

What can Medicaid expansion do for rural North Carolina?

Expanding Medicaid has several potential benefits that would positively impact rural North Carolina. In addition to improved access to treatment, expanding Medicaid can have implications for local economies and on the overall wellbeing of North Carolinians living in rural areas.

Rural life can be full of pleasures, but it can also bring challenges. Steady jobs may be in short supply, while health problems are abundant. In fact, [rural Americans are more likely to die prematurely](#) from heart disease, cancer, lung disease, and stroke, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The NIH also reports that the risk of fatal car crashes, suicide, and drug overdoses is also higher in rural communities.

Those trends are colliding with the rising number of rural hospitals closing their doors. North Carolina alone has [lost 11 hospitals](#) with between six and 70 inpatient beds since 2006, according to the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Often the largest employer in their area, community and critical-access hospitals are the cornerstone of the economic, physical, and mental well-being for the nearly [one in five people living in rural America](#), per the United States Census Bureau. Whether delivering a baby or seeking emergency care, people who live far from cities understand the necessity of medical care close to home.

In 2022, North Carolina has the opportunity to expand Medicaid under a federal program that [will fund 90% of the cost](#) under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Medicaid expansion would increase access to health care services across the state, especially [benefiting rural communities](#), per the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

North Carolina is just one of 12 states that has not yet offered Medicaid coverage to people who earn up to 138% of the federal poverty level – or families with annual incomes of \$27,750 to \$38,925, 65% of whom are employed. That’s 600,000 North Carolinians who currently are neither eligible for Medicaid nor can afford commercial insurance or get it through their employer.

Research from the 2019 Budget and Tax Center Report conducted by the North Carolina Justice Center indicates that Medicaid expansion would [improve the physical and economic health of rural communities](#), as well as the hospitals that serve them. In states that have expanded Medicaid, residents are less likely to postpone medical treatment. Getting care when you need it saves lives, catching diseases like cancer and heart disease early and ensuring that people don’t forgo medications due to cost. One study found that Medicaid expansion was associated with nearly [12 fewer deaths per 100,000](#) adults each year in states that have expanded Medicaid. In addition, according to the Commonwealth Fund, most Medicaid enrollees report [higher rates of satisfaction](#) than people with private insurance.

Expanding Medicaid also helps rural hospitals by reducing the amount of uncompensated care they give. In Michigan, the cost of uncompensated care for uninsured people was [cut in half](#) after the state expanded Medicaid, a result seen across the country where states have adopted the program. Relieving struggling rural hospitals of that financial burden can help them maintain local services, from obstetrics to emergency care, along with the jobs that support those services. Yet perhaps the most surprising effect of Medicaid expansion is that the economic benefits go far beyond healthcare.

While small businesses in retail, food service, and agriculture sustain local economies, the high cost of providing health insurance to employees threatens their survival, too. By reducing that barrier to opening and growing a small business, the [North Carolina Rural Center](#) projects that expanding Medicaid would create 83,000 jobs in North Carolina. Those jobs fuel local economies as employed people are more likely to put their paychecks back into their community by hiring neighbors for help, dining at restaurants and shopping at small businesses. That's why the Rural Center calls Medicaid expansion "the economic solution North Carolina needs."

"Expanding Medicaid will, without a doubt, improve the quality of life of rural North Carolinians in the communities that they call home," [Patrick Woodie](#), president of the Rural Center, testified at the General Assembly in March 2022. "Our state's rural people are deserving of a life where they can survive and thrive."

Article was written by NCHA and posted on [WRAL](#) through a sponsorship