Illinois Health and Hospital Association

NAPERVILLE – The Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA) and Illinois Critical Access Hospital Network (ICAHN) will join communities across the country in celebrating National Rural Health Day on Thursday, Nov. 19, to spotlight and honor the efforts of rural healthcare providers, communities and other stakeholders dedicated to addressing the unique healthcare needs of the nearly 61 million people living in rural America. In Illinois, Gov. JB Pritzker proclaimed Nov. 19, 2026, National Rural Health Day to recognize the important contributions of rural healthcare providers and healthcare organizations in delivering care, supporting jobs, training healthcare professionals and strengthening community partnerships.

IHA and ICAHN pointed to the innovative ways small and rural hospitals serve their communities, such as expanding access to behavioral healthcare, developing youth programs that support emotional well-being, and building partnerships that connect residents with care and resources close to home.

“Illinois’ small and rural hospitals are essential to the health, well-being and economic strength of the communities they serve,” IHA President and CEO A.J. Wilhelmi said. “Despite mounting financial pressures, workforce shortages and growing uncertainty surrounding healthcare funding, our hospitals and their healthcare teams remain committed to providing high-quality, compassionate care close to home. On National Rural Health Day, IHA and ICAHN proudly recognize the extraordinary dedication of rural healthcare workers and reaffirm our commitment to advocating for the resources and support these hospitals need to remain strong for generations to come.”

“National Rural Health Day is an opportunity to celebrate the extraordinary people and hospitals that serve as the heart of rural communities across Illinois,” said Tracy Warner, executive director of ICAHN. “Our member hospitals are more than healthcare providers. They are economic anchors, trusted community partners, and a vital part of what makes rural Illinois strong. Through collaboration, advocacy, and shared solutions, we are building a future where rural hospitals are connected, innovative, and financially sustainable for generations to come. Together, we truly are the Power of Rural.”

Illinois has 85 small and rural hospitals, which includes 56 Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), serving the more than 1.6 million Illinoisans who live in rural communities and rely on their local hospital as an important—and often only—source of healthcare. Small and rural hospitals represent 38 percent of all Illinois hospitals. Like their urban peers, they are major drivers of economic growth, with an annual economic impact of more than $21 billion. They often serve as the primary source of good-paying jobs in their region, directly employing 33,622 individuals in Illinois, and they fuel community revitalization and help attract new business.

The following examples highlight how Illinois’ small and rural hospitals are making a positive impact in their communities:

Blessing Health System has worked purposefully since 2021 to ensure exceptional behavioral healthcare is accessible in the rural communities it serves. Over the past two decades, a growing number of rural Americans have died by suicide, which has significant impacts on families and rural communities. In stark contrast with urban areas, rural areas have double the rate of suicides as large cities. Among rural youth, the suicide rate is a concerning 74% higher than their city-dwelling peers. The health system’s 10 rural health clinics are located throughout its service area to be easily accessible to all residents. In-person or virtual behavioral healthcare are available through a 62-person team of 11 adult psychiatric providers, seven child and adolescent psychiatric providers, two neuropsychologists, and 42 therapists and social workers. Social workers with Blessing’s Integrated Care team provide crisis care focused on assessment, stabilization and short-term care to guide patients through the difficulties they face.

Carle Richland Memorial Hospital has made educating youth a priority, alongside providing high-quality care for those in need of mental and behavioral healthcare. Carle Richland launched an elementary school program that brings in a hospital mental

health first aid instructor to help children better understand their emotions and how to express their feelings appropriately. The program is designed around the “Little SPOT of Emotion” books by Diane Alber. The model connects each emotion to a color, with students being taught to tell their teacher if they are feeling “red” or another emotion-specific color. Daily check-ins by teachers, in addition to a Carle Richland mental health first aid instructor visiting the class monthly, help decrease the number of outbursts and class disruptions. Given the positive response, Carle Richland is expanding the program. In addition to the planned growth to fifth grade, discussions are underway on bringing the experience to seventh graders.

Deaconess Illinois Union County Hospital in Anna has partnered with Hornik Neuroscience Associates (HNA) to develop an innovative, coordinated Alzheimer’s disease diagnosis and treatment program that brings advanced neurological care to rural Southern Illinois. Through this collaboration, HNA provides specialized evaluations, diagnoses, and ongoing clinical oversight, while Deaconess Illinois Union County delivers advanced diagnostic imaging, FDA-approved infusion therapies, and surveillance services. By coordinating MRI examinations and infusions on the same day whenever possible, the program reduces travel demands and eases the burden on patients and caregivers who would otherwise need to seek care at distant medical centers. To date, dozens of patients have benefited from improved access to specialized Alzheimer’s care and treatments designed to slow disease progression. Beyond improving patient access and continuity of care, the initiative strengthens the hospital’s financial sustainability through imaging and infusion services and potential 340B medication savings. The partnership demonstrates how rural hospitals and specialty providers can work together to deliver sophisticated care locally while creating a sustainable, replicable model for other rural communities.

Ferrell Hospital, a recipient of ICAHN's 2026 Community Innovation Award, is taking a collaborative approach to improving preventive healthcare access for children and adolescents. Through a partnership with the Egyptian Health Department's Integrated Care for Kids program, Ferrell Hospital's Population Health team is taking healthcare outreach directly into the community to reach families who may otherwise remain disconnected from essential services. The initiative addresses significant gaps in pediatric preventive care. Population health data identified that nearly 90 percent of attributed children and adolescents were not current on recommended well-child visits, while approximately 80 percent were behind on recommended vaccinations. Rather than relying solely on traditional phone calls, letters, or clinic-based outreach, population health nurses and community health workers are visiting families, building relationships, identifying barriers, and helping connect children with needed care.

Hammond-Henry Hospital, which recently received ICAHN’s 2026 Innovation Award at its Annual Conference on Nov. 11, has partnered with the Geneseo Police Department through the Integrated Model Police and Crisis Team (IMPACT) program to provide compassionate, informed support for individuals with mental health challenges, substance use disorders, or acute crises. With resources often limited in rural communities, the hospital and police department are working together to address the growing mental health and substance use disorder needs of local residents. Launched in 2022, the police department’s IMPACT brings together law enforcement and hospital staff in a coordinated response to individuals in need. The approach prioritizes deescalation, timely medical assessment, and linkages to appropriate treatment rather than punishment. IMPACT’s mission is to build stronger community relationships, support individuals in crisis, and connect residents with needed resources through prevention and outreach.

Memorial Hospital in Carthage is taking an innovative approach to rural workforce development through its Summer Youth Program, introducing young people to healthcare careers while removing barriers to employment. Partnering with area high schools, the Tracy Family Foundation, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the hospital provides hands-on work experiences, career training, and mentorship. Funding and community partnerships help cover transportation, meals, uniforms, and training expenses. Eight students completed the inaugural program, with four registered for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes, two planning to pursue CNA or radiology training in 2027, and seven interested in continuing with Memorial Hospital. Future plans include financial literacy education and mentorship with medical students. Through this initiative, Memorial Hospital is building a pipeline of future healthcare professionals while helping young people envision careers in their rural communities.

Southern Illinois Healthcare (SIH) broke ground last year on the expansion and modernization of the SIH Mulberry Center in Harrisburg, marking a nearly $20 million federal and state investment in the future of behavioral health care for the region. The new inpatient mental health facility on the campus of SIH Harrisburg Medical Center will add a 12-bed

medical psychiatric inpatient unit and update existing spaces, increasing its acute mental illness bed capacity from 30 to 42. The new medical-psychiatric unit will serve patients requiring both medical and psychiatric care, with medical care for conditions like diabetes, heart disease, or other current or chronic illnesses. There, clinicians will provide integrated treatment in a safe, specially designed setting. Patients will no longer face prolonged stays in emergency departments or medical units not equipped for behavioral health.

*Click here* to learn more about how Illinois' small and rural hospitals are making a positive impact on their communities. Read rural health stories from ICAHN members and explore some ways ICAHN hospitals turn collaboration into action for their communities.

About IHA

The Illinois Health and Hospital Association, with offices in Chicago, Naperville, and Springfield, advocates for Illinois' more than 200 hospitals and over 30 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. Like IHA on Facebook. Follow IHA on X (formally known as Twitter).

About ICAHN

The Illinois Critical Access Hospital Network (ICAHN) advances the strength, sustainability, and transformation of Illinois' rural hospitals through collaboration, advocacy, and shared solutions that improve performance and community health. Representing all 56 Illinois Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) designated by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and four other rural hospitals in Illinois, ICAHN is a nationally recognized rural health leader supporting sustainable hospitals, strong communities, and a healthier rural Illinois—Better Together. Visit icahn.org or call 815.875.2999 for more information.