



NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Office of Rural Health

NC Office of Rural Health Quarterly Newsletter

Winter 2025

Welcome to the Service Area Teams' Quarterly Newsletter from the North Carolina Office of Rural Health (ORH).

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) Service Area Teams (SATs) strengthen collaboration across programs and support consistent, strategic assistance to partners statewide. SATs combine expertise from Community Health, Medication Assistance, Rural Hospital Assistance, Rural Health Operations, Farmworker Health, Placement Services, Health Information Technology and Telehealth, Analytics & Innovations, and Business and Contracts.

We would love to hear from you! If you have a news story, comments, or questions for the upcoming Spring newsletter contact [Leslie Wolcott](#).

Holiday Greetings and Merry Christmas from the ORH Operations team!



Upcoming Meetings

Save the Date! The Blueprint: Rural Health Policy, Practice, & Sustainability Planning

Come join us for THE premiere rural hospital event – The Blueprint: Rural Health Policy, Practice, & Sustainability Planning. This session will convene critical access and small rural hospital and health system leaders, community

ORH News and Deadlines



National Rural Health Day

This year's National Rural Health Day convened 257 in-person and virtual

collaborators, philanthropy, and technical assistance partners to discuss the blueprint for transforming rural health in North Carolina- for now and toward a value driven future. We are excited to see everyone in Cary this winter!

Date: February 18th, 2026, 8:30 a.m. -12:00 p.m.,

Registration Details & Agenda Coming Soon!

This event is made possible through funding for the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Grant Program, administered by ORH in collaboration with the North Carolina Healthcare Foundation and its funded partners.

Regional News and Highlights

Western SAT News and Highlights:

Surry Medical Ministries partners with local school districts to increase access to care in Surry County



In November, the Office of Rural Health joined the Surry Medical Ministries (SMM) and Mount Airy Middle School teams to learn about their partnership to increase access to care in Surry County. As the 2025 State Designated Rural Health Center of the Year Winner, Surry Medical Ministries is known for their strong community collaboration and innovative approaches in whole person health care.

The program, with funding from NC Office of Rural Health, enables SMM's new mobile clinic to visit schools throughout the district every week. The mobile clinic is staffed with a Primary Care Physician, a Registered Nurse and a Behavioral Health Specialist. The Mount Airy Middle School team has

attendees at Mountain Area Health Education Center in Asheville, one of the strongest attendances to date.



The highlights include:

- Remarks from Governor Stein, DHHS Secretary Devdutta Sangvai, Dr. Bryan Hodge and a Land Acknowledgement by Casey Cooper
- We also recognized the extraordinary state and regional advocacy work of David Pope, CEO & Executive Director of Scotland Health as our 2025 Community Star. Read about [all of the stars here](#) and [coverage of Dr. Pope's award here](#).

- The packed agenda included discussions on growing and retaining rural workforce, resource optimization for rural communities, Western NC's ongoing recovery from Hurricane Helene, and integrating whole person care. Rounding the day was a detailed presentation from Assistant Secretary Debra Farrington on North Carolina's Rural Health Transformation Plan. NCDHHS will have more information related to the funding process in early 2026. [Read more here.](#)

The day also featured reunions, meaningful conversations and a renewed sense of shared purpose capturing the full energy of the #powerofrural



See local news coverage of the event [here: Officials celebrate National Rural Health Day amid Medicaid cuts uncertainty.](#)

shared that the partnership has been beneficial for students, families and staff members alike and noted SMM's commitment to the community as a driving force behind the program.

South Central News and Highlights

Updated: NC Gets Approval for New Medical School.

[Methodist University](#) and [Cape Fear Valley Health](#) have received accreditation approval for the Methodist University Cape Fear Valley Health School of Medicine, clearing the way to begin recruiting their first class of students for summer 2026. *They will join in the region the Campbell School of Osteopathic Medicine, founded in 2011 with its first class graduating in 2017.* The school will focus on training physicians to serve communities across Southeastern North Carolina, helping strengthen access to care for years to come. Learn more here: <https://bit.ly/49fGee0>

Cathy Ory, Medical Director of the Care Clinic in Fayetteville, was invited to sit on their Community Engagement Council which includes representatives from the 8 counties served by CFCHS. The group met for the first time in late October and it was exciting to learn about how they want input from the community. The medical school has been accredited and their first class will start next July.

Video from Matthews Free Medical Clinic

[Click here](#) to watch a video from Matthews Free Medical Clinic in Mecklenburg County about their goals for the future.



Black River Health Services Grand Re-opening.

New Staff



Zakiya Bell, Executive Assistant

ORH's new Executive Assistant brings a calm, can-do energy to the ORH Administrative Team. Before joining ORH, she spent 14 years at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, where she led national public health outreach initiatives, managed government contracts, and helped keep operations running smoothly. Zakiya holds a Bachelor of Science in Community Health from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a Master of Health Science from Towson University. Outside of work, Zakiya enjoys staying active, following the WNBA, and spending time with her Shih Tzu, Troy (below). She's excited to be part of the ORH team and looks forward to supporting the work ahead.



Novant Health representatives joined with Black River Health Services to celebrate the Burgaw clinic's recent expansion. The additional space will support increased access to care, made possible due to collaboration with Novant Health, which has launched a new rural track of its family medicine residency program. This transformative initiative aims to train the next generation of physicians directly in rural communities.

The rural residency program reflects a bold investment in community-based health care to address the shortage of primary care physicians by placing medical residents in the heart of rural communities.

"Where doctors train is where they're most likely to stay," said Dr. Bailey Minish, a Novant Health family medicine physician who also serves as associate program director for the rural residency track. "This program helps ensure that high-quality, compassionate care is accessible not just in cities, but also in the small towns and rural areas."

"We are not just filling gaps in care – we're building long-term solutions," said Lee Ann Amann, CEO of Black River Health Services. "This program strengthens our workforce, deepens our roots in the community, and creates a sustainable pipeline of primary care providers."

Eastern SAT News and Highlights

Open Door Clinic Success Story (Urban Ministries of Wake County)

Ana Cecilia Cardoza, a diabetic with hypertension, was without health insurance and had limited financial resources. Ana quickly found herself in a precarious situation. Her supply of medications was running dangerously low, and the prospect of affording necessary treatment seemed impossible. During this difficult time, a friend introduced her to the Open Door Clinic (ODC).

For Ana, the ODC became a lifeline. The compassionate care and comprehensive services she received gave her the stability and support she desperately needed. Through regular medical



Olga Pechinnikova, Finance Specialist

has joined the NCFHP team as its new Finance Specialist.

Olga comes to the team with experience in financial analysis, budgeting, and compliance within both health care and public-sector settings. In her previous roles at Biomerieux, Thermo Fisher Scientific, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina, she contributed to forecasting/budgeting, financial reporting and analysis, process improvements, including supporting programs that interact with state and federally funded initiatives such as Medicaid and state employee health plans. Skilled in SAP, Workday, and Hyperion, she focuses on developing clear documentation tools, tracking program expenses, and supporting contract-related financial activities, internal controls, and audit readiness. Olga holds dual master's degrees in business and health administration from Pfeiffer University.



checkups, access to essential medications, and personalized guidance, Ana regained control of her health. "The ODC was like a beacon of hope," Ana reflected. "They treated me with such kindness and respect, making me feel welcomed and cared for. I am so grateful for the care I received." Today, Ana is thriving in her new life. Her experience at the ODC has inspired her to pay it forward by encouraging others to support the clinic and its mission. By providing comprehensive health care services to those in need, the ODC empowers patients like Ana to overcome challenges, regain their health, and build brighter futures. You can read even [more about Ana and ODC here.](#)

Training Opportunities

Community Health Coding and Billing Specialist Training: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)

Community Health Worker (CHW) Reimbursement

Registration information coming soon! The NC Office of Rural Health (ORH) will be offering an interactive session designed to help your organization understand CHW reimbursement and how to effectively integrate it into your organization's billing and workflow systems. This session is designed for clinical personnel (MD, DO, NP, PA, RN), coders, billers, electronic health record professionals, CHWs and facility managers, to encourage building a shared foundation of knowledge. Please email Moneka Midgette, Moneka.midgette@dhhs.nc.gov or Dorothea Brock, Dorothea.brock@dhhs.nc.gov for additional information.

Encouraging Resilience: Addressing Physician Burnout January 16, 2026, from 12–1 p.m.

This program is designed to support health care professionals in recognizing

Featured ORH Staff

Sheneka Brightwell, ORH Contracts Team. Sheneka is part of the 2024-2026 class of Jim Bernstein Community Health Leadership Fellows. Her Bernstein project focuses on Black youth suicide awareness and prevention, centering caregiver engagement, and culturally responsive strategies to reduce the stigma and improve community dialogue. Sheneka appreciates the supportive culture of ORH and its commitment to both professional growth and community impact. Congratulations again to our colleague.



Featured ORH Team: Contracts Team

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) professionals are committed to improving the lives of citizens within metropolitan and rural areas statewide. With this objective in mind, the ORH Contracts Team made a pact earlier this year to pay it forward by sending necessary resources back into the community. On Tuesday, November 25, the team got together to fulfill this promise by volunteering at the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina at 1924 Capital Boulevard in Raleigh. With their assistance, over 20,000 pounds of food, pet, infant, and hygiene products were sorted and packed, and 16,700 meals were distributed in time for Thanksgiving. Although this investment of the team members' time and resources will not be a one-time occurrence, they are actively encouraging others to give back in ways that matter to those who need it most. Instead of being a factor that contributes to global crises like food insecurity, they

and addressing burnout while strengthening resilience and overall well-being. During this session, **Dr. A.C. Gaither** from the **NC Physicians Health Program** will share evidence-based insights and practical strategies to help clinicians maintain mental wellness, enhance coping skills, and sustain professional fulfillment – without compromising the quality of patient care.

Session Overview:

This CME event will explore:

- How to identify the signs and consequences of physician burnout and understand its impact on patient care
- Evidence-based strategies to build resilience and promote mental well-being in health care environments
- Practical organizational and individual approaches to reduce burnout risk and improve clinician performance and satisfaction

Fee: \$20.00

Register here: [Encouraging Resilience: Addressing Physician Burnout](#)

Understanding Neurological Birth Defects: What Providers

Need to Know.

January 30, 2026, from 12–1 p.m. This program is designed to give health care providers a comprehensive overview of neurological birth defects in infants, including microcephaly, hydrocephaly, and brain underdevelopment.

Session Overview:

This CME event will help participants:

- Recognize common neurological birth defects seen in the region
- Understand possible contributing factors, including environmental, genetic, or socioeconomic influences
- Identify early signs and recommend appropriate referrals
- Learn prevention strategies, including prenatal care and folic acid use

Fee: \$20

Register here: [Understanding Neurological Birth Defects: What Providers Need to Know](#)

are actively serving as change agents who provide sustainable solutions to challenges that impact us all.



Loan Repayment Program

Spotlight: A Social Worker's Story of Community Impact

ORH's Placement Services team is proud to highlight the meaningful difference recruitment and retention incentives make in communities across the state. This month, it introduced a testimonial from one of its award recipients – a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) whose experience shows how loan support can strengthen both access to care and workforce stability.

For many early career social workers, student debt can limit the ability to choose positions in underserved or rural areas. By offering loan repayment, financial barriers are eased, and opportunities are created for behavioral health providers to practice where they are needed most.

One LCSW, Jonadab Samuel Franco, whose video testimonial appears in this issue, shares how the initiative allowed him to support individuals and families in Richmond County facing complex behavioral and socioeconomic challenges.

This testimonial is one of many demonstrating how loan repayment empowers health care professionals to deepen their commitment to the communities they serve. The team's provider incentives open pathways for health care professionals who want to build lasting careers in areas where their expertise can make the greatest difference.

[Testimonial](#)

Grant Opportunities



Injury-Free NC, a collaboration between the North Carolina Division of Public Health Injury and Violence Prevention Branch and the University of North Carolina's Injury Prevention Research Center, is preparing to launch its 2026 Injury-Free NC Academy on Harm Reduction as Transformative Practice.

Dates will be

May Academy

In-person May 7 & 8 2026

Virtual: May 12 & 13 2026

July Academy

In-person: July 16 & 17 2026

Virtual: July 21 & 22, 2026

NCMS Leadership Academy

The North Carolina Medical Society Leadership Academy is Accepting Applications for the Advanced & Executive Healthcare Leader Cohorts!

Whether you're a student just starting out, an emerging leader building your first leadership role, or a senior clinician ready to lead at scale, the NCMS Leadership Academy has a program tailored to your current stage.

Scholarships are available for rural health practitioners that are a part of the CPP (Community Practitioner Program) and for those administrative and or clinical leaders that develop projects related to well-being.

Register here:

<https://ncmedsoc.org/professional-growth/kipl-leadership-development/>

Resources

Get the NC Guide on Prevention and Management of Diabetes:

<https://www.diabetesnc.com/guide>



Nurse Loan Repayment

A new statewide initiative is bringing welcome news to early-career nurses: an opportunity to receive up to \$40,000 in student loan repayment in exchange for serving at qualifying health care sites. Designed to strengthen the nursing workforce and improve access to care in high-need communities, this program supports nurses who have fewer than five years of licensed practice and are working in approved clinical settings across the state.

The initiative was created in response to growing shortages in rural and underserved regions, where patient needs continue to rise. Qualified nurses may receive substantial loan repayment support while gaining valuable experience in settings that rely heavily on dedicated clinical staff.

The program's goal is twofold: to lessen the financial burden of student loans for early-career nurses and to encourage long-term retention in communities where strong nursing teams are essential to improving patient outcomes.

In addition to Nurse Incentives, ORH continues to offer incentives such as loan repayment and high needs service bonuses for providers in safety net organizations, private practices, and NC state facilities to strengthen the workforce in rural and underserved communities.

Learn More [Nurse Initiative Guidelines](#)

Learn More [Additional ORH Incentives](#)

New Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health and Substance Use Professionals

NCDHHS announced a new Licensed Workforce Loan Repayment Program, a \$20 million initiative to recruit and retain licensed professionals who provide mental health, substance use, intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD), and traumatic brain injury (TBI) services in rural and underserved communities. The loan repayment program is designed for licensed, master's-level professionals – including counselors, social workers, psychologists, and therapists – who are essential to delivering services but often face financial barriers to working in high-need areas. Applications opened on **Dec. 1, 2025**. Learn more and [apply at the NCDHHS Licensed Workforce Loan Repayment Program page](#).

About ORH

We would love to hear from you! If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions for specific programs within our office, please feel free to contact the Operations Specialist facilitating your region's SAT below!

ORH Programs: Updated Information about who we are and what we do

[Provider Recruitment and Placement Program](#) provides recruitment efforts for medical, dental and psychiatric health professionals to North Carolina's rural and underserved areas and offers incentives to eligible providers.

[Provider Recruitment and Placement Program Profile \[JJ1\]](#)

[Rural Health Operations Program](#)

creates access to primary health care for vulnerable populations by supporting state designated rural health centers.

[Rural Health Operations Program Profile](#)

[Community Health Worker Program Profile \[JJ2\]](#)

[Community Health Program](#) supports the primary care Safety Net system to increase access to primary care for vulnerable populations.

[Community Health Program Profile \[JJ3\]](#)

[NC Farmworker Health Program](#) provides medical, dental and enabling services to members of the North Carolina agricultural labor force and their families.

[NC Farmworker Health Program Profile \[JJ4\]](#)

[NC Rural Hospital Assistance Program](#) provides technical assistance for the benefit of all critical access and eligible small rural hospitals in NC.

[NC Rural Hospital Program Profile \[JJ5\]](#)

[Medication Assistance Program](#) provides free and low-cost medications donated by pharmaceutical manufacturers to patients who cannot afford them.

[Medication Assistance Program Profile \[JJ6\]](#)

[Statewide Telepsychiatry Program](#) supports the psychiatric evaluation of patients through videoconferencing technology in emergency departments.

[Statewide Telepsychiatry Program Profile \[JJ7\]](#)

[Analytics and Innovations Program](#) assists ORH programs and grantees with using data and leveraging technologies to improve monitoring, evaluation efforts, and innovative strategies.

[Health Professional Shortage Area Program Profile \[JJ8\]](#)
[Rural Health Information Technology and Telehealth Program](#) works directly
with the North Carolina Safety Net to assess needs and provide technical
assistance throughout the state to improve the use of Electronic Health Record
(EHR) Systems

[Rural Health Information Program Profile \[JJ9\]](#)

Office of Rural Health Operations Team

Dorothea Brock, Rural Health Operations Program Manager

Dorothea.Brock@dhhs.nc.gov

Justin Kearley, Rural Health Operations Specialist - Regions 1 & 2

Justin.Kearley@dhhs.nc.gov

Moneka Midgette, Community Health Worker Coordinator

Moneka.Midgette@dhhs.nc.gov

Kimberly R. McNeil, Rural Health Operations Specialist - Regions 4 & 6

Kimberly.R.Mcneil@dhhs.nc.gov

Leslie Wolcott, Rural Health Operations Specialist - Regions 3 & 5

Leslie.Wolcott@dhhs.nc.gov

Visit our Website

Office of Rural Health | 311 Ashe Ave., MSC 2009 Cooke Bldg. | Raleigh, NC 27606 US

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