

CMS Announces Agency's First Rural Health Strategy

Interagency effort seeks to improve access & quality of care for rural Americans

Today, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) released the agency's first Rural Health Strategy intended to provide a proactive approach on healthcare issues to ensure that the nearly one in five individuals who live in rural America have access to high quality, affordable healthcare.

"For the first time, CMS is organizing and focusing our efforts to apply a rural lens to the vision and work of the agency," said CMS Administrator Seema Verma. "The Rural Health Strategy supports CMS' goal of putting patients first. Through its implementation and our continued stakeholder engagement, this strategy will enhance the positive impacts CMS policies have on beneficiaries who live in rural areas."

The agency-wide Rural Health Strategy, built on input from rural providers and beneficiaries, focuses on five objectives to achieve the agency's vision for rural health:

- Apply a rural lens to CMS programs and policies
- Improve access to care through provider engagement and support
- Advance telehealth and telemedicine
- Empower patients in rural communities to make decisions about their healthcare
- Leverage partnerships to achieve the goals of the CMS Rural Health Strategy

Approximately 60 million people live in rural areas – including millions of Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries. CMS recognizes the many obstacles that rural Americans face, including living in communities with disproportionately higher poverty rates, having more chronic conditions, being uninsured or underinsured, as well as experiencing a fragmented healthcare delivery system with an overworked and shrinking health workforce, and lacking access to specialty services.

This new strategy focuses on ways in which the agency can better serve individuals in rural areas and avoid unintended consequences of policy and program implementation. "This Administration clearly understands that one of the keys to ensuring that those who call rural America home are able to achieve their highest level of health is to advance policies and programs that address their unique healthcare needs," said Administrator Verma.

Although released today, work on the strategy is already underway. For example, to strengthen access to care, especially for those living in rural communities, CMS is transforming access to telehealth by paying for additional services and making it easier for providers to bill Medicare.

CMS will also continue to collaborate with agencies across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) including, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to implement this strategy.

"HRSA is excited to see CMS spell out a strategy to better serve rural populations that was informed by rural stakeholders who have a unique lens on the issues in their communities," said HRSA Administrator George Sigounas, MS, Ph.D. "This builds on our long-standing collaboration with CMS and will highlight key issues for rural safety net providers like rural hospitals and community health centers for CMS and HHS."

For more information on the Rural Health Strategy, please visit: <http://go.cms.gov/ruralhealth>. A fact sheet is also available at <https://www.cms.gov/Newsroom/MediaReleaseDatabase/Fact-sheets/2018-Fact-sheets-items/2018-05-08.html>.