

Issue: AZ Health Care

## Talking Points: Rural Arizona and Health Care

The inequities in the health of rural versus urban citizens in Arizona are profound. Providing fundamental health care is an investment in every citizen so they can thrive, care for their families, have opportunities for education and for good paying jobs. Access to routine, quality health care not only helps prevent the development of chronic illness and costly long-term care, it sustains economic viability through a vibrant workforce across the state, rather than isolated areas thriving at the expense of others.

### A Significant Percentage of Arizona's Population Lives in Rural Areas

Rural populations are the norm in Arizona. In seven of Arizona's fifteen counties, 40% or more of the population live in rural areas. Twelve counties (80%) have more than 20% rural population. Even the three most urban counties have sizable rural populations. The state's rural areas include most of its Native American population.

### The Rural-Urban Socioeconomic Divide

Rural residents have lower average income, higher unemployment, and higher poverty levels. They have the lowest health quality and the highest health risks. There are more aging adults, more chronic disease, and more children lacking health insurance. Medicaid, which protects access to health care for the most vulnerable Arizona citizens, includes a disproportionate number of rural families, and is under threat from Republican legislators, who continue to try to pare away enrollment.

### Fragile Rural Health Care Infrastructure

Greater geographic isolation means rural residents must travel long distances to reach health care, and often have fewer transportation options than in urban areas. Hospitals and clinics are far apart and provide fewer services, and many teeter on the edge of financial insolvency. Rural communities suffer a severe shortage of primary care physicians (PCPs). Many are reaching the end of their careers, with fully 25% planning to retire within the next five years. With onerous medical school debt and lower salaries for rural service, younger PCPs are not backfilling these positions.

With health care infrastructure barely able to handle today's needs, rural communities are ill-equipped to deal with public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thin resources get strained even further. For example, Arizona's largely rural counties are woefully lacking in ICU beds across the state.

Telemedicine services can help ease the burden of long-distance travel to reach health services, but need to become more accessible to rural populations. Some regulatory requirements have been eased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but these need to be made permanent. The lack of broadband internet access in rural Arizona remains a substantial problem. A 2016 FCC study found that 63% of Arizona's population without broadband internet access live in rural areas.

## Tribal Nations

There are 22 federally recognized tribes in Arizona, living mostly in rural areas across the state. Tribal members have the most glaring health disparities in almost every category. A significant number of homes lack even the most basic infrastructure, such as indoor plumbing. 95% of the tribal population lacks broadband internet access. Tragically, it is no surprise that COVID-19 cases have surged on reservations, with more people infected per capita in the Navajo Nation than any state in the country.

## CARES Act

The 2020 federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, recognizing the disparities in rural health care provisioning, appropriated funding to benefit both patients and providers. Separate funds were targeted specifically for Native American health care. How the funds are actually distributed remains to be seen.

## Summary

There are numerous steps—both short-term and long-term—that legislators can take to help mitigate the rural health care crisis rather than stand by as it has spiraled downward under successive Republican administrations, jeopardizing the future of the state. Legislators can commit new financial resources to expand broadband coverage to enable telemedicine. They can increase funding for medical student training for rural health careers. Legislators need to act on behalf of rural minority and Native American residents who are suffering significantly more than their more urban neighbors. Legislators need to be cognizant that 25% of the state's aging population lives in rural communities and will be faced with declining health and health care options. Health care costs and casualties in rural populations will only continue to increase without concrete actions.

See [www.localmajority.org/research-reports](http://www.localmajority.org/research-reports) for our complete report: [\*Rural Arizona and Health Care\*](#)