



Rural Recruiting in 2022: The Official Guide

10 Recruiting and Retention Strategies
for Rural Healthcare Leaders



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The State of Rural Recruiting in 2022

Access to high quality healthcare services for rural Americans continues to be dependent upon an adequate supply of rural physicians; despite efforts to meet shortages in these markets, there continues to be a glaring lack of physician coverage for rural areas.

In sparsely populated rural regions, often geographically isolated with fewer than 500 people per square mile, more than 50% of the population lives in an area where the ratio of primary care doctors to patients often exceeds 1:3,500, when the national average is around 1:2,300.¹ Further highlighting this shortage, while about 20% of the U.S. population lives in rural regions, rural physicians comprise only about 10% of the total number of working physicians in the country.²

Sparse population, extreme poverty, high proportions of racial and ethnic minorities, and lack of physical and cultural amenities characterize rural communities most likely to suffer from a shortage of physicians.³ Residents in these areas are likely to be older, poorer, and in worse health than city dwellers, with a lower life expectancy, and they are more likely to be uninsured.⁴ Faced with a variety of socioeconomic obstacles, this already vulnerable population is hit the hardest; limited access to physicians reduces access to preventive care and exacerbates unmet health needs, leading to costly hospitalizations and poor health status.

While the public health implications due to a lack of rural physician coverage are certainly significant, the financial consequences are just as daunting, and have never been higher. In fact, since 2010, a whopping 132 rural hospitals have shuttered, with 17 rural hospitals closing in the first three quarters of 2020 alone.⁵

¹<https://www.annfammed.org/content/10/5/396.full>

²<https://www.dmagazine.com/healthcare-business/2019/08/rural-physician-recruiting-what-administrators-are-missing/>

³Rosenblatt RA: The health of rural people and the communities and environments in which they live. In Geyman JP, Norris TE, Hart LG, eds: Textbook of rural medicine. New York, McGraw-Hill, 2001:3-4.

⁴<http://worh.org/sites/default/files/2014-rural-urban-chartbook.pdf>. opens in new tab

⁵<https://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/programs-projects/rural-health/rural-hospital-closures/>

COVID-19 has made matters worse, stopping hospitals from performing lucrative [elective outpatient procedures](#) that allow them to stay in business, with nearly one out of every four open hospitals showing early warning signs that indicate they are also at risk of closing in the near future.⁶

As rural communities struggle continuously to recruit and retain physicians, this physician shortage is only projected to get worse - the New England Journal of Medicine predicts that by 2030, the number of practicing rural physicians will fall by nearly 25%.⁷

In "Rural Recruiting in 2022", we address some of the main obstacles faced by rural hospitals in their hiring strategies, cover the post-COVID-19 recruitment landscape, and equip recruiters, physician leaders and executives of rural hospitals with strategies and best practices to develop an effective and scalable recruitment strategy for 2022.

⁶https://www.ivantageindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CCRH_Vulnerability-Research_FINAL-02.14.20.pdf
⁷<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1900808>



Who Becomes a Rural Physician?

Two of the strongest predictors that a physician will choose rural practice are specialty and background: Family physicians are more likely than those with less general training to go into rural practice, and physicians with rural backgrounds are more likely to locate in rural areas than those with urban backgrounds.

Other factors associated with increased likelihood that a physician will choose rural practice include:

- **Training at a medical school with a mission to train rural physicians.** Such schools are more likely to graduate students who go into rural practice than schools that do not have a rural mission.⁸ (There is, however, evidence that physicians who go into rural practice after having been trained at a school that does not have a rural mission tend to stay in rural practice longer.⁹)
- **Osteopathic training.** Osteopathic medical schools have a long tradition in rural communities, and physicians who are trained in osteopathic medicine are more likely to select family practice as a specialty than those trained in allopathic medicine (46% vs. 11%) and to practice in rural areas (18.1% vs 11.5%).
- **Training that includes rural components.** Rural rotations and other rural curricular elements in medical school and residency training are critical to keeping students who have an interest in rural practice from looking elsewhere.¹⁰

While those factors are strong predictors of a physician engaging in a rural-based profession, by no means does coming from those training backgrounds equate to a “sure thing.” There are a variety of factors that prevent many physicians from entering rural medicine, although most of them can be addressed properly if a hospital is willing to put in the necessary effort to do so.

⁸ Geyman JP, Hart LG, Norris TE, Coombs JB, Lishner DM: Educating Generalist Physicians for Rural Practice: How are we doing? *Journal Rural Health* 2000; 16: 56-78.

⁹ Rabinowitz HK, Diamond JJ, Hojat M, et al: Demographic, educational, and economic factors related to recruitment and retention of physicians in rural Pennsylvania. *J Rural Health* 1999; 15(2):212-218.

¹⁰ Pathman DE: Medical education and physician's career choices: are we taking credit beyond our due? *Acad Med* 1996;71(9):963-968.

What Holds Physicians Back from Rural Practices?

The overwhelming majority of physicians still prefer to live in urban areas. In fact, only 1% of doctors in their final year of medical school say they want to live in communities under 10,000; only 2% want to live in towns of 25,000 or fewer.¹¹

Here are some of the common reasons physicians stay away from rural opportunities¹²:



FAMILY OBLIGATION

Physicians want to live and work in an area that is comfortable for their entire family. However, in smaller towns there are naturally less work options, and many physicians are married to professionals who are not able to align their career to the location of the potential role.



LIFESTYLE

The lifestyle for the physician and their family is also a large consideration and may be a reason for turning down a rural offer. Personal desires outside of work like the proximity to restaurants, shops, gym facilities, and other essentials that come with an urban lifestyle may be non-negotiable for certain families.



LOCATION TIES

It's not uncommon for physicians to want to end up near where they were born, or where they currently have family. Since rural areas are not densely populated, it's less common for physicians to have ties to such areas.

¹¹ <https://www.merrithawkins.com/trends-and-insights/article/surveys/2019-Survey-of-Final-Year-Medical-Residents/>

¹² Recruiting Rural Clinicians: The Doximity E-Book



RESIDENCY PROGRAMS

Most medical residency programs are in urban areas and medical providers get accustomed to enjoying the benefits of urban life. So at the end of the program, moving from a fast-paced city life to a rural community can seem like a drastic change.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Urban areas tend to have larger hospitals with more patients, researchers, and funding. Some physicians might look at this abundance as a chance to grow in their profession with more state of the art tech, career support, and mentorship in their day-to-day work.



LACK OF SUPPORT

Since rural clinics lack the specialists that large hospitals often have, physicians are often asked to treat a diverse set of illnesses among their patients, without extensive training in many of those areas.

Though rural recruitment is certainly without its dearth of challenges, recent macro-level developments have given rural recruiters a much needed jolt of momentum in 2021 and the years to follow. In the next section, we example some of the industry-wide implications that unexpectedly arose from the coronavirus pandemic, and why they could drive a major shift in how physicians think about practicing rural medicine.

COVID-19 Recruiting Tailwinds

While COVID-19 has certainly put financial strain on rural hospitals, in many ways the pandemic has also leveled the playing field for rural recruiters. The onset of the pandemic fundamentally altered the urban living experience, serving as the catalyst for many working professionals, physicians included, to rethink their priorities and become more open to embracing a more rural lifestyle. In fact, a recent Gallup poll found that nearly half of all U.S. adults said they prefer to live in a small town or rural area in 2020, up from 39% in 2018.¹³

These recent trends bode well for the sector. According to the Association for Advancing Physician and Provider Recruitment (AAPPR), there have traditionally been three main factors that hinder a rural hospital's ability to recruit, which may no longer be as difficult to overcome.

“If you asked recruitment professionals in rural areas a year ago about the most significant challenges they faced, the first would likely have been location, the second sourcing, and the third perhaps competition from larger, urban health systems. A year ago, most would have agreed that these challenges were, in many cases, difficult to overcome.”¹⁴

Rural hospitals can provide better work/life balance, offering a lower volume of patients, while the cost of living in those markets is significantly lower than that in metropolitan areas. As “remote work” becomes more prevalent and

¹³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/328268/country-living-enjoys-renewed-appeal.aspx>

¹⁴ <https://aappr.org/2020/11/18/the-changing-landscape-of-rural-recruitment/>



culturally acceptable, “location” will slowly become less of a deal breaker moving forward.

Another trend that has emerged from the pandemic is the switch to virtual interviewing, which not only reduces the time-to-fill, but also results in significant cost savings, eliminating the need to cover travel and room & board for the interview candidate. With the interview costs ranging up to \$30,000 per interviewee¹⁵, the financial upside of the new digital approach to interviewing is quite substantial. Furthermore, it’s also much easier to secure an interview with a candidate; since there’s no investment on their part to fly out for an interview earlier in the process, employers can get the candidate on a hook much sooner than it was once possible.

Finally, the rapid adoption of telemedicine that arose due to COVID-19 has allowed rural hospitals to increase their access to specialists from larger hospitals, helping physicians working in these smaller markets better manage complex and acute patients. Since there are fewer physicians per capita in these regions, they’re often required to take on unfamiliar cases often not aligned with their training. For many physicians, especially primary care physicians who were once hesitant to take a rural opportunity because they felt they couldn’t adequately provide proper care, telemedicine has significantly helped ease their worries.

¹⁵ <https://www.nejmcareercenter.org/minisites/rpt/the-high-costs-of-hiring-the-wrong-physician/>



5 Tips on Sourcing Candidates for Rural Positions

Despite factors that might steer certain candidates away from rural practices, there are a number of strengths that rural practices offer as well. Remember, physicians who are interested in rural work are often a different set of candidates than those interested in urban positions – your recruiting methods and resources should be tailored to incentivize your candidate as an individual. Keep the following strategies in mind when searching for candidates to fill your rural position¹⁶:

1

Lifestyle Preferences

Look for candidates who seem to enjoy an outdoor or active life-style. Does that person like fishing, hiking, biking, or other outdoor activities? Many rural areas are ideal places for all of these sports and you can leverage it to help sell the location.

2

Recruit From Rural Training Programs

The very act of enrolling in a program in a rural area shows that a young doctor is

¹⁶ Recruiting Rural Clinicians: The Doximity E-Book

interested in the small town lifestyle. Additionally, some of these programs even specialize in training new doctors to be prepared for the nuances for rural medicine – meaning that doctors in these programs are likely seeking out work in rural areas upon graduation. Some of these programs might include: Des Moines University Rural Medicine Educational Program (RMEP), Dartmouth Geisel Rural Health Scholars, East Tennessee State Rural Primary Care Track, and Auburn University Rural Medicine Program.

3

Always Be Networking

You've heard this before and we'll say it again – recruiting is all about who you know. You never know where you might make a connection that could lead to a job placement down the road, so make sure you are always meeting new people, and getting the word out about what you do even in the non-medical community. For example, maybe someone in the area has a friend currently in residency and you can connect with that person. You never know where you could meet a candidate, so be sure to bring your A-game everywhere you go.

4

Look for Candidates That Have Ties to Rural Areas

Physicians who have a rural background are much more likely to be interested in a rural position. A NCBI study found that as many as 70% rural providers had a rural background already.

5

Start Early

Seek out eager and aspiring medical students that are from a rural community and offer incentives such as paying their medical tuition in return for commitment to serving there after graduation.

Compensation Isn't Everything

While compensation is typically a critical factor when recruiting and retaining physicians to rural markets, it's important to take into account that most rural facilities don't have excess money to throw at candidates given the mounting financial pressures stemming from COVID-19. Amitabh Chandra, Director of health policy research at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, says:

“The amount of money that you'd need to try and make up for what these doctors could make in the city would be cost-prohibitive,” Chandra explains. “We aren't talking about the state or other agencies adding 5 percent in extra wages but more like 40%, 50%, maybe even 60% to make up the difference. Instead of focusing on salary, we need to think more creatively about how we can make rural America more attractive to doctors and their families.”¹⁷

The data also shows the emphasis in compensation may be overstated. In fact, a recent survey found that while 28% of physicians rank compensation as the top priority when assessing rural work opportunities, 40% of hospital administrators think it's the most important factor.¹⁸ Rather, the study finds that community culture remains the main focus for many physicians looking to work in rural markets.



There are a lot of positives that come with working in a rural community, and for many of our candidates, those value propositions can be much more compelling than solely compensation. We find that many of our physicians that choose to work in these areas find more meaning in their work, becoming an integral part of their communities. There's also perks like a slower pace of life and easy access to outdoor recreational activities – our hospital clients continue to be surprised about just how alluring these factors can be.

- Dr. John Mehall, Chief Medical Officer, Curative Talent



¹⁷ <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/view/dealing-shortage-rural-physicians>

¹⁸ <https://www.dmagazine.com/healthcare-business/2019/08/rural-physician-recruiting-what-administrators-are-missing/>

10 Rural Recruiting and Retention Strategies

1

Empower Physicians By Giving Them Autonomy

It's no secret that many physicians dislike the time-consuming bureaucracy that can come with working at a larger urban hospital or health system. By developing a participatory culture (and communicating you have one!) and giving physicians an opportunity to shape policy and also practice clinical autonomy, you'll be able to offer a compelling benefit for those who value independence – something most competing hospital employers won't be able to!

2

Get the Family Involved

It's important to go the extra mile and spend significant effort involving the physician's family in the recruitment process. Provide support to help the spouse research employers, as 38% of physicians cite a lack of spousal career opportunities as a reason preventing them from entering rural medicine.¹⁹ Look into the school district to identify quality schools, connect them with local real estate agents to help them understand housing, and introduce them to the other physicians' families. Getting the family plugged into the community will give them a sense of the area and will also help them feel engaged, especially critical for maintaining retention later on.

3

Retain Locums Tenens Physicians

Locums physicians provide continuity of care when rural hospitals experience permanent physician turnover, and can bring speciality-specific expertise should the need arise. Bringing on locums physicians also provides more bandwidth, allowing rural hospitals to give their permanent physician hires

¹⁹ Association Between Having a Highly Educated Spouse and Physician Practice in Rural Underserved Areas. JAMA. March 1, 2016

added schedule flexibility, which is typically an important benefit for many physicians. And who knows, maybe the locums physician you bring on will end up loving the job so much that you'll be able to convert them to a permanent hire!

4 **Actively Recruit J-1 Visa Physicians**

International physicians can be just as skilled as their domestic counterparts, and oftentimes are trained in the United States as well. Foreign physicians on J-1 Visa waivers who commit to practicing in a health professional shortage area (HPSA) or medically under-served area (MUA) for a three-year period of time are allowed to remain in the United States for three years after expiration of their visas, a very compelling benefit. Immigrants account for 30% of doctors and surgeons in the U.S., so this incentive comes into play more often than one might think.

5 **Go the Extra Mile By Including Leadership in Recruiting**

It's important to show a prospect how much they're wanted, and nothing communicates that more than getting a hospital's leadership and administration involved in the recruitment process. Whether it's including the administration in a dinner during an on-site visit or having hospital executives take the time to share their vision for how the prospect would benefit the organization and local community, involving the leadership during key parts of the recruitment process will add a personal touch and make a candidate feel special.

6 **Offer Loan Forgiveness Programs**

Rural facilities often offer physicians with a loan forgiveness or a tuition reimbursement plan on top of a salary as an additional incentive to show how much they value the provider. Unfortunately, for recruiters, urban hospitals are catching on to the strong appeal of this offer and beginning to offer such incentives as well. Remember, your organization can also lean into programs like that of the National Health Service, which will pay off a portion of a physician's student loan debt.

7 Sell the Location & Quality of Life

While rural areas might not have the hussle and bussle of city life that some people seek out, it does offer other perks and you should be sure to highlight these when selling the role. For example, rural areas often include very safe neighborhoods, and are great for a family if the physician has one or is thinking about having one. There's never any traffic, and the overall pace of life is slower than the city, making for a relaxing and enjoyable lifestyle for any age or stage of life.

8 Emphasize the Mission

As we mentioned earlier, not all physicians are motivated by money. Many physicians choose to go down the medical career path for the very reason of helping people. There are a lot of popular programs like Doctors without Borders where young physicians will provide care in a less developed part of the world. Rather than having to go across the world for this opportunity, you can market your rural position as an opportunity to increase healthy equity and help those in the greatest need within your own country.

9 Seek Referrals by Developing a Referral Program

One of the most effective ways to identify new physician talent is through the recommendations of physicians and other medical professionals within your organization. If you have the funding for a referral program, make sure you're always promoting the program and it's finder's fee bonuses to your staff. Additionally, develop active relationships with the local medical schools and training programs, as candidates from these institutions already have a sense of the area, and are statistically more likely to practice medicine in a rural environment.

10 Promote the Learning Opportunity

Physicians in rural communities oftentimes have to treat patients that would typically be assigned to other specialists in larger urban markets. For many physicians who relish the opportunity to learn and grow their clinical expertise, there is no better training ground than working in a rural hospital, where physicians will be exposed to a variety of conditions and patients.



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