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As the population declines in many rural communities, maintaining strong local health care services can be a challenge. Numerous rural communities that once had physicians, pharmacies, hospitals and other healthcare services are now finding themselves without many of those services. This loss has had tremendous human and economic impact on these communities.

But rural people are resilient and resourceful. Across the country, people are banding together in small towns and regions to restore, or to prevent the loss of critical health services. Through a collaborative process, communities are thinking regionally versus locally. They are reaching out to other health care and human services organizations to provide services locally that are economically sustainable yet based upon the needs of their community.

These services may be as basic as a nurse practitioner or physician assistant serving in a clinic that it has a physician practice referral agreement with in another community. Through a collaborative arrangement with a larger hospital or health care service, specialists may come to the community on a regularly scheduled basis to see patients who need such care.

There may be a telehealth link from the hospital or clinic to a medical/behavioral health specialty service that may significantly increase access to care. Studies have shown that real time behavioral health services can be effectively provided through telehealth with high consumer satisfaction.

In some rural communities, a hospital that closed has found it financially feasible to re-open as a Critical Access Hospital. Services are provided that meet the most common local needs and the hospital often has arrangements for more specialized services with a hospital in another community.

When communities learn how to access resources they can gain expertise locally to address health care needs and identify possible solutions. Every state has people designated to assist rural communities with their health care needs. This assistance is generally free and can help communities identify resources. Most states also have a state rural health association.

Communities all across America are coming together in a collaborative manner to increase access to health and human services. If a community doesn't know where to turn, the National Rural Health Association may be of assistance. NRHA can direct you to resources in your state as well as to federal resources that may be available for health and human services. Go to the NRHA Web site at: www.NRHArural.org or call Courtney Yohe at: (703) 519-7910.