Welcome to the third edition of Rural Health Update for 2004, a publication designed to keep members of the Pennsylvania Rural Health Association (PRHA) up to date on activities within the association and across the state and nation that focus on increasing the health status of rural Pennsylvanians.

Please remember that this is your newsletter and we want to hear from you!

Forward your comments and items for inclusion in future issues to Ron Mezick, PRHA President, at (717) 561-5248.

Focus on Uninsured a Growing National and State Issue

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) called on lawmakers to address the rising number of uninsured Americans, expressing great concern regarding statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau that show 45 million Americans are uninsured (a 3.2 percent increase from 2002–2003). This rise in the number of uninsured Americans is particularly alarming for those who live in rural communities, because rural Americans are more likely to be uninsured and are less likely to have employer-sponsored coverage.

According to a March 2004 NRHA Policy Brief titled Health Insurance Access in Rural America, rural Americans have an uninsured rate about six percent higher than urban Americans. This is because rural Americans have an employer-sponsored coverage rate that is 11.5 percent lower than the urban rate. Rural Americans are also about twice as likely to work for a low-wage employer. Low-wage workers receive health coverage 32 percent of the time, while 77 percent of other workers are offered coverage.

“To those of us in the healthcare field, and even to those of us who aren't, these statistics should be a real wake-up call for the need to address this country's uninsured population,” NRHA Executive Director Stephen D. Wilhide said. “Rural Americans, in particular, are in need of real solutions. We cannot allow the current negative trend in health insurance coverage to continue unabated.”

The uninsured is also a key issue during the presidential race. Recent reports about the rising costs of health care and the rising number of uninsured have prompted the candidates to highlight their solutions—and to attack each other’s proposals. Though the presidential candidates’ health care platforms “provide one of the more significant differences of the campaign ... experts say that neither plan would seriously restrain costs,” according to the Washington Post.

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An analysis of the competing campaign claims by *USA Today* concluded that “Kerry is proposing no government takeover of health care, as Bush alleges. But he is proposing that the government spend money to provide health care to tens of millions of uninsured Americans. Bush, by contrast, proposes modest steps that produce modest results ... [His] plan pursues a new conservative philosophy that leaves it to individuals to find health coverage or pay their own medical bills, with tax incentives to help.”

> **The large adultBasic waiting list is but an indicator of the enormity of the problem of lack of health insurance,”** said Sister Teresita Hinnegan.

In Pennsylvania, public hearings continued as part of the House Republican Caucus’ “Healthy PA” initiative to explore the rising cost of health care (see the July issue of *Rural Health Update* for more information). On September 14, PRHA member Sister Teresita Hinnegan provided testimony on behalf of PRHA at a public hearing in Harrisburg that focused on Pennsylvania’s adultBasic insurance program.

“Our rural populations mirror the characteristics and needs of those across the nation,” said Sr. Teresita. Citing the NRHA’s *Health Insurance Access in Rural America*, the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, and PRHA’s *Status Check III*, she clearly made the case that the number of uninsured in Pennsylvania has reached critical levels and must be addressed.

“The PRHA understands that lack of health insurance or under-insurance of low income persons is a multifaceted problem including characteristics of the uninsured, provider and system limitations, and scarcity of public funding. The large adultBasic waiting list is but an indicator of the enormity of the problem of lack of health insurance,” she said.

In closing, Sr. Teresita called on lawmakers to find additional funds to cover the pressing need for health insurance for Pennsylvania’s rural working population who lack access to the most basic health care services.

To read Sr. Teresita’s complete testimony, go to the “Legislative Agenda” section of the PRHA website.
**Resources…**

*Continued*

**Mapping Resource Available Online**

The Rural Assistance Center has made available on its website a detailed guide to using maps. The online guide includes links to maps, glossary of terms and acronyms, answers to frequently asked questions, and links to additional mapping resources.

The information guide is available online.

**Online Subscription to Journal of Rural Health Now Available**

The National Rural Health Association’s Journal of Rural Health is now available online through a separate subscription to Ovid Technologies. The current online version, still available on the NRHA website, will be phased out. The move to Ovid will allow readers enhanced capabilities, including access to current and back issues, searchable text, and bibliographies. The “paper version” of the journal will continue to be mailed to NRHA individual and organizational members as part of their membership dues.

For more information about Ovid or to subscribe to the online Journal of Rural Health (or any of Ovid’s 1,500 other online journals and books), go to the Ovid website.

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**State News…**

**PHEAA Nursing Loan Forgiveness Application Deadline Extended to October 31**

Nursing students now have until October 31 to apply for the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) and the Pennsylvania Higher Education Foundation’s “Nursing Loan Forgiveness for Healthier Futures” program.

Qualified applicants who work for a participating Pennsylvania health care organization after graduation from an approved nursing education program will receive student loan forgiveness for up to 25 percent (a maximum of $12,500) of eligible debt over a three-year period.

The program is funded by the PHEAA Foundation and sponsoring organizations and was established to encourage students enter the nursing field.

For more information, call (800) 859-5442, email PHEAA or go check the Futures in Nursing website.

**Windber Medical Center to Utilize New Scanner that Combines PET and CT Technology**

Windber Medical Center has been chosen by GE Medical Systems as the site for one of the first 16 slice PET/CT scanners in the country.

Alone, PET scans reveal “hot spots” that can indicate tumors or blockages in blood vessels. Alone, CT scans show the structure of the body in great detail. Fused together, the PET/CT displays a three-dimensional image of the area in question, helping physicians to:

- Identify a cancerous malignancy earlier and pinpoint location.
- Differentiate malignant and benign tumors and determine the presence, location, and extent of multiple lesions, recurrences, and metastases.
- Guide selection and delivery of cancer treatment, surgery, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy.
- Demonstrate response to therapy.

In addition, PET/CT is the most accurate non-invasive test to identify cardiac disease, eliminating up to 80 percent of invasive catherizations and the risks associated with them. In many cases, angioplasty could be avoided altogether since doctors can identify blockages and flow troubles and view inside the stents.

Windber Medical Center plans to use the PET/CT in the areas of cardiovascular health and to detect brain disorders such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease earlier than before. For more information, you can call Windber Medical Center at (814) 467-3438.
PRHA Explores Hosting Rural Health Forums
The PRHA board is exploring partnering with the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, Department of Health, and Rural Development Council to hold up to 10 rural issue forums across Pennsylvania during the Spring/Summer 2005. “We want to determine what health care issues are on the minds of both consumers and health care professionals in rural Pennsylvania,” says PRHA President Ron Mezick. “We’re still finalizing our goals, but plan on utilizing the results in a meaningful way, perhaps creating a ‘strategic plan’ for rural Pennsylvania.”

Additional information will be available as details are finalized.

Meeting Notice:
The next meeting of the PRHA Board of Directors will be Wednesday, December 8, 2004. The time and location will be announced.

National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services Issues Report
Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tommy Thompson recently released HHS’ National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services annual report. The 2004 report includes recommendations to the secretary as well as examples of model rural programs. The report was the work of the HHS’ committee, of which PRHA member Michael Meit serves on.

The report’s recommendations urge the secretary to:
• Support efforts to cover mental health services equally with primary care services under Medicaid and Medicare
• Authorize an oral health bonus within Medicaid to encourage greater participation by dentists in rural areas and increase funding for HHS programs that train and place dentists.
• Support transportation projects to help the rural elderly access health care.

The report cited two models of rural care: the Minnie Hamilton Health Center, a critical access hospital in Grantsville, W.Va., that offers mental, oral and other health services; and Community Health Development, a federally qualified health center in Uvalde, Texas, that assesses patients for oral health needs.

Senate Committee Approves Funding to Rural Health Programs
According to the National Rural Health Association, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved legislation allocating federal funding to rural health programs, restoring the spending cuts proposed by President Bush.

Under the measure, Rural Hospital Flexibility Grants, Rural Outreach and Network Grants, state offices of rural health, and rural research would all be funded at fiscal year 2004 levels. In addition, community health centers, National Health Service Corps, and the health professions program would see modest overall increases.

While the National Rural Health Association views this as a positive step, it notes it is unclear when, or even if, the measure will be considered by the full Senate, noting that it’s likely the appropriations process will continue toward the end of the year and possibly into 2005.

For more information, contact the National Rural Health Association's government affairs office at (703) 519-7910.
**Upcoming Events …**

**November 11–14, 2004**
26th Annual Conference on Patient Education at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco. Sponsored by Society of Teachers of Family Medicine and American Academy of Family Physicians. For more information or to register, contact the society via email, call (800) 274-2237, or visit the society’s website.

**March 21–23, 2005**
National Rural Health Association’s Rural Health Policy Institute at the Grand Hyatt Washington, Washington DC. For more information, contact NRHA’s Courtney Yohe via email or call (703) 519-7910.

**May 18, 2005**
National Rural Health Association’s 11th Annual Rural Minority and Multicultural Health Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. For more information, contact NRHA’s Rosemary McKenzie via email or call (816) 756-3140.

**May 19–21, 2005**
National Rural Health Association’s 28th Annual Rural Health Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. For more information, contact NRHA’s Kathy Siress via email or call (816) 756-3140.

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**Upcoming Events …**

**Counter Terrorism and Emergency Preparedness Videoconference October 22**
The Pennsylvania Rural Development Council, University of Pittsburgh Center for Public Health Preparedness, and Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency joined together to present information on the latest rural preparedness issues.

Participants will hear an update from Pennsylvania Office of Homeland Security, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, and Pennsylvania Department of Health as well as learn more about the resources available from these agencies. In addition, participants will learn about Pennsylvania hospitals and University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Public Health Preparedness activities, as well as have the opportunity to ask questions.

The videoconference will run from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and can be viewed at sites in the following 21 counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Bedford, Berks, Bradford, Butler, Centre, Clinton, Crawford, Dauphin, Elk, Greene, Lackawanna, Lycoming, McKean, Mercer, Philadelphia, Potter, Somerset, Tioga, and Union.

For more information or to register, contact the Pennsylvania Rural Development Council via email or call (717) 772-9030.