



## Illinois' Rural Hospitals Celebrate National Rural Health Day

*By A.J. Wilhelmi, President & CEO, Illinois Health and Hospital Association and Pat Schou, Executive Director, Illinois Critical Access Hospital Network*

More than 1.4 million Illinoisans live in rural communities and rely on their local hospital as an important—and often only—source of care. As representatives of Illinois' 87 small and rural hospitals, including 51 critical access hospitals, the Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA) and the Illinois Critical Access Hospital Network (ICAHN) are proud to recognize National Rural Health Day [November 18], which celebrates rural communities, highlights the unique health challenges and opportunities they face, and brings together hospitals and other stakeholders who work tirelessly to improve the health and wellbeing of their neighbors.

The dedication of small and rural hospitals to provide access to quality healthcare has been highlighted during the last 20 months of the pandemic. When cases started to present in Illinois, hospitals such as Hopedale Medical Center, jumped in to help screen patients for COVID-19 symptoms. A triage tent was quickly established and a trailer was later added to their COVID-19 triage unit for clinicians to take X-rays and lab samples, as well as perform a full patient exam. Southern Illinois Healthcare began conducting virtual visits for established primary care patients through SIH Medical Group. Telehealth helped reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19, especially for those who are more vulnerable to serious illness from the virus. Physicians were able to manage patients' chronic conditions, provide mental health follow-up care and evaluate rashes and other minor conditions. And over the past few months, hospitals across southern Illinois have courageously weathered the state's latest major surge of COVID-19 cases, continuing to save lives under the most trying of circumstances. The list of services that Illinois' small and rural hospitals have provided during the pandemic is extensive, and it is filled with examples of neighbors helping neighbors.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has also intensified many persistent challenges facing rural hospitals, including workforce shortages, lack of capital improvement funding and declining reimbursement. At the same time, the pandemic laid bare the impact that social and structural determinants of health have on individuals and communities.

In spite of these challenges, and in the midst of herculean efforts to respond to the virus, rural hospitals provided all of us with something critically important: assurance that when we need it most, the care will be there, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Today, we recognize and thank the heroes who work in rural hospitals, and we acknowledge their many sacrifices during the pandemic.

To be sure, each hospital and community is unique, and their challenges both complex and multi-faceted, which means there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. IHA and ICAHN appreciate recent actions Congress and federal policymakers have taken to support rural hospitals during the pandemic, including providing emergency funding, telehealth flexibilities, expanding coverage and directing targeted resources to support rural and underserved communities. As Congress finishes the year, we urge the state's delegation to prevent any cuts to hospitals, provide capital improvement funding opportunities, and advance legislation to shore up the healthcare workforce, including passing bills introduced by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), Rep. Brad Schneider (D-10), Rep. Cheri Bustos (D-17) and Rodney Davis (R-13).

IHA and ICAHN appreciate the leadership of our policymakers and stand with them as they work to advance targeted policies and deliver new tools and resources that enable rural communities to do what they do best—roll up their sleeves, work together and take care of their neighbors.

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#### **About IHA**

The Illinois Health and Hospital Association, with offices in Chicago, Naperville, Springfield, and Washington, D.C., advocates for Illinois' more than 200 hospitals and nearly 40 health systems as they serve their patients and communities. IHA members provide a broad range of services—not just within their walls, but across the continuum of healthcare and in their communities. Reflecting the diversity of the state, IHA members consist of nonprofit, investor-owned and public hospitals in the following categories: community, safety net, rural, critical access, specialty, and teaching hospitals, including academic medical centers. For more information, see [www.team-iha.org](http://www.team-iha.org). Follow IHA on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

#### **About ICAHN**

Quite simply, the mission of our organization is – and always has been – to strengthen critical access and small, rural hospitals through collaboration. Better together, ICAHN and its 57 member hospitals make it their overarching goal to preserve access to rural healthcare while improving the vibrancy and viability of the communities served. ICAHN accomplishes this goal by:

- Ensuring appropriate funding and financial resources
- Continuing efforts to be a recognized resource on critical access hospitals and rural healthcare in Illinois
- Promoting efficient use of information technology services for the network and members alike
- Maintaining and further developing specific-type peer networks, activities, and listservs that promote hospital operational efficiencies and connectivity
- Offering ongoing educational opportunities and resources
- Developing and offering projects that are self-sustaining and which add value to the organization and its members
- Developing and offering shared services that offer value to members
- Establishing an institute that specializes in rural health population management

*ICAHN is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 corporation established in 2003 and is governed by a nine-member board of directors. For more information, see <https://icahn.org>. Follow ICAHN on [Facebook](#).*