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NRHA announces 2026 Rural Health Award recipients

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is proud to announce the association's 2026 Rural Health Award recipients. NRHA's Rural Health Awards are given each year to individuals and organizations in the field of rural health who have dedicated their time and talents to improving the health and well-being of others. The winners will be honored during NRHA's 49th Annual Rural Health Conference in San Diego.

"We're extremely proud of this year's winners," says NRHA CEO Alan Morgan. "They have each made tremendous strides to advance rural health care, and we're confident they will continue to help improve the lives of rural Americans."

Wamego Health Center is this year's Outstanding Rural Health Organization. Founded in 1916 by a father-son physician duo, this critical access hospital has remained a trusted community anchor for over a century. Through a unique partnership between the City of Wamego, Kan., and Ascension Via Christi, the hospital has grown from its humble roots into a thriving center for clinical care. By combining local governance with the resources of a leading health system, Wamego Health Center continues to provide exceptional, compassionate care for everyone in Wamego and Pottawatomie County.

The Plumas Model is this year's Outstanding Rural Health Program. Founded at Plumas District Hospital in Quincy, Calif., this innovative, community-driven solution restores access to essential maternal health services in one of California's most remote rural regions. Through the development of the Plumas Model, Plumas District Hospital has transformed a crisis of access into a replicable national blueprint for rural health care sustainability.

John Barnas has been awarded the Louis Gorin Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Health Care. As executive director of the Michigan Center for Rural Health, Barnas has worked tirelessly on behalf of Michigan's rural health clinics, federally qualified health centers, and emergency medical services agencies for 36 years. He advocates on behalf of rural health care at the state and federal levels and has provided insight to the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy on programs that have a national impact.

Teresa Tyson, DNP, is NRHA's Rural Health Practitioner of the Year. As president and CEO of St. Mary's Health Wagon in Wise, Va., Tyson has reshaped what is possible in health care delivery for some of America's most geographically isolated and medically underserved

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communities. A nurse practitioner with more than three decades of service, Tyson has devoted her life to improving access, quality, and equity in Central Appalachia.

Darrell Carter, MD, is NRHA's Outstanding Educator Award winner. With a distinguished 54-year career as a family practice physician at Avera Granite Falls in Granite Falls, Minn., he exemplifies extraordinary dedication to rural health care, clinical excellence, and transformative educational leadership. His most impactful contribution is the conceptualization and development of the Comprehensive Advanced Life Support program, which has strengthened emergency care in rural and resource-limited settings around the world.

Brittany Howell, PhD, is NRHA's Outstanding Researcher Award winner. As an associate professor at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC in Roanoke, Va., and faculty member in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Virginia Tech, Howell personifies excellence, innovation, and commitment to advancing rural health through her leadership in the Healthy Brain and Child Development Study – the nation's largest long-term study of its kind.

Parker George is the winner of NRHA's Quinn NRHA Student Award. As a doctor of pharmacy candidate at Ohio Northern University with a minor in public health, George has consistently demonstrated extraordinary initiative and commitment to advancing rural health care delivery, advocacy, and education. This includes key roles in policy-level rural health advocacy, a pharmacy-led initiative for tobacco cessation, and other rural health training programs.

Ruth Lim is the winner of NRHA's Quinn NRHA Student Award. She is currently a fifth-year pharmacy student at Ohio Northern University, having already made a meaningful and measurable impact on medication access and affordability for rural and underserved populations. She consistently identifies gaps in care, develops innovative solutions, and follows through to implementation, essential qualities for addressing the complex challenges of rural health care.

Joni Nelson, PhD, is NRHA's Volunteer of the Year. A former NRHA Rural Health Fellow, Nelson has remained an active member and leader within the association. She currently serves on NRHA's Journal of Rural Health Editorial Board, Government Affairs Committee, and Health Equity Council. She is also a task force member of NRHA's National Rural Oral Health Initiative, where she serves as a subject matter expert. In these roles, she contributes to advancing rural health policy, research, and access to care, and she regularly presents at national conferences and professional events.

Carrie Cochran-McClain, DrPH, is the recipient of this year's President's Award. Selected for the award by NRHA President Carrie Henning-Smith, Cochran-McClain serves as NRHA's chief policy officer. "She's smart, kind, good humored, and tough when she needs to be," Henning-Smith says. "She never wavers from her commitment to improving rural health policy, even when the politics can be tricky. It's clear that she's guided by her Montana roots and her deep care and concern for rural people and places."

Beth O'Connor is the recipient of NRHA's Rosemary McKenzie Legacy Award. As executive director of the Virginia Rural Health Association, O'Connor has made tremendous contributions to champion the needs of underserved populations in Virginia and across the country. She is a vocal advocate for rural health equity, and she provides a platform for marginalized voices

through her Rural Health Voice podcast and publications. O'Connor served as NRHA president in 2022.

The Journal of Rural Health Article of the Year is “Mapping maternity care deserts: Driving distance and health outcomes in North Carolina” by Margaret Sugg, PhD, Shishir Shakya, PhD, Sarah Ulrich, Jennifer Schroeder Tyson, and Jennifer Runkle, PhD. Selection criteria include average downloads per month and evaluation by the JRH Editorial Board regarding methodology and importance.

About NRHA

NRHA is a nonprofit organization working to improve the health and well-being of rural Americans and provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research. NRHA's membership consists of a wide variety of individuals and organizations that share the common bond of an interest in rural health.