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## MODELS FOR PRACTICE

### FOCUS AREA: EDUCATIONAL AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

**Program Name:** Networks for Rural Health  
**Location:** Atlanta, Georgia  
**Problem Addressed:** Community Development  
**Healthy People 2010 Objective:** 2  
**Web Address:** <http://www.networksforruralhealth.org>

#### SNAPSHOT

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Networks for Rural Health (NFRH) focuses on increasing access to primary care and improving the health status of rural residents in Georgia through restructuring of the local health care system. NFRH delivers services on-site, statewide, and regionally from network organizational development to information dissemination. The program's agenda for the future is to become a national resource to improve access to care and the health status of communities.

#### THE MODEL

**Blueprint:** Networks for Rural Health serves rural communities in Georgia, with special emphasis on the uninsured and medically underserved populations. NFRH focuses on increasing access to primary care, improving health status, and reducing disparities through the restructuring of the local health care system. Of the 159 counties in Georgia, 117 of these are rural. NFRH serves almost half of these rural counties.

Networks for Rural Health provides technical assistance in the areas of network organizational development, board education, rural physician leadership development, strategic planning, mediation and conflict resolution, cultural competency, program evaluation, business plan development, care management, exchange of best practices, and information dissemination. These services are delivered on-site, regionally, and statewide through facilitation of meetings with community stakeholders, strategic planning facilitation on-site, development of peer education opportunities, conferences, telephone consultation, and electronic mail communication. The program consists of one director, two community health system developers, one data analyst, one administrative coordinator, and one graduate research student.

**Making a Difference:** Networks for Rural Health is currently developing its evaluation component. Indicators of the success of the program at the community level are:

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- development of networks of parties that have traditionally not worked together—public and private providers, elected officials, businesses, churches, etc.;
  - improvement in health status and reduction in health disparity, especially for patients with chronic illnesses;
  - development of multidisciplinary health care teams;
  - improvement of quality of care;
  - strengthened local health systems with active and effective leadership;
  - development of mutually beneficial partnerships;
  - reduced costs of care for indigent patients;
  - improved coordination and efficiency of services;
  - improved access to services and pharmaceuticals; and
  - increased volunteerism among providers, i.e., free clinics.

The staff and director of Networks for Rural Health have been invited to visit 15 states to provide details of their success. NFRH has team members who provide technical assistance nationwide. The program offers an annual Community Health Systems Development Institute to teach others the methods that it has pioneered so successfully. The Institute draws national health system experts and funding sources.

**Beginnings:** Networks for Rural Health began in 1997 in response to the need identified by the State of Georgia to improve the decaying health care systems in rural Georgia. The Georgia Health Policy Center, the Office of Rural Health Services (ORHS), and the Georgia Hospital Association were the original stakeholders. Today, the Georgia Health Policy Center manages and houses the program, and collaborates closely with the Department of Community Health, which funds the program through ORHS.

Originally, the program focused on health care systems in individual rural communities. Program staff helped these rural communities pass through an intensive strategic-planning process to ensure local access to primary care for the residents of the county. Recently, state funding sources began focusing more aggressively on encouraging rural communities to cross county lines and develop multi-county health networks to maximize the use of resources and retain the maximum amount of dollars locally.

**Challenges and Solutions:** In Georgia, an unprecedented investment of more than \$4 million has been made in rural community health system development activities. Partners must continue to seek diverse resources that will support local, regional, and statewide efforts into the future. The staff of the Georgia Health Policy Center are developing a plan to secure resources for the Networks for Rural Health program through contracts, grants, and

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revenue from business lines. Initial funding came from the formerly named Department of Medical Assistance that since 1999 became a division of the newly created Department of Community Health. The Georgia Health Policy Center received an initial grant from this department to pilot the Networks for Rural Health program and subsequently a three-year grant to implement it. The program is currently funded by the Department of Community Health through a contract with the State Office of Rural Health Services. Currently, a percentage of the program's funding derives from a contract with the Philanthropic Collaborative for a Healthy Georgia and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge Fund.

Further, the demand for tailored technical assistance and the facilitation of community health system change is on the rise. The Georgia Health Policy Center and the Department of Community Health are searching for innovative ways to provide the necessary financial and technical support for improving health and increasing access to care for rural Georgians.

To bring Networks for Rural Health to the attention of potential funders and/or supporters, the program makes its needs known through participation in the Georgia Rural Development Council, direct conversations and forums with legislators and policymakers, involvement in the National Movement on Health Disparities Reduction, and through continuous networking and partnering with different agencies and organizations. Networks for Rural Health is publicized through newspapers, its web page, community involvement, conferences, educational meetings, request for proposals, collaboration with other agencies and organizations such as the Georgia Rural Health Association, and participation in the Health Planning Committee of the Rural Development Council. The lessons learned while working with communities have been translated by policymakers through briefings, issue papers, and presentations.

The Networks for Rural Health Program has received national recognition as a partner in the 100 percent access, zero disparities campaign. Some of the projects assisted by the Networks for Rural Health staff have become best-practice models at the national level.

## **PROGRAM CONTACT INFORMATION**

Tina Anderson Smith  
Networks for Rural Health  
One Park Place South, Suite 660  
Atlanta, GA 30303  
Phone: (404) 651-3137  
Fax: (404) 651-3147  
E-mail: [tsmith8@gsu.edu](mailto:tsmith8@gsu.edu)

