

Rooted in Rural Virginia, Strengthening Clinician Recruitment and Retention Through Local Pathways

Recruitment and Retention

In Smyth County, recruitment and retention of health care professionals remains a focus. There are only two primary care practices in the area to care for patients. Due to a dearth of primary care, the local urgent care and hospital work to meet the basic health needs of its population. Not only is there a shortage of PCCs, but there is also a shortage of other specialists. To help fill this void, two initiatives were created. First, the county partnered with the Smyth County Community Foundation to develop scholarships for those pursuing careers in health care. Second, it collaborated with local schools and universities to establish a pathway for clinician training.



They just don't have primary care. I'd guess it's as many as 30 or 40% that pass through. They've not seen a primary care physician. They don't have any routine care."

As of fall 2025, local university Emory and Henry ran a nursing program with projected enrollment of 160 students for local medical staff training. Even though not all will complete their training or practice in the county, these programs have strong interest and support from community members. Tapping into local talent is a win-win for graduates and the county, providing jobs while making health care more accessible for residents. Recruiting locally aligns with the principle that individuals often work where they train, with most nurses coming from nearby community college programs. This established pathway has contributed to filling nursing positions, and the nursing turnover rate at Smyth County Hospital is 12.6%, well below the national average.

While local medical staff recruitment is on the rise, physician recruitment remains challenging. Lifestyle considerations such as access to entertainment, restaurants and activities may dissuade some. Spouses who also work in medicine may have conflicting schedules due to few other physicians, and therefore experience childcare challenges. Finally, some subspecialty clinicians may worry about the low volume of some conditions, leading them away from rural care.

Compensation is another barrier in recruitment efforts, as rural hospitals struggle to compete with higher salaries offered in suburban or urban areas. Likewise, rural clinics have difficulty matching hospital salaries. One primary care clinic in Smyth County reports that high volume may lead to clinician burnout and leaving practice. Without physician ties to the area, tending to a large, complex panel can be challenging. Additionally, balancing staffing needs within budget constraints can be frustrating, particularly when financial margins are tight. The hospital and primary care clinics work in tandem to promote physician and clinician retention; enticing new graduates, while maintaining a positive bottom line, requires a delicate balance.

Characteristics

Location

Smyth County, VA;
Southwest corner of
VA, including Marion,
Chilhowie and Saltville

Geography

Mount Rogers National
Recreation Area, Hungry
Mother State Park

Population

29,216 people
75% rural
24% urban

Resident Characteristics

93% white
1% Black
3% multiracial
2% Hispanic

Age

19% under 18
22% over 65
Median age 40

Median Household Income

\$45,061

Health Care

Smyth County Hospital (Ballad Health): 44 bed acute care hospital, 109 bed nursing care facility; One of 8 hospitals in VA to receive 5 stars from CMS

Workforce (clinicians per 100,000 people, compared to national average [NA]): substance abuse 3.36 (NA 27.85), dental health 16.78 (NA 39.06), behavioral health 100.67 (NA 178.73), primary care 104.03 (NA 112.36)

Primary care practices:
2 family medicine clinics,
2 pediatric clinics



Community Resources

Emphasis on efforts to recruit and retain clinicians is not the only initiative that Smyth County supports; they also serve patients through resource outreach services. In the most recent community-needs assessment, equity was determined to be a top priority for its residents. The Mountain Community Action Program provides many needed social services such as transportation for medical appointments. Additionally, the Community Service Board plays an essential role in behavioral health. In fact, the number of patients receiving services is approximately 11% of the county's population. The Mount Rogers Community Service Board continues to expand its resources, with a nurse practitioner on staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This has decreased the number of emergency room visits, improving both capacity and costs. Other social services based in the county exist alongside medical care to augment health outcomes.



Rural health care is more than health care. It's social services. It's a whole lot of things like making sure that folks are healthy when they get home after they've been treated at the hospital here. They've got a program focused on that. The food boxes that we give are to battle food insecurity issues. It's not just health care, it's person care."

Interactions with Clinical Teams and Patients

Health care institutions take great pride in patient care, quality and outcomes, which are well-regarded and contribute toward recruiting and retaining a local workforce. Beyond clinical accolades, interactions among physicians, staff and patients contribute to a positive environment. The principle, "Treating people like you would your own family," is a standard that is practiced on a day-to-day basis, which fuels trust and care. Trust and care are also reinforced outside the walls of a hospital or health care clinic, where compassion is nurtured to foster a healthier community.

Takeaways

- Rural hospital leaders help address health care workforce gaps by partnering with community organizations and local universities, but they cannot be the sole source of solutions.
- Establishment of a clinician training pathway and local scholarships have led to an increase in training health care professionals.
- Attracting physician talent remains a challenge.
- Rural hospitals and clinics face challenges competing with urban salaries for both primary care and specialist positions, affecting physician and clinic staff retention.
- Behavioral health needs are supplemented through the Community Service Board, reducing emergency room visits. Other nonprofits offer support for the social determinants of health, improving health access and wellbeing.
- The county values patient care and strives to instill trust and a positive health care environment for staff and patients.

