Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

# Designing a Civic-science Media Model for Rural Caregivers and Families?

## Statement of Problem

Mothers and caregivers in rural areas are more likely to be uninsured or underinsured, rely on public insurance, or depend on public subsidies to afford health insurance through state exchanges. At the same time, Pennsylvania's rural health systems, especially maternity care, are strained and dependent on payments from state and federal programs.

The 2025 passage of H.R. 1 cut Medicaid funding and ended enhanced premium tax cuts that helped people purchasing health insurance through state exchanges. Together, these changes are expected to pull roughly $58 billion in federal funding from rural communities over the next decade and could lead to 17 rural hospital closures in Pennsylvania. By February 2026, nearly 1 in 5 enrollees in Pennsylvania's health marketplace, Pennie, had dropped their coverage, with the highest terminations among rural Pennsylvanians. Additional Medicaid changes are set to take effect in 2027, creating even more uncertainty for rural communities and the health systems that serve them. These changes are projected to be particularly devastating for women's health, and will deepen existing health disparities.

As H.R. 1's effects reach rural Pennsylvania, they will do so at a time when local news coverage is already shrinking. The decline of rural newsrooms has left many communities with fewer sources of reliable local information and less explanation of how national policies affect their daily lives. It also means rural voices are heard less often beyond their own communities, allowing stereotypes and misinformation to go unchallenged. Nationwide, 80% of news deserts are rural, more than 130 newspapers closed in the past year, and newspaper employment continues to drop. As these media outlets close, rural Pennsylvanians lose an important source of local reporting, including the in-depth coverage needed to understand how these federal decisions matter for them.

## Description

Funded by a Partnership Development Award from PolicyLab's Community Partnerships in Research Program, PolicyLab and Spotlight PA are developing a civic-science media partnership. Spotlight PA is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit newsroom dedicated to high-quality investigative and public-service journalism.

Civic-science media happens when media and storytellers work intentionally with researchers and community members to address shared issues collaboratively. As the U.S. experiences major social policy change, we will document — in media and scholarship — how families navigate these changes.

This partnership joins research and in-depth reporting to:

1. increase rural mothers' and caregivers' agency and engagement in media coverage of rural health topics

2. counter misinformation and distrust in media and public health through building a relationship that highlights community-identified needs in both media and academic avenues

3. develop a collaborative research model to ensure the effects of federal policy changes are documented by and for women and caregivers in rural Pennsylvania

Through this partnership, we will document how caregivers with young children navigate anticipated changes to public and marketplace health insurance. We aim to publish their stories in Spotlight PA and in scholarly work. This project is a pilot to scale a larger civic-science media partnership and research agenda documenting how caregivers at the intersection of gender and geography experience, navigate, and make decisions to offset the effects of H.R. 1.

## Next Steps

Over the next decade, rural mothers and caregivers will face growing health and financial challenges from sweeping federal health policy changes that fray the social safety net that is especially important for women and children. This will come at a time when trust in the media, science, and public health is already low, making it even harder for rural communities to access reliable information.

By bringing Spotlight PA and PolicyLab into a civic-science media partnership, we aim to shorten the time between research participation and public-facing storytelling, reduce opportunities for misinformation, amplify rural voices, and build trust between researchers, community members, and journalists.

*Find Spotlight PA team member bios here: Sarah Rafacz; Marley Parish*

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