



Sustainable Towns: Rural Improvement, Development, and Expansion (STRIDE)

Concept Paper

August 1, 2008

Introduction:

The Colorado AHEC System (AHEC) and the Colorado Rural Health Center (CRHC) are developing a new program called Sustainable Towns: Rural Improvement, Development, and Expansion, or STRIDE. This program will entail a partnership between two innovative, statewide healthcare organizations working together, and collaborating with others, to enhance the ability of communities in rural Colorado both to recruit and to retain quality healthcare providers through locally driven community development efforts.

The Colorado AHEC System Office and the five AHEC offices in the North Eastern, South Eastern, Central, Western, and San Luis Valley regions of the state serve as liaisons between the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) and local communities – particularly frontier, rural and urban underserved communities – in order to develop UCD educational outreach and support systems and to link university resources with local planning, education, and clinical and community based resources. Funded by a combination of federal, state, and local dollars, the Area Health Education Centers situated around the state provide a host of educational, public health, and capacity building services all over Colorado.

The Colorado Rural Health Center serves as Colorado's non-profit State Office of Rural Health. CRHC's mission is to enhance healthcare services by providing information, education, linkages, tools and energy toward addressing rural healthcare issues. CRHC provides or helps arrange for technical assistance to rural communities so they can take full advantage of federal, state, public, and private resources. CRHC builds linkages among rural programs and communities and urban and rural colleagues toward identifying and addressing healthcare issues. CRHC has a statewide membership of over 2,500 diverse people and organizations.

Problem:

Colorado is a rural state: 73% of Colorado's counties are designated rural or frontier (fewer than 6 people per square mile.) Moreover, our average rural county covers 1,632 square miles; more than that of the state of Rhode Island. Of Colorado's counties, eight have only one full-time primary care physician – four of those are not accepting new Medicaid patients. Six additional rural counties lack even one full-time primary care physician. One rural county has *no* primary care physician at all. 14 rural counties do not have a dentist accepting Medicaid, while seven have no dentist at all. Almost every county in rural Colorado is designated as a Medically

Underserved Area or a Health Professional Shortage Area, showing access to care is severely limited.

At the same time, recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals to rural Colorado is a tremendous challenge. Even healthcare providers who originate from rural areas become accustomed to urban amenities during their education and training, which generally takes place in urban settings. This helps account for the geographic disparities in physician placement in Colorado: Of physicians responding to a 2005 Colorado Health Institute workforce survey of Colorado physicians, 89 percent reported practicing in an urban setting compared to 11 percent who reported practicing in a rural Colorado community. However, 85 percent of Coloradans live in an urban area compared to 15 percent who live in a rural area.

In short, Colorado's rural and frontier counties in Colorado have extreme difficulty recruiting and retaining an adequate number of primary healthcare providers.

Solution:

To address this recruitment and retention problem, STRIDE, which draws from existing community development models, such as West Virginia's Recruitable Communities program, Economic Gardening programs around the country, and Asset Based Community Development, will be as unique as the needs and environments found across rural Colorado. The program depends on the collaboration of members from all facets of the local community, working in tandem with state, federal and philanthropic resources offered through STRIDE. This partnership will identify and build upon community assets while addressing opportunities for community improvement.

AHEC and CRHC plan to partner with other organizations in order to provide a full-service approach to asset-based community development for rural Colorado.

These organizations could include:

Colorado Community Health Network

Community Health Association of Mountain Plains States

University of Colorado Denver's College of Architecture and Planning

University of Colorado Denver's health sciences programs

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

The Governor's Office

Colorado Office of Economic Development

Colorado Rural Development Council

Regional Advocacy Groups – Action 22, Club 20, and Progressive 15

Local communities

For more information about STRIDE, contact Clint Cresawn at the Colorado AHEC System Office at 303-724-2480 / clint.cresawn@uchsc.edu or Lou Ann Wilroy at the Colorado Rural Health Center at 303-832-7493 / lw@coruralhealth.org.