

Wyoming County HEALTHCARE CENTER WCHC

Written Testimony on Rural Healthcare Access, Women's Health, and Maternal Health in Pennsylvania

Submitted by: Wyoming County Healthcare Center (WCHC)

Date: October 13, 2026

Dear Chairman Yaw and Honorable Members of the Committee,

On behalf of Wyoming County Healthcare Center (WCHC) and the rural communities we serve in Pennsylvania, we sincerely appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony on rural healthcare challenges, particularly access to women's health and maternal health services.

For rural residents, access to healthcare can mean traveling 45 minutes to an hour or more to reach a hospital, waiting months for a provider appointment, or struggling to obtain preventive screenings and specialty treatment close to home. These barriers are especially concerning for pregnant women, patients undergoing cancer treatment, older adults, patients with chronic conditions and families with limited transportation or financial resources.

The closure of Tyler Memorial Hospital in Tunkhannock in 2021 created a significant void in healthcare access throughout Wyoming County and the surrounding region. Established in 2024, WCHC was created to help restore and strengthen access to healthcare by transforming the former hospital facility into a collaborative healthcare campus.

Our experience demonstrates both the consequences of losing local healthcare infrastructure and the potential for rural communities to rebuild through collaboration, innovation, and targeted investment. We respectfully encourage policymakers to strengthen rural healthcare infrastructure, expand women's and maternal health services, support emergency medical services (EMS), and evaluate the Rural Emergency Hospital (REH) model as one potential component of a sustainable rural healthcare strategy.

Wyoming County Healthcare Center: Rebuilding Rural Healthcare

WCHC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Wyoming County and the surrounding region. Our collaborative healthcare campus brings multiple providers and community organizations together to improve access to care in one location.

Services and resources available through the campus include primary care, behavioral health, rehabilitation, diagnostic imaging, laboratory services, preventive health programming, community outreach, telehealth accommodations, and a food pantry for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Broadband access and free public internet further help residents connect with services.

Following the hospital closure, residents often faced waits of six to twelve months for a new-patient primary care appointment, forcing some to travel long distances or delay needed care. Through

partnerships, grant funding, tax credit investments, and private donations, WCHC has revitalized the facility, invested in infrastructure and equipment, and worked to restore local healthcare access.

WCHC is also leading a countywide Health Needs Assessment to identify gaps in services and community priorities. Findings will help guide future opportunities to expand ambulatory care hours, specialty services, pharmacy access, and other needed programs.

Our work demonstrates that rebuilding rural healthcare requires more than maintaining a building. It requires sustainable funding, provider recruitment, appropriate reimbursement, and coordination with regional healthcare systems.

Women's Health: Bringing Essential Services Closer to Home

Women in rural communities' face barriers to preventive screenings, specialty care, access to childcare and ongoing treatment. Long travel distances, limited provider availability, transportation challenges, and the costs of repeated appointments can delay diagnosis and treatment.

The return of mobile mammography services to our community illustrates the value of restoring care locally. Following the closure of Tyler Memorial Hospital, many women went years without receiving a mammogram. Bringing mobile mammography back to the community restored an essential preventive service and demonstrated the impact of making care more accessible. Establishing onsite screening and diagnostic mammography services would further improve access to timely breast cancer detection.

Cancer is another area of concern. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health's Wyoming County Health Profile, the age-adjusted incidence rate for all cancers among women in Wyoming County was 532.2 cases per 100,000 women for 2019–2023, compared with 418.6 cases per 100,000 statewide. This disparity underscores the importance of improving access to preventive screenings, early diagnosis, cancer care navigation, and appropriate treatment services in rural communities.

Women receiving cancer treatment may require recurring infusions, laboratory testing, monitoring, and specialist appointments over many months. When these services are available only outside the region, patients and their families face repeated travel, transportation expenses, time away from work, and additional stress.

WCHC sees opportunities to partner with oncology providers, including specialists treating gynecologic cancers, to explore whether appropriate infusion and supportive services can be delivered closer to home while maintaining coordination with patients' treating specialists. Such arrangements would require appropriate clinical oversight, staffing, equipment, patient safety standards, and sustainable reimbursement.

We encourage policies that support mobile screenings, gynecologic services, cancer navigation, and appropriate specialty partnerships so rural women can access preventive and ongoing care with fewer unnecessary travel burdens.

Maternal Health: Addressing Wyoming County's Maternity Desert

Maternal health is among the most urgent healthcare access concerns facing Wyoming County. Following the closure of Tyler Memorial Hospital's maternity unit, residents lost local access to hospital-based maternity services and must travel outside the county for hospital-based labor and delivery.

Despite these challenges, WCHC continues to support important components of maternal care within the community. Certified nurse-midwives provide prenatal visits at the WCHC location, ultrasound services are available on-site, nursing staff and licensed clinical social workers provide visits at WCHC as well as home visits to help patients with maternal care, perinatal and postpartum depression. These services help connect expectant mothers with care closer to home and provide a foundation for stronger coordination throughout pregnancy.

However, prenatal visits, ultrasound services, and home-based nursing support cannot replace access to hospital-based delivery and emergency obstetric care. Pregnant patients must still travel outside the county for delivery and may need urgent evaluation or specialized care at facilities equipped to manage maternal and newborn complications.

In recent years, WCHC has learned of a couple instances in which babies were delivered by local ambulance personnel while families faced the challenges of longer travel distances to hospital care. These experiences demonstrate the responsibilities placed on rural EMS providers when maternity services are far away.

Rural EMS agencies must be prepared to respond to a wide range of emergencies, often with limited personnel, substantial transport distances, low reimbursement rates, and fewer nearby clinical resources. Emergency medical technicians and paramedics are essential to rural maternal health, but emergency transport cannot substitute for accessible and coordinated maternity services.

We urge policymakers to support a comprehensive rural maternal health strategy that builds on existing services at WCHC, strengthens connections among nurse-midwives, nursing staff, obstetric providers, regional hospitals, and EMS agencies, and improves access to prenatal and postpartum care, specialist consultation, maternal emergency training, and coordinated transportation.

The goal should be to strengthen care within rural communities while ensuring that expectant mothers can safely access hospital-based delivery and specialized services when needed.

The Rural Emergency Hospital Model: A Potential Part of the Solution

The federal Rural Emergency Hospital model offers an important option to consider when evaluating sustainable rural healthcare delivery. Established by Congress and implemented by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the REH designation took effect in 2023. It is intended to help eligible rural hospitals and critical access hospitals maintain access to emergency and other essential outpatient services where sustaining a traditional inpatient hospital model may be difficult.

A REH designation generally provides emergency department services, observation care, and additional outpatient services under specific federal requirements and a distinct Medicare payment structure.

The REH model does not restore a traditional inpatient hospital or local labor-and-delivery unit. Nevertheless, it may offer a framework for sustaining essential emergency and outpatient services while strengthening connections to regional hospitals and specialists.

For Wyoming County, the loss of Tyler Memorial Hospital demonstrates the importance of examining sustainable approaches to preserving local healthcare access. We encourage policymakers to evaluate whether the REH model, where federal eligibility requirements and local circumstances permit, could help maintain essential services or support partnerships among eligible facilities, community healthcare organizations, and regional health systems.

WCHC does not suggest that its current structure automatically qualifies for REH designation. Rather, we recommend a formal assessment of REH eligibility and feasibility alongside other sustainable rural healthcare arrangements.

Any REH-related strategy should complement, not replace, investment in women's and maternal health. WCHC's existing prenatal visits with certified nurse-midwives, on-site ultrasound services, licensed clinical social workers and nursing home visits provide a foundation for a coordinated community-based approach. Stronger regional partnerships could connect these services with hospital-based delivery, emergency obstetric care, and specialized maternal and newborn services.

Policy Recommendation: A Coordinated Rural Healthcare Access Initiative

Based on WCHC's experience, we respectfully recommend that Pennsylvania and federal policymakers develop a coordinated rural healthcare initiative focused on sustaining rural healthcare infrastructure and local services, expanding access to women's health and cancer screening, improving rural maternal health access and coordination, workforce recruitment, evaluation of the REH model and rural EMS support.

Conclusion

Wyoming County Healthcare Center was established in response to the loss of local hospital services. Our work demonstrates that rural communities can rebuild healthcare access through collaboration, community investment, and innovative service delivery. However, local commitment alone cannot overcome every barrier associated with workforce shortages, reimbursement, long travel distances, and the loss of hospital-based services.

WCHC is already supporting important components of maternal care through certified nurse-midwife prenatal visits, on-site ultrasound services, and some home visits by nursing staff. We are restoring preventive services, exploring opportunities to bring specialty treatment closer to home, and working with local EMS organizations to strengthen emergency response.

We respectfully urge policymakers to support a coordinated rural healthcare strategy that invests in community-based services, strengthens women's and maternal health, supports EMS, and evaluates the REH model and other sustainable approaches to rural emergency and outpatient care.

Women should be able to access preventive screenings and appropriate cancer treatment without unnecessary travel burdens. Expectant mothers should have timely prenatal and postpartum care, coordinated emergency response, and safe access to hospital-based delivery. Rural communities need sustainable local healthcare resources connected to regional hospitals and specialists.

Investing in rural healthcare is an investment in families, community stability, and the long-term health of Pennsylvania. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on behalf of Wyoming County Healthcare Center and the rural communities we serve.

Respectfully submitted,

Wyoming County Healthcare Center (WCHC)