

2026 POLICY GUIDES

Rural Healthcare

Issue

Farm Bureau members recognize that all families, regardless of where they live, should have access to high-quality healthcare within their own communities.

The challenges facing rural healthcare are significant. Many rural communities struggle with provider shortages, hospital financial pressures, workforce recruitment and retention difficulties and increasing distances to specialized care. When healthcare services are reduced or lost, rural residents are often forced to travel long distances for routine appointments, emergency treatment, maternity care, mental health services and specialty care. These barriers can lead to delayed treatment, poorer health outcomes, increased costs and added burdens on families and employers.

Maintaining a strong rural healthcare system requires sustained investment and forward-thinking policies. Recruiting and retaining physicians, nurses, mental health professionals, emergency medical personnel and other healthcare providers is critical to ensure that rural communities remain viable places to live, work and raise a family. Investments in healthcare infrastructure, telehealth expansion, broadband connectivity, workforce development and innovative care delivery models can help bridge gaps in service and improve patient outcomes across rural Nebraska.

A robust rural healthcare network is also an economic development issue. Businesses, agricultural operations and prospective residents are more likely to invest in communities where quality healthcare services are available. Access to healthcare is frequently one of the first considerations for families deciding where to live and for employers seeking to attract and retain workers. As Nebraska works to strengthen its rural economy, policymakers must recognize that healthcare access is a foundational component of community sustainability and growth.

For these reasons, Farm Bureau supports policies that strengthen rural healthcare systems, expand access to providers and services, encourage healthcare workforce development and promote innovative solutions that ensure all Nebraskans can receive quality care close to home. Preserving and enhancing rural healthcare is essential to maintaining the quality of life, economic stability and future prosperity of Nebraska's agricultural communities.

Background

Access to quality healthcare is not simply a healthcare issue for rural Nebraska — it is a workforce issue, an economic development issue, and a community sustainability issue. The future of agriculture depends on healthy families, a stable workforce and vibrant rural communities, all of which require a strong and accessible healthcare system close to home.

THE FACTS: Nebraska has approximately 677,000 residents living in non-metropolitan areas, representing more than one-third of the state's population. The rural healthcare network is thin

when evaluating the sheer size of the state, with 62 critical access hospitals and 127 rural health clinics. For many communities, the local hospital or clinic is the primary source of emergency care, primary care, behavioral health services and preventative care. When those services are reduced or lost, patients often must travel significant distances to receive care.

One of the most pressing challenges is the shortage of healthcare professionals.

According to the Nebraska Hospital Association and the Nebraska Rural Health Association,

- 57 primary care physicians were lost in Nebraska between 2017 and 2023, including 41 family medicine doctors,
- 14 of 93 counties have no primary care providers,
- there is a projected shortage of more than 5,000 nurses,
- 85 rural communities are federally designated as medically underserved, and
- about 90% of Nebraska is in a health professional shortage area.

These shortages make it increasingly difficult for rural hospitals and clinics to maintain services and recruit the next generation of providers. Nebraska's geography creates unique challenges. Nebraska has more rural residents living at least 25 minutes from an ambulance than all but two states nationwide. As hospitals struggle financially, many are forced to reduce services. Even when a hospital remains open, the loss of key service lines can create significant access barriers for rural families.

Healthcare is often one of the largest employers in rural communities and are often the economic anchor in their community. Hospitals and clinics provide high-quality jobs and support other local businesses through their economic activity. In increasingly difficult times in the agricultural industry, many families rely on the employment opportunities hospitals and clinics can offer.

For agriculture, healthcare access is particularly important because farming and ranching are physically demanding occupations. Without an able body, a farmer or rancher cannot perform to his or her fullest ability. Delayed care, limited emergency response capabilities and provider shortages can directly affect the productivity and quality of life of agricultural producers and their families.

Farm Bureau Policy

STATE POLICY:

HEALTH BENEFIT PLAN (2024). We support legislative and non-legislative efforts to address the high cost of health care and health insurance. We support changes to state law to allow for non-insurance health benefit plan alternatives to provide lower cost health care coverage in Nebraska.

MENTAL HEALTH (2025). We support efforts to increase awareness of mental health issues in rural Nebraska and make resources available and options to deliver mental health services. We also support continued education and awareness of all mental health treatment opportunities.

FEDERAL POLICY:

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Questions

- What principles or policy measures should NEFB adopt to support rural healthcare?
- How can NEFB contribute to keeping rural hospitals, clinics and EMS financially stable?
- Should NEFB advocate for increased funding of programming that attempts to bring more healthcare providers into local communities?
- What policies can be strengthened or created to increase access to care?
- How can NEFB policy better address prioritization of economic growth as it pertains to rural healthcare facilities?
- Are there particular gaps in rural healthcare that should be prioritized? Where can NEFB have the greatest impact?
- Should NEFB view rural healthcare as critical infrastructure alongside roads, bridges, broadband and energy needs?
- The ability of our aging members to remain in their homes or within their communities is paramount amongst NEFB members as a whole. How can NEFB both voice and support this effort?