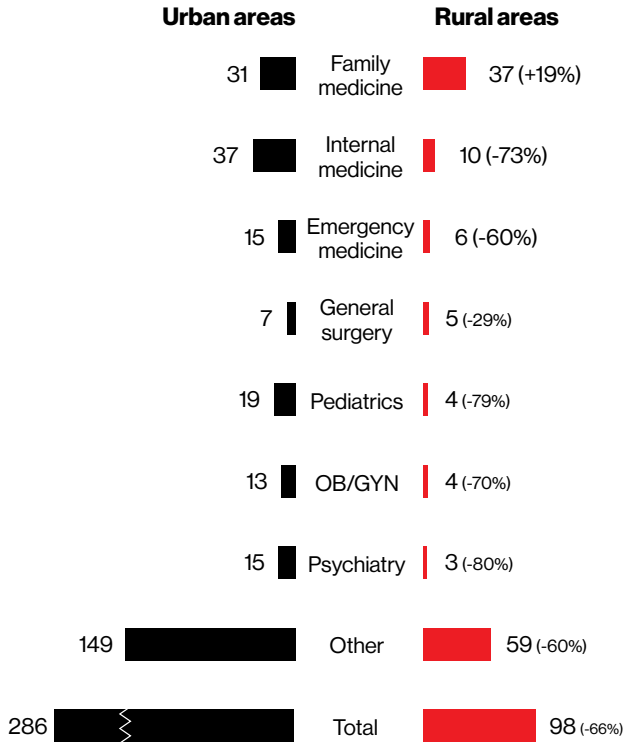

Figure 1. AMA Physician Professional Data 2022[13]

> **"There is a projected shortage of 87,150 full-time equivalent (FTE) primary care physicians by 2037, which will be particularly acute in nonmetro areas."**
>
> State of the Primary Care Workforce, 2024[14]

The transformation of rural healthcare in practice

Advanced communication technology has a crucial role to play in helping providers transform care delivery to improve outcomes and the economic viability of healthcare in rural America. The following real-world examples illustrate the transformative impact of Verizon's connectivity solutions in rural areas.

Cutting treatment delays

Leveraging the low-latency and high-bandwidth capabilities of 5G and mobile edge computing (MEC), clinicians in rural Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) can perform virtual specialist consults (tele-triage) for stroke, trauma, or cardiac emergencies. Further, equipping ambulances with reliable connectivity enables the real-time transmission of patient data to emergency departments, allowing hospital staff to prepare for their arrival more effectively and speed up treatment. These measures can dramatically improve outcomes, especially in time-sensitive care pathways, like stroke treatment.

Reaching underserved communities

Mobile health units equipped with fixed wireless access (FWA) can help take care directly into underserved communities by providing a safe, connected location for conducting teleconsultations. One of Verizon's partners offers turnkey self-contained virtual care units that can be quickly deployed directly into communities to provide access to essential services. Each unit contains a suite of integrated diagnostic tools that can be operated by an on-site nurse or technician. Using the included secure communication platform the local operator can connect with a remote physician via who can guide examinations, review diagnostic data and suggest treatment plans in real-time.

Alleviating staff burnout

Connected tablets with the pervasive high-performance, low-latency connectivity provided by a private 5G network can give clinicians easy access to patient information and expert support (via teleconsultation). They can also enable AI-enabled tools like voice-to-text conversion for automated note taking. This can help enhance care, improve record taking, free-up time and alleviate the burden on staff. This can help improve patient outcomes, reduce the incidence of burnout and ease staffing pressures.

Reducing readmission rates

Hospital-at-Home and remote patient-monitoring (RPM), enabled by secure 4G LTE and 5G networks, enable the continuous monitoring of patients with chronic conditions at home. This approach can help providers free-up in-patient beds, put less stress on the patient, reduce the CO_2 associated with travel and cut readmission rates.

The potential ROI for rural healthcare

As healthcare evolves beyond the walls of traditional clinics, connectivity is essential. Improving access to quality care starts with improving access to infrastructure. Verizon is committed to enabling the future of healthcare by delivering secure and reliable networks that power remote care, data-driven decisions and patient-centered health systems.

Investing in digital infrastructure and telehealth services can yield significant financial advantages for rural healthcare providers and clinical benefits for residents.

Reducing the need for care

- **Fewer readmissions**
  The use of RPM to monitor patients at home after release can cut readmisssion rates—in rural areas it's been shown to decrease 30-day readmissions for heart patients by 50%.[15]

Delivering care more efficiently

- **Fewer patient transfers**
  By providing access to remote expertise, connectivity can reduce the need to transfer to larger/specialist facilities. This can reduce stress on patients and enable friends/family to provide support. It can also drive dramatic savings in the people time taken to carry out transfers, reducing the pressure on staffing. One telestroke network helped reduce transfers by 85%, saving an estimated $3.1 million per year across 12 rural hospitals.[16]

- **Lower cost of care**
  Virtual triage and local treatment enabled by reliable connectivity can reduce the cost of care. In some cases, average costs have dropped by over a quarter—from around $11,000/episode to approximately $8,000/episode.[17]

- **Greater operational efficiency**
  Reliable Broadband can help enhance administrative functions, enable more effective use of EHRs and improve communication among care teams, leading to lower overhead costs.

Improving provider sustainability

- **Increased patient retention**
  When local health centers can offer a wider range of services through telehealth, they are more likely to retain patients, leading to more consistent revenue for providers.

-50%

30-day readmission rate for heart patients halved.[14]

-85%

5 out of 6 patient transfers avoided, saving $250K/ hospital.[15]

-25%

Virtual triage and local treatment reduced care costs by a quarter.[16]

A critical moment

We're at a critical juncture for rural healthcare. Rural care deserts are already growing and the perilous nature of the finances of many providers presents a huge challenge.

Stakeholders must work together to invest in infrastructure and adopt innovative care models to ensure that every community has access to the tools needed to provide quality care. Verizon is driving critical rural health and broadband initiatives that reflect our deep commitment to helping improve health outcomes. Our solutions can help rural healthcare providers overcome legacy connectivity issues, modernize their services and improve financial stability.

Technology	Application in rural healthcare	Potential impact
Private 5G	High-bandwidth, low-latency campus connectivity.	Helps eliminate connectivity "notspots" and enable rich near-real-time solutions like virtual consultations and diagnostics.
Mobile Edge Computing (MEC)	MEC brings cloud computing power closer to the source of the data, enabling near-real-time processing.	This is critical for latency-sensitive applications such as advanced AI/ML apps, which can enhance the speed and effectiveness of care. It can help improve access to information and expertise, supporting improved decision-making.
Satellite connectivity	Provides coverage in remote areas where terrestrial coverage is lacking.	Can provide a backup to maintain care during outages and support the response to disasters and emergencies.
Fixed wireless access (FWA)	FWA leverages cellular (4G LTE/5G) networks to provide a cost-effective Broadband connectivity solution.	This offers widespread availability and rapid deployment, making it ideal for connecting clinics and patient homes to increase digital inclusion and enable applications like virtual consultations and monitoring.
Secure infrastructure	Networks designed for HIPAA-readiness, with zero-trust models and robust authentication.	Helps protect patient information, including Protected Health Information (PHI) and enable the continuous availability of critical applications.
Internet of Things (IoT)	IoT-ready networking provides the secure foundation needed for a wide array of connected medical devices.	Can help enable proactive care—including wearable sensors for continuous monitoring and at-home diagnostic kits—reduce the need for in-person visits and cut the length of hospital stays.

With the right mix of innovation and collaboration, operators can povide equitable access to care for every community. To help achieve this, we're building strong partnerships with national, state and local government, academic institutions and private organizations to support investment in improved infrastructure, workforce development and the development and deployment of cutting-edge solutions to support the transformation of rural healthcare provision and improve health outcomes for millions of Americans.

Let's talk

To explore networking can help improve patient care and financial stability, please reach out to your Verizon account team or visit:
verizon.com/business/resources/healthcare

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