

3rd Annual Rural Healthcare Innovation Summit

*From Risk to Resilience:
Building the Rural Healthcare Future*

February 25-26, 2027 * Westin Tempe * Tempe, AZ

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About the Conference

Rural healthcare stands at a turning point. While 750+ rural hospitals remain at closure risk, leaders across the country are shifting from reactive survival strategies to proactive transformation. Rather than waiting for solutions, innovative rural hospitals are actively redesigning workforce pipelines, expanding specialty access, leveraging technology and forming strategic partnerships that strengthen sustainability. Successful rural hospitals are investing intentionally in five transformation areas: workforce innovation, care model redesign, digital transformation, strategic partnerships and governance and leadership. Yet many rural leaders feel unprepared to navigate this transformation. They struggle recruiting and retaining workforce, accessing federal funding, designing facilities suited to rural scale, overcoming broadband limitations and building boards and executive teams aligned on strategy.

Business Research Intelligence Network's Rural Healthcare Innovation Summit brings together rural health leaders, innovators and transformation experts sharing proven strategies from hospitals successfully building resilient futures. Sessions dive deep into the five transformation pillars with case studies and practical playbooks. Attendees learn how to build workforce pipelines from the source through K-12 partnerships, redesign care models around community needs, deploy virtual care and AI strategically, navigate governance and leadership alignment, and leverage federal funding for transformation. This summit equips rural leaders with actionable frameworks for proactive transformation positioning their organizations to thrive.

Agenda

Day One – Thursday, February 25, 2027

7:15am – 8:00am

Conference Registration & Networking Breakfast

8:00am – 8:15am

Chairperson's Opening Remarks

8:15am – 9:00am

Digital Tools and AI in Rural Practice: Extending Capacity Without Adding Staff

Rural hospitals face capacity constraints that technology can help address without proportional increases in staffing and expense. AI tools automate clinical documentation reducing physician paperwork burden, allowing clinicians to focus on patient care rather than administrative tasks. Virtual nursing programs extend in-person nursing capacity through remote monitoring and support. Telehealth and tele-specialty access connect rural patients with remote specialists without requiring full-time recruitment or travel. Yet rural hospitals must select technology strategically suited to their budget and infrastructure constraints. Learn how to assess which technology investments address highest-priority capacity gaps, implement digital tools for meaningful workflow improvement not just technology adoption, build broadband and IT infrastructure supporting digital care and measure ROI ensuring investments deliver promised benefits. Understand how to engage clinicians in technology selection and implementation building adoption rather than resistance.

Hassan A. Tetteh, MD, MBA

Adjunct Faculty, Center for Digital Health and AI
Johns Hopkins Carey Business School

9:00am – 9:45am

The Rural Health Landscape

Rural health is not simply a small version of urban, but rather a unique health care delivery environment. This session will provide a national perspective on the current rural health landscape, examining the key policy, economic, and demographic trends shaping rural health care today and the opportunities that lie ahead. Participants will gain insight into the challenges facing rural health organizations while exploring innovative strategies that are strengthening rural health systems and improving outcomes. Attendees will leave with a clearer picture of where rural health stands today, where it is headed, and how collaborative leadership can help build a stronger, healthier future for rural communities nationwide.

Alan Morgan, MPA

Chief Executive Officer
National Rural Health Association

9:45am – 10:15am

Networking & Refreshments Break

10:15am – 11:00am

Building the Rural Leadership Pipeline: Research-Informed Strategies for Developing Middle Managers

Rural hospitals face persistent challenges in recruiting, retaining, and preparing the next generation of leaders, yet few evidence-based leadership development models are designed specifically for the rural healthcare environment. This presentation shares the findings of a qualitative study exploring the leadership development experiences of middle managers across

New Mexico Rural Health Network (NMRHN) member hospitals. The research identified the unique barriers and organizational factors that influence leadership growth and informed the development of the CORE Leadership Initiative, an evidence-informed framework that develops leaders through experiential learning, mentorship, and project-based leadership. Attendees will leave with practical, scalable strategies to strengthen leadership pipelines, improve engagement, and build organizational capacity within rural healthcare organizations

Matthew C. Stephens, DHA, FACHE

Chief Operating Officer

Gila Regional Medical Center

11:00am – 11:45am

Strategic Partnerships: From Safety Net to Growth Engine

Partnerships have evolved from survival strategy to core growth engine. Learn about partnership models from informal referral agreements to formal system integration, how to identify complementary partners and maintain local autonomy while accessing resources.

Sherri A. Young, DO, MBA, FAAFP, DHL

Physician Director, Healthcare Policy and Advocacy Fellowship

WVU Medicine

11:45am – 12:30pm

Federal Funding and Resources: Accessing RHTP and Emerging Opportunities

Leveraging RHTP funding, Nebraska is set to become the first State to effectively connect its entire rural health care grid to Veterans Affairs. The connections will allow seamless scheduling for Veterans in rural communities, increase access to local care for Veterans while reducing paperwork and accelerating payment to community care sites. Learn about Nebraska's RHTP plan to modernize and digitize Veteran scheduling.

Jed Hansen PhD, APRN, FNP-C

Executive Director

Nebraska Rural Health Association

12:30pm – 1:30pm

Networking Lunch

1:30pm – 2:15pm

Right Patient. Right Bed. Right Time: Advancing Coordinated Care Across Rural Health Networks

Rural healthcare organizations are increasingly embracing a coordinated, system-wide approach to patient flow that improves access to care while maximizing limited resources. This session will explore how shared accountability, regional collaboration, centralized patient placement, and technology-enabled care coordination can help ensure patients receive the right level of care at the right time and in the most appropriate setting. Attendees will learn

strategies for strengthening partnerships across rural hospitals, leveraging transfer centers and bed management technologies, expanding access to specialty services close to home, and creating seamless care transitions that improve patient outcomes while preserving local access to high-quality care.

Kevin Post, DO

Chief Medical Officer

Avera Health

2:15pm – 3:15pm

Panel Discussion: Leading Proactive Transformation Across Rural Healthcare

Rural healthcare leaders navigating transformation discuss how they shifted from reactive survival to proactive growth. Panelists share decision-making frameworks, how they built board and community support, managing change while maintaining culture and when to pivot versus persist. Hear candid reflections on what worked, unexpected challenges and how rural leaders maintain momentum. Topics to be discussed will include:

- Shifting mindset from reactive survival to proactive transformation
- Building board and community alignment on transformation strategy
- Managing change at scale across multiple priorities simultaneously
- Maintaining culture and staff engagement through transformation

Marvin Smoot

Executive Director

Great Plains Veterans Research Foundation

Aubrey Haynes

Vice President, Board of Directors

National Association of Rural Health Clinics

Jed Hansen PhD, APRN, FNP-C

Executive Director

Nebraska Rural Health Association

3:15pm – 3:45pm

Networking & Refreshments Break

3:45pm – 4:15pm

How to navigate the complex world of modern Radiology: a checklist for success.

The Radiology industry from the technical and professional standpoint has been transforming at a untenable rate. Rural Hospital leaders need to understand where the industry was, where it currently is, and where it is going. How to navigate the world of radiology interpretation, The radiologist shortage, the Radiology technologist shortage, and Radiology AI, that benefits patients, but also results in long-term financial stability.

Anand P. Lalaji MD
Chief Operating Officer
The Radiology Group

4:15pm – 5:00pm

From Policy to Practice

Healthcare organizations often struggle to transform policy and reimbursement requirements into operational success. This session provides leaders with a practical framework for translating complexity into sustainable execution.

Participants will be able to:

- Analyze common breakdowns between healthcare policy, reimbursement requirements, and frontline execution.
- Translate regulatory and payer requirements into practical workflows aligned with staff responsibilities.
- Develop an execution framework that improves accountability, operational consistency, and sustainability.

Aubrey Haynes
Vice President, Board of Directors
National Association of Rural Health Clinics

5:00pm

End of Day One

Day Two – Friday, February 26, 2027

7:15am – 8:00am

Networking Breakfast

8:00am – 8:15am

Chairperson's Recap

8:15am – 9:00am

Why Health Networks Are Essential to Rural Health Transformation

For decades, health networks have been driving innovation to expand access to care, improve quality, share resources, and achieve economies of scale. Long before "rural health transformation" became a national priority, these collaborative organizations were pioneering new approaches to strengthen rural healthcare systems. This session will examine the evolution of rural health networks, showcase their measurable impact, and explore why they are uniquely positioned to lead the next generation of rural health transformation efforts.

Linda K. Weiss, LCSW
Executive Director

National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN)

9:00am – 9:45am

Sustaining Transformation: Building Accountability and Overcoming Implementation Barriers

Transformation plans fail not because of weak strategy but because of weak implementation and accountability structures. Learn how successful rural hospitals embed accountability mechanisms ensuring transformation initiatives actually happen — from clear ownership and timelines to regular progress monitoring and course correction. Explore common implementation barriers rural hospitals encounter including competing priorities, resource constraints, staff resistance and leadership turnover, and practical strategies for overcoming them. Hear from leaders who sustained momentum through multi-year transformation journeys, maintained board and staff engagement despite setbacks and built cultures where innovation becomes the norm rather than the exception. Discover how to create peer accountability networks connecting with other rural hospitals navigating similar transformations, establish cadences for reviewing progress and celebrating wins that keep energy high and how to adapt your transformation plan when circumstances change without losing sight of your strategic vision.

Rick Leesmann

Chief Information Officer

Sky Lakes Medical Center

9:45am – 10:15am

Networking & Refreshments Break

10:15am – 11:00am

Behavioral Health Expansion: Financial Sustainability and Access in Rural Communities

Behavioral health has emerged as one of the most important and profitable service lines for rural hospitals, addressing both rising demand and persistent access gaps. Leading rural hospitals have successfully co-located behavioral health facilities alongside critical access hospitals, sharing laboratory, pharmacy and imaging services to improve efficiency and lower operating costs while generating thousands of annual behavioral health referrals. Others have formed strategic partnerships with larger behavioral health providers to expand outpatient services and crisis programs, reducing emergency department overcrowding and strengthening care coordination. Learn how to assess community behavioral health needs through data and community input, evaluate whether to build in-house programs versus partner with specialists, design co-located or integrated models that share infrastructure and reduce costs, build sustainable financial models for behavioral health services, navigate workforce challenges recruiting and retaining behavioral health clinicians and measure success through utilization, outcomes and financial performance. Explore how behavioral health expansion strengthens patient relationships, reduces ED utilization and creates a reliable revenue stream positioning rural hospitals for long-term sustainability.

Marvin Smoot

Executive Director

Great Plains Veterans Research Foundation

11:00am – 11:45am

Rural Partnerships: Models and Strategies for Success

Learn about different partnership models from informal referral agreements to formal integration, identifying complementary partners and maintaining local autonomy while accessing system resources and scale benefits. Topics to be discussed will include:

- Informal partnership models including referral agreements, tele-consult arrangements and shared services without integration
- Formal affiliation models balancing financial viability with local control and decision-making authority
- Integration strategies capturing economies of scale in purchasing, staffing and clinical services
- Identifying complementary partners whose strengths offset your weaknesses and vice versa
- Negotiating partnership terms protecting local autonomy while accessing system resources and expertise
- Building community trust and support for partnership decisions ensuring stakeholder alignment

Eric A. Hagan

Vice President, Rural Hospitals

Med Center Health

11:45am – 12:30pm

Bridging Gaps: Community Health Workers Transform Rural Health

This presentation highlights the University of Kentucky Center of Excellence in Rural Health's innovative use of Community Health Workers (CHWs) to improve health outcomes in rural Appalachian communities. Attendees will learn how Kentucky Homeplace integrates state-certified CHWs into community and clinical settings to address social drivers of health, expand access to care, and support chronic disease self-management. Presenters will share implementation strategies, evaluation methods, and lessons learned from developing scalable, community-based models that promote healthy aging and reduce health disparities. Participants will leave with practical insights for incorporating CHWs into rural healthcare systems to strengthen population health and improve outcomes.

Michaela Amburgey, MPH, CCHW

Rural Project Manager

University of Kentucky Center of Excellence in Rural Health

12:30pm

Conference Concludes

12:45pm – 2:45pm

Workshop: Building Your Rural Healthcare Transformation Plan Using the Five Pillars

This workshop guides leaders through creating actionable transformation plans across the five pillars: workforce innovation, care model redesign, digital transformation, strategic partnerships and governance and leadership. You'll assess current state, identify priorities, develop implementation roadmaps and create accountability structures. Leave with draft transformation strategy and prioritized initiatives ready for implementation.

Learning objectives:

- Assess your organization's maturity across the five transformation pillars
- Develop prioritized roadmap focusing on highest-impact transformation opportunities
- Create realistic implementation plans with timelines and accountability
- Identify resources, partnerships and federal funding supporting transformation

Ericka Beeler, MBA

Chief Executive Officer

Beeler Consulting

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