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## Rural Health Day event draws attendees from across state

November 21, 2025 by Jennifer Pallikkathayil



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Health providers, community advocates and leaders from across the state converged Thursday for Missouri Rural Health Day, uniting to look at challenges and celebrate progress in rural Missouri.

The summit at the Capital Bluffs Event Center was part of a national effort to highlight the importance of rural health. The National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health has marked the third Thursday in November

as National Rural Health Day since 2011, celebrating what it calls the "Power of Rural," according to event literature.

"National Rural Health Day is a movement nationwide to celebrate rural health and bring light to all of the initiatives that are happening around the country to support rural health in rural communities," said Aleesha Jones, chief of the Office of Rural Health and Primary Care. Jones' office, which hosted the Missouri event, is a division of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS).

This is the fifth year Missouri has held an event for Rural Health Day.

The day-long event, which Jones said attracted about 125 people, featured speakers on topics like enhancing oral health care in rural communities and a rural health transportation program, as well as updates from the Office of Minority Health and Health Equity.

"Rural health is not a side issue," DHSS director Sarah Willson said. "It's central to Missouri's future. One in three Missourians, so over 2 million people, live in rural communities. These are our farmers, nurses, veterans and families. They are the backbone of our state."

Attendees got an opportunity to hear findings from the 2024-25 Health in Rural Missouri biennial report, which was published last week. Willson said there's plenty to celebrate in rural health, but there's also plenty to keep working on. She said the report "paints a sobering picture."

Willson shared that 47 rural Missouri counties don't have hospitals. She pointed out that since 2014, 24 hospitals have closed in Missouri, 12 of which were in rural counties.

"More than a third of Missouri counties now lack access to hospital care," she told attendees. "In some counties, residents must drive 45 minutes or more to reach any type of emergency care outside of our local EMS providers, who are already strapped to provide the services that they provide."

Willson said 12.6 percent of rural residents are uninsured, while only 9.1 percent of those in urban areas are uninsured.

Willson said poverty, transportation barriers and workforce shortages continue to limit access to health care.

She added that 19 of the 20 counties in the state with the highest poverty rates are rural areas, and infant mortality in some of the rural counties in Missouri is as high as 18 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Multiple vendors at the event shared information about their programs and services, including Missouri Rural Health Association, Abbott Diabetes Solutions and the University of Missouri's Office of Health Outreach, Policy and Education. Attendees got an opportunity to network and learn about partnership opportunities with the various vendors.

Representatives from St. Louis-based Gateway to Hope, whose website says it has a mission of "removing barriers to affordable, timely, quality breast health care," attended the event.

"The goal (today) is to potentially connect with others who could be partners with us, as well as getting the word out to anybody who could potentially utilize our services," said Kacey Kuda, central and northeast regional screening navigator. "... So (we're) happy to talk to anybody who has questions about breast health care, has concerns, or is currently in treatment, and let them know how we can support them through that process."





## Jennifer Pallikkathayil

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