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Practicum Site: Tennessee Health Care Campaign

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Centering Community Voices to Identify Protective Strategies for Rural Hospitals



Introduction: Rural hospitals are closing at rapid rates across the US, causing a decline in access to health care for rural populations. Tennessee has the highest rate of rural hospital closures per capita; however, some rural hospitals have managed to survive.

Methods: To better understand protective strategies against rural hospitals closures, thirteen interviews were conducted with hospital stakeholders in five racially and geographically diverse rural communities in Tennessee. Interviewees shared perspectives on strategies that have supported their hospital's continued operations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using rapid qualitative analysis.

Results: Several themes evolved around protective strategies for rural hospitals. Participants identified that some government policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic were beneficial, including the expansion of telemedicine. Rural hospitals benefited from being associated with a larger hospital system—if that system had aligning values and priorities. They used this association as a financial safety net and to provide additional specialty services that would otherwise be inaccessible for their communities. Interviewees also identified strong leadership and recruiting a dedicated staff as key to rural hospital survival. Finally, interview participants underscored the importance of engaging the local community to build rapport, identify local health priorities, market services, and recruit local providers. In addition to the protective strategies, interviewees identified areas where federal and state supports need to be strengthened to ensure hospital sustainability.

Conclusions: Amplifying the concerns and successful strategies of rural hospital stakeholders may provide solutions to address the health crisis affecting rural communities throughout the US and advance rural health equity.