



HEARTBREAK
INTHE HEARTLAND
COLLABORATION & PERSISTENCE

A man in a red apron stands on a porch of a building with 'FARM' written on the wall. The porch has a white railing and a wooden post. The building has a rustic, weathered appearance with a large window and a door. The man is wearing a red apron over a light-colored shirt and white pants. The background shows a clear blue sky and some trees.

INTRODUCTION

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Matthew Zachary, Co-Founder (OffScrip Health)

COALITION PARTNERS

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EPILOGUE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, our organizations were honored to bring together an impressive roster of concerned national leaders from business, nonprofit, activism, philanthropy, and higher education. We met in Washington, D.C., to discuss an urgency that seems to be hidden in plain sight: the poor health and challenging economic circumstances of rural Americans.

Some 46 million Americans live in rural communities, with the nearest hospital miles and potentially hours away. Too many of our fellow citizens lack access to essential quality health care services and economic mobility. Those living in rural communities often lack access to emergency services and specialist providers. They experience higher rates of smoking, hypertension, obesity, mental illness, and poorer end-of-life care than the residents of urban and suburban areas.

The problems that rural Americans face are more expansive than health alone. During our discussions, we shared the understanding that poor health may be an outcome of challenging economics, crumbling infrastructure, polluted environments, and lack of technology access. Some of these challenges result from pure neglect; others from the government and corporate leaders' inability to find common ground in taking charge of solutions. Regardless, these challenges cause suffering and privation among our fellow citizens, fueling despair and discord.

Founded on the principle of E Pluribus Unum – Out of Many, One – America will only thrive nationally by recognizing that when segments of our population face disparities and disenfranchisement, our collective potential is stunted. It is a fundamental truth that what affects one of us affects all of us; that's what being a part of community is all about, and that is something we must not ignore in the era of partisan politics. In the 24-hour churn of the news cycle and focus on vitriolic discourse, problems Americans in rural communities face can feel abstract or worse, recede into the background.

Here, the prophetic words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his immortal recounting of *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, ring too true:

“Without persistent effort, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social destruction. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

It is a time for engagement. Dialogue that elevates awareness of people's difficulties is essential in providing a remedy through viable solutions with set timetables and action plans.

In health, solutions that work in cities or suburbia may be doomed to fail in rural communities, where poor infrastructure, remoteness, and poverty derail progress. Funding for specific rural initiatives that might address rural Americans' problems can be hard to secure and often comes with long bureaucratic strings attached. Essential funds are too often secured and redirected elsewhere.

Innovative solutions are needed. These must be purpose-built for rural America and factor in the unique realities of life there, leveraging them as advantages instead of obstacles.

The Heartbreak in the Heartland Collaborative is dedicated to workshopping, creating, championing, and executing real-world, achievable answers that effectively address rural Americans' challenges. It is our privilege to present the following perspectives – idealistic, yet pragmatic steps we can take *right now* to alleviate pressure and comfort those who need it. Our shared mission is to work together to build capacity and a larger constituency for positive change.

This is only the beginning of that vitally important discussion. We welcome all who come forward with suggestions and a willingness to contribute. Let's work together to end our neighbors' struggles and to bring all Americans closer together in good health and prosperity.

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RURAL COMMUNITIES AS INNOVATION LABORATORIES:

In the health care industry, solutions that work for the broadest groups of patient populations tend to be the solutions that are adopted. While that's understandable from an economic perspective and can be successful for many patients, it ultimately leaves some patient populations behind. They remain underserved and their needs go unaddressed.

Economics plays a significant role in the well-being of residents. As younger generations move away, people are left behind to fend for themselves. Abandoned homes signal a tipping point for despair, disease and death. Communities decay without intervention.

Outside-the-box thinking by individuals, county and state governments, and purpose-centered corporations are effective. The Catskill Mountain Foundation draws upon the arts—music, creativity, and dance—to attract people to rural Upstate New York all year round. Hunter's streets are lined today with inns, restaurants, antique shops, and art galleries. Visitors come to enjoy the fall foliage, hike, and ski.

The unique challenges of living in a rural community cannot be ignored, and solutions for improving health outcomes must be tailored to meet their needs.

Rather than trying to adapt or scale down solutions that have worked in urban or suburban areas, the Coalition proposes the inverse: incentivize the start-up community to invest resources into developing solutions tailored specifically for rural America.

In the end, the more patients that we reach, the more the entire health sector benefits.

"I have been a long-time resident of Hunter, one of the far too many rural communities struggling in Upstate New York. The town was economically depressed and quickly deteriorating. Rather than abandon Hunter and shut our eyes to what was happening, we chose to get involved by raising awareness and mobilizing other concerned citizens to create the Catskill Mountain Foundation."

- Peter Finn
FINN Partners

"The narrative around how rural areas are stereotyped as older, poorer, sicker, uneducated, and white must change. If you look at one rural community, you have seen one rural community – it's not representative of the entire spectrum of rural America. Rural communities possess a vast depth of innovation, as they often must use what little resources they have for the incredibly diverse communities they serve."

- Amy Elizondo
National Rural Health Association

"My son had neutropenia and was diagnosed and treated here in Washington, D.C. at the Lombardi Cancer Center at Georgetown. We moved to New York; we found a donor in the form of my daughter Maggie; Henry was signed up for a bone marrow transplant; and Henry survived and is thriving today. At some point in virtually everyone's life there's an encounter with a terrifying health care issue. But not everyone has the Lombardi Cancer Center; not everyone has Memorial Sloan Kettering or New York Presbyterian. So let's talk about how we can provide that support to people."

- Andrew MacDowell
OffScrip Health



KEY POINTS

Establish innovation centers in strategically chosen rural areas with limited health care infrastructure to serve as hubs for health innovation, research, and community education.

Incentivize startup participation via direct access to community members, government actors, and providers and establish pilot programs to ease the burden on all stakeholders.

Nurture novel partnerships between the private sector, academic medical centers, and government officials and agencies, bringing to the forefront of the conversation solutions and ideas beyond standard practices.

Sponsor innovation competitions, awarding ongoing investment or one-time infusions of capital to the most promising solutions.

TIMELINE

YEAR ONE:


Engage with state health agencies, regional institutions of higher education, and entrepreneurial communities to identify localities of greatest need and select communities to serve as the sites of pilot programs.

YEAR TWO:

Establish an innovation laboratory system and build the logistics necessary to support it. Develop a competition framework.

YEAR THREE & BEYOND:

Launch a competition series, implement promising solutions, conduct ongoing benchmarking and evaluation. Expand successes and pivot away from non-starters.



EMPOWERING LOCAL ACTORS

We can't pretend we can solve problems facing rural American communities from a distance. We can't dictate policy, direction, or adoption. No one knows the issues a community faces better than the members of that community. Any viable solution must come organically from within the communities, where they recognize what progress needs to be made and where effort should be deployed for best results.

There's an abundance of philanthropic funding available and a desire to do the right thing at nonprofits and corporations, large and small. However, material and moral support must be directed wisely and adequately to achieve results.

The Coalition proposes empowering local actors, activated via community health representatives/liaisons at the state level.

"Rural America knows what is best for rural America. We need to build programs and initiatives that empower individuals and their families. That leads to a sense of purpose in the community, which can stem the tide of many negative health and social implications. Marrying purpose with economic empowerment is the real game-changer."

- Pritesh Gandhi, M.D.
Walmart

"The only way to improve patient outcomes is to invest and build a local health care infrastructure that delivers sustainable and comprehensive services. Collaboration between the health care industry and rural communities is crucial to ensure equitable access to care and innovative medicines. For patients to thrive as productive members of society, we must thoroughly examine health care access barriers and co-invest in appropriate solutions."

- Tania Small, M.D.
GSK

"...About four years ago, Congress explicitly stated that [the Clinical and Translational Science] Award Program needs to focus more on rural health. And when I charged my staff, I said, 'What exactly are we doing on rural health?' ...It turns out that there had been no effort in coordination or cross-fertilization across the CTSA; everyone was working on their issues. Many of those academic medical centers that the Program funds are state institutions—the University of Arkansas and the University of Kentucky—and those states have expectations that those institutions will... provide health care opportunities and options across their state. We must recognize disparities and consider how to address unique health care issues in our communities."

- Michael Kurrilla, M.D.
National Institutes of Health

"Particularly in light of the health care provider shortages, as well as for the overall improvement of patient care, the proposed and highly supported concept of the team approach to healthcare to include Community Health Representatives as an approach to rural health is an essential component of quality health care, especially in rural communities."

- Rear Admiral (ret.) James Galloway, M.D.
Arc Health, PBC

KEY POINTS

These **actors would be advised** by steering committees composed of state higher education leaders, local providers, appropriate nonprofit representatives, and community leaders.

These **groups should be enlisted to support the needs expressed by local community members** and empowered to direct philanthropic and public/private partnership efforts to serve communities in need, on the ground.

These **groups will be linked directly** to the innovation hub concept and direct activities at the local level, helping make connections, evaluate results, and consult on areas of greatest need.

TIMELINE

YEAR ONE:

Identify individuals in target communities to serve as steering committee members and individuals inside organizations to serve as community liaisons. Establish a regular meeting cadence and methodology for documenting and distributing recommendations to Coalition partners and the entrepreneurial community.

YEAR TWO & BEYOND

Deepen integration between corporate, nonprofit, and philanthropic Coalition partners, entrepreneurs, and local stakeholders. Continue to develop ways of working and capabilities to respond to evolving needs.



ESTABLISHING HEALTH CARE HUBS

Rural health care professionals are using telehealth and tapping into electronic medical records to improve quality care delivery. At the same time, there is ample support for remote patient monitoring and digital health technologies as tools to enhance access to care. The biggest concern among physicians on the frontlines of addressing patient needs is clinical training and financial assistance to keep community hospitals operating.

Physicians frequently cite building on what they already use to care for their remote patients: state-of-the-art medical equipment, 5G internet service, and expanding use of electronic health records to guide their patients on self-care strategies. While technology helps with a care connection, it can only measure and monitor the substandard status quo. Upskilling is needed to elevate quality care in rural areas.

Communities in rural America face well-documented infrastructure shortfalls, including a need for broadband connectivity, which is essential in current care models. While infrastructure must be brought up to meet expanding rural markets, overcoming those shortfalls to provide high-quality care in the immediate term doesn't require billions in investment. It calls for wise use of existing resources.

Creating one-stop health care hubs in rural communities is a familiar idea, but effective implementation of that idea is long overdue.

"We conducted a research survey with Walmart last year, and we surveyed actual rural physicians and compared their assessments of the quality of care for their rural patients versus urban physicians... We saw that physicians who practice in rural communities rated the quality of care they provide as lower quality compared to urban communities. That really should be a wake-up call."

- John Whyte, M.D.
WebMD

"One of the things we're struggling with... does COVID cause the schism. People are now not getting the information they need to make good decisions about preventive health, particularly infections. And so we are trying to think of ways to engage with many different, underserved communities. We've had great success finding great partners in the African American and LatinX communities... And I want us to engage the rural health space in the same way."

- Phyllis Arthur
Biotechnology Innovation Organization

"We must continue to change the narrative about how rural America is viewed and overcome the stereotypes that continue to perpetuate. Rural communities are far more diverse, innovative, and vibrant than they're given credit for. We must educate ourselves about the people we seek to serve and work with them to create the kind of programs that will move the needle in a meaningful way."

- Sarah Dash
Alliance for Health Policy

"Poverty rates in rural communities are higher than those in urban areas, and the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) helps ensure rural residents can afford the broadband they need for work, education, and healthcare. At Verizon, we have health equity programs on top of the ACP that help those individuals get devices to manage their health. What will happen to the 20 million Americans using the program when federal funding runs out in mid-2024?"

- Gary Lynch
Verizon

KEY POINTS

Walgreens, one of our Coalition partners, has generously offered **several locations in rural Georgia to serve as “Welcome Entry Hubs”** where community residents can learn about clinical trial participation, health care delivery options, and more from trusted members of their community.

Other Coalition partners are invited to use these initial Walgreens locations to **pilot their unique services and resources.**

By establishing central, accessible locations for primary delivery of health care information and services in existing infrastructure – and employing trusted local community members, we can **leverage the tools we already have while bringing in new services essential to providing high-quality care to our rural residents.**

TIMELINE

YEAR ONE:

Establish Welcome Entry Hubs at several Walgreens locations and investigate initiatives to develop similar one-stop care hubs at other Coalition partner locations.

YEAR TWO:

Integrate the hub system into target communities' liaison and steering committee systems. Deploy promising new solutions; evaluate and measure success over time.

YEAR THREE & BEYOND:

Continue expansion of successful models of care and information delivery. Identify new partners and services to expand the health care menu for rural Americans as much as possible with as little friction in the system as possible.



EPILOGUE

We all understand how frustratingly glacial progress can be. We see it in our politics, where bad-faith actors hijack public discourse, pulling attention away from the issues that matter to divide us in pursuit of their self-interest. It is much easier to stoke people's anger and mistrust than to do the hard work of overcoming persistent disparities and improving painful realities.

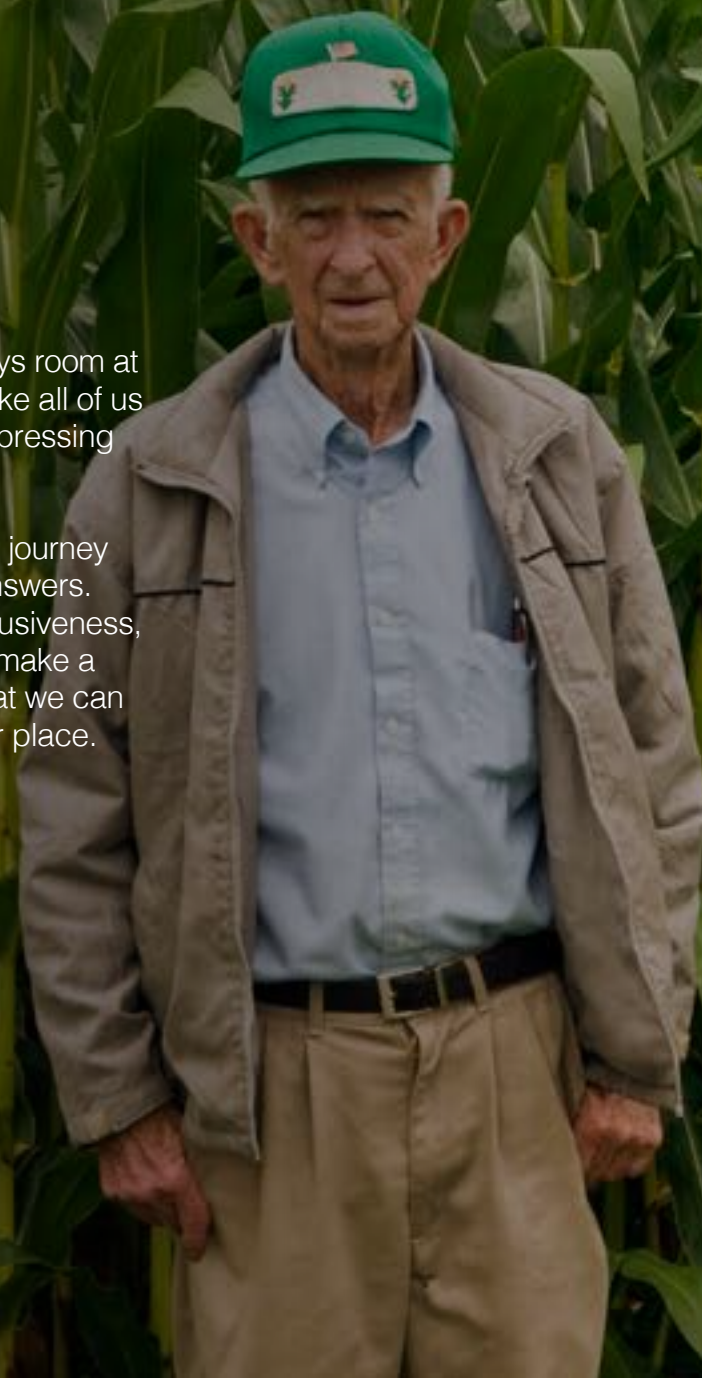
That's why this effort has been so rewarding. The Heartbreak in the Heartland Collaboration partners are proof that progress is possible when leaders committed to making a difference in people's lives come together to have frank conversations.

That's what operating with purpose is all about. When we collaborate to make the world a

better, healthier place, there's always room at the table for more partners. It will take all of us working together to solve the most pressing problems we face as a society.

We are only at the beginning of this journey and don't pretend to have all the answers. But if we proceed with humility, inclusiveness, and open minds, we know we can make a meaningful difference. We know that we can help make rural America a healthier place.

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