Amplifying the 'Power of Rural' for Kids' Health

Health Equity

Date Posted:

Nov 14, 2018

The upcoming National Rural Health Day provides and opportune moment to celebrate the health, vitality and resilience of our rural communities. Organized by the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health, the awareness day highlights the power of rural communities as visionaries and innovators in tackling big public health problems with fewer resources. The day also shines a light on some of the unique health care needs of rural communities. Yet, because rural communities are often aging, sometimes the important health care needs of kids are overlooked. As we observe National Rural Health Day here at PolicyLab, we want to make sure rural children and families are a part of the broader conversation on health no matter where they live.

Though Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is based in a big city, our rural reach is vast. Several of our primary care practices provide care for children from rural communities. Last year, our main hospital here in Philadelphia admitted children from nearly all of the counties across the Commonwealth. And several of PolicyLab's projects, like the evaluation of Pennsylvania's evidence-based home visiting programs, assess the health outcomes of children in communities across the state.

Right now, rural communities in Pennsylvania and across the country are tackling some big challenges to keeping kids healthy. As we have written about before, rural kids experience worse health outcomes compared to their non-rural peers. Their lack of access to health care is compounded by higher likelihood of living in poverty and fewer community, social and infrastructure supports. Layers of racism and historic community trauma contribute to more severe disparities for rural children of color. Here in the Commonwealth, the opioid epidemic, hospital and maternity ward closures, extreme shortages in mental health care and rising levels of inequality have presented new challenge for small communities with limited financial resources.

Leading in Innovation and Integration

While rural communities have dire needs, it's hardly all gloom and doom. Rural communities are short on financial resources but long on creatively mobilizing their assets. Innovation is happening well beyond the borders of our metro areas and it's founded in forging creative partnerships and engaging in community-wide systems approaches.

For example, the Rural Health Redesign in Pennsylvania is testing a new financial mechanism for rural hospitals that incentivizes community health and supports hospitals as vital parts of the local economy. The Rural Health Research Gateway and Rural Health Information Hub are keeping communities connected through tracking the most up-to-date research and data on rural health. Grassroots organizations like the Northwest Arkansas Workers Justice Center, the Warrior Institute and the Southwest Georgia Project are addressing multiple contributors to well-being through labor rights, education and social justice. To put it simply, rural communities are leading the way on integrating health with other significant issues like environmental protection, climate change, food security, community development and livable wage job opportunities.

Communities big and small have much to learn from these leaders in the field.

Standing Together for Child Health

Too often, we see an emphasis on the divide between urban and rural communities. But, the needs of rural families—affordable housing, living wage jobs, healthy and affordable food, accessible health care and quality education—are not unique to rural places. These are issues that plague our country as a whole and restrict opportunities for all of our children. A recent survey of rural communities revealed that the majority of rural residents believe they cannot solve many of these issues independently; they will need outside help to address widespread community challenges. National Rural Health Day shines an important light on health care barriers for rural communities, but it also serves as a reminder that the power of all communities is amplified when people come together to address our biggest health challenges. By standing side by side with rural communities and learning from their leadership we can strengthen the futures of all children.

Colette Rector is a former communications associate at PolicyLab.

Jennifer Whittaker
Jennifer Whittaker
PhD, MUP
Research Scientist