

Written Testimony of
GREENE COUNTY RURAL HEALTH NETWORK
Catskill, New York

New York State Joint Legislative Public Hearing on
2015-16 Executive Health Budget
Monday, February 2nd, 2015
10:00 AM

Chairs: Senator Kemp Hannon and Assemblyman Richard Gottfried

Submitted by: Ronald Rouse, Director

The Greene County Rural Health Network is a not-for-profit organization headquartered in Catskill, New York. Our membership consists of health care providers, consumers, businesses, and government agencies. Our service area is Greene County, which has about 50,000 people residing in about 650 square miles. Our mission is to improve the health status of Greene County residents. We receive most of our funding from the NYS Rural Health Network Development program.

Our Network has been instrumental in creating a self-sustaining, county-wide service system over the 19 years of our existence. The Network has expended about \$4.5 million to help start needed services and then help them become self-sufficient. The Network has created or supported more than 25 important health care services and programs in our community since our inception.

The Greene County Rural Health Network is regarded as a leader in our County for identifying emerging and unmet needs, proposing solutions and sponsoring programs, and pooling resources and expertise. We are considered a creative resource for envisioning the future direction of health care.

Budget Cuts Threaten a Good Return on Investment. Our efforts have produced excellent results for our community. We have been able to accomplish so much because of the funding provided by the State Rural Health Network Development program. Unfortunately, this program has been cut in past years to the point where it was allocated only about \$6.4 million for the current year for over 30 rural networks, and the Governor's Budget is proposing another cut – about 15% -- for this upcoming fiscal year, which would bring the total allocation to only about \$5.5 million. The past cuts have hampered our ability to accomplish as much as we could have, and the proposed cut for next fiscal year will further undermine not only our efforts to improve the health status of our residents but also the efforts of more than 30 networks across the State. We ask that the current funding of \$6.4 million for the Rural Health Network Development program be continued at the same level for Fiscal Year 2015-16.

Described below are some examples of the programs and services we are currently pursuing in Greene County. They are by no means the sum total of our work, but give you a good sense of what the State funds help us achieve.

I. Obesity. We are sponsoring 4 major initiatives to help people lose weight:

(1) Biggest Loser Contest. We have just started our 3rd annual contest. The first one in 2013 had 250 participants, 350 in 2014, and we are planning for at least another 350 for 2015; these are significant numbers for a county with our population. More than 50% of the contestants lost weight in 2013 and 2014. The major benefit of an organized contest is that it motivates people to take the most important step – a mental commitment to losing weight and maintaining that loss. They are now willing to

consume less, exercise more, and eat healthier. This year we are also sponsoring a first-ever weight-maintenance contest starting immediately after the weight-loss contest because focus groups have told us that although weight-loss is difficult, maintaining that loss is even harder.

(2) Healthy Diet. Promoted and created Farmers Markets/Roadside Stands with TV and radio ads, coupons, web site. Promoted program in which 35 restaurants offer healthier menus and starting a pilot program in which restaurants offer smaller portions at smaller prices.

(3) Exercising. Sponsored walking/hiking programs over 7 years in which hundreds of people have participated. Developed and promoted the first-ever Master Roster of Hiking & Biking Trails throughout the County, which contains maps of 20 trails located in 10 towns/villages. Support local schools opening their hallways during the winter so people can walk in the evening.

(4) Physician Role. Physician counseling is one of the most effective weight-loss interventions. More and more insurance companies are reimbursing for counseling as they lose their grandfather status under the ACA. We provided all primary care doctors an office visit counseling program to help patients lose weight. Doctors will also be encouraged to refer patients for enrollment into the weight-loss contest and we encourage the Biggest Loser contestants to seek counseling from their doctors.

II. Behavioral Health in Primary Care. Our household surveys show that about 90% of all Greene County residents see a primary care physician within a 24-month period. Thus, we created with the County Mental Health Center a co-location program in which mental health counselors locate in primary care offices. Currently about 75% of all our full-time-equivalent primary care physicians participate. Over the past several years, an estimated 12,000 screenings have occurred in physician offices, and hundreds have received counseling who otherwise would not have.

We have also conducted a major media campaign to address the stigma surrounding mental health services since stigma is one of the biggest reasons people do not seek services. We are now working to introduce a program in which primary care physicians and their staff offer counseling to patients who abuse alcohol and then we will expand it to include drug abuse counseling.

III. County-wide Emergency Medical Services. No hospital operates in Greene County; we have no emergency department. Until 2000, we also had no paramedic services in our County. The Rural Health Network led the efforts in creating a county-wide paramedic program that has now operated for 14 years by a separate not-for-profit corporation. In that period of time, it has provided paramedic services over 23,000 times. Now, the Rural Health Network is playing a major role in consolidating the multiple town agencies that provide basic emergency medical services into one entity that will also merge with the paramedic agency to create one county-wide agency that will respond to about 7,100 EMS events per year. This consolidation will result in higher quality services at less cost.

Maintain Funding Level. The above are just 3 examples of many, many programs and services we have created and supported. Reduced funding will impede these good efforts. Rural Health Networks are a great return on investment. Thus, we ask you to ensure that funding for the Rural Health Network Development program is retained at \$6.4 million.

Thank you for helping us. If you have any questions, please contact me, Ron Rouse, at 518-674-8465 or rouse2272@aol.com.