

MARYLAND RURAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION'S 2012 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

The Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA) is a non-profit organization. Our focus is health and our mission is to educate and advocate for the optimal health of rural communities and their residents. Membership is comprised of health departments, hospitals, community health centers, health professionals, and community members in rural Maryland. We count 40 organizations and over 5,000 individuals within our membership. Of Maryland's 24 counties, 18 are considered rural by the state, and with a population of over 1.3 million they differ greatly from the urban areas in Maryland. To help meet their unique healthcare needs and improve the health of all Maryland, our 2012 **Rural Maryland C.A.R.E.S.** legislative agenda is as follows:

Completely Fund Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund – Dedicated funding stream for rural communities is a top priority for MRHA. The Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF) was created in 2006 legislation to help raise the overall standard of living in rural areas, aspiring to meet or exceed statewide benchmark averages. A \$4 million investment a year is needed to meet the objectives of the legislation before it sunsets. Rural health facilities could use this fund for infrastructure costs for telemedicine and health information technology, in addition to leveraging funds for matching rural federal health grants.

Adequately Provide for Rural Maryland Safety Net – Local Health Department (LHD) core funding is a vital part of the rural Maryland safety net along with rural Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC), which are essential components of rural public health services. Continual budget constraints at the state level from core and grants funds can disproportionately affect rural counties that rely on blended funding for staff members. LHDs provide essential public health programs (immunization, disease tracking and monitoring, maternal and child health, emergency preparedness and environmental services) that must remain strong.

Rationally Implement Requirements of the New Healthcare Reform Law – Improving access to quality, affordable healthcare has always been of great importance to the Maryland Rural Health Association. Maryland's Healthcare Reform Coordinating Council is guiding implementation of The Affordable Care Act, (Federal Healthcare Reform Law) in Maryland. MRHA supports the establishment of a health insurance benefit exchange that supports the rural health safety net and rural healthcare workforce.

Expand and Improve Access to Rural Healthcare through Telemedicine and Health Information Technology – Rural communities have the right to equal access to the high quality specialists located in Maryland. In 2010 MRHA led the effort to provide an understanding of the rural telemedicine delivery system in Maryland linking urban specialists to rural patients. MRHA supports the creation of a statewide telemedicine delivery system with a clear state lead and reimbursement mechanisms to improve access to care for rural Maryland.

Strongly Support Efforts to Stabilize and Grow the Health Professions Workforce for Rural Maryland – Maryland's rural communities face dire shortages in primary care providers and specialists. Sustainable funding must be kept for rural **Area Health Education Centers (AHEC)s** that are essential to the workforce pipeline by providing education to elementary schools through continuing education for rural medical providers. The expansion of the rural track at the UMB Medical School and the potential for a full fledged **Rural Residency Primary Care Program** in Maryland must be established and funded to help train and attract rural physicians. The **Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment Program for Physicians (LARP)**, expanded by 2010 legislation, needs the additional funding in that legislation to help attract primary care physicians to rural Maryland.