

Solutions for Care: Reaching Rural Communities in Behavioral Health Treatment

Mental health affects everyone. However, disparities exist in mental health treatment in rural communities compared to urban areas. Mental health conditions among the populations of rural and urban communities are similar, but rural communities receive care that is both less frequent and less specialized. Research shows this is due to reduced access to providers, lack of trained mental health providers, and underutilization of available services.¹ Though federal and state organizations vary on the definition of a rural area, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health states that nearly one-third of Pennsylvania's population lives in areas that are considered rural.²

Access to Mental Health Services in Rural Pennsylvania, a report published by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, identified challenges to accessing mental health services by rural communities:

- Limited public and private transportation options
- Shortage of medical/health professionals
- Rural hospital closures
- Limited access to affordable, reliable broadband internet
- Stigma, limited privacy, and maintaining confidentiality in rural communities

However, there are innovative strategies to increase accessibility and availability of services, as well as acceptability of conditions to bridge mental health care gaps. Providers can implement these solutions:

- Adopt the Collaborative Care Model, an evidence-based approach integrating physical and behavioral health care
- Use telehealth options, where internet availability allows
- Expand peer support networks
- Promote behavioral health information and resources to people of influence within the community, such as attorneys, clergy, health care providers, and EMT/police



Resources

- American Psychiatric Association
The Collaborative Care Model
<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/professional-interests/integrated-care/learn>
- AgriSafe Network
Online training/education for behavioral health care professionals <https://www.agrisafe.org/>
- Center for Rural Pennsylvania
<https://www.rural.pa.gov/>
- Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH)
<https://www.porh.psu.edu/>
- Pennsylvania Rural Health Association
<https://www.paruralhealth.org/>

¹ Dawn A. Morales et al., "A Call to Action to Address Rural Mental Health Disparities," *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, May 4, 2020, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7681156/>, accessed August 8, 2025.

² "About Rural Health," Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, <https://www.porh.psu.edu/about/about-rural-health/>, accessed August 8, 2025.¹