Rural healthcare

It doesn't always spring to mind when I think of my morning toast or the energy that heats my toaster. But maybe it should.

My comfortable life depends to no small extent on the food and fuel produced by rural residents. For these reasons alone, I have an investment in their health and care. We all do. And that's just the beginning.

Remember 2020, when urbanites fled town to avoid COVID-19? In another pandemic, or in a big terrorist attack on U.S. cities (God forbid, but…), rural America could quickly become our first line of defense. I would go so far as to call rural healthcare a national security issue.

Don't take me for an expert; I'm not—but I've worked with more than 50 health systems and hospitals (big and small) around the U.S., so I know just enough to be confident that rural hospital closures, physician shortages, transportation barriers, and poverty are all bad news. I'm also pretty sure that local solutions alone are not enough.

I myself live in the country, but it's the Sonoma Valley, home to multi-millionaires and billionaires who have helped make little Sonoma Valley Hospital the envy of less prosperous regions. Kudos to the hospital staff and volunteers for building such strong relationships with our most philanthropically capable and generous neighbors. Heroes all.

Alas, most rural communities have no such potential. They just don't.

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Fortunately, a lot of smart people around the country are working toward solutions. A couple weeks ago, the American Hospital Association (AHA) held its rural health leadership conference in San Antonio to share “actionable strategies and resources.” The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) has its own event coming up on May 20-23 in Atlanta.

Meanwhile, in just the past few weeks, Congress has seen a whole slew of new bills aimed at addressing the challenges to rural health. These bills cover a lot of ground. I hope at least some of them make it past the chainsaw. I also hope our nation’s philanthropists will look beyond their own communities to help. This is going to take more than any one village.

See comments below for links.

Image: Ralph Wheelock’s Farm, c. 1822, by Francis Alexander. National Gallery of Art, gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. Public Domain. Augmented with modern hospital sign created by Gail Terry Grimes.)
https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.50302.html

To advocate for rural healthcare, here’s a list of bills in Congress as of spring 2025:
https://www.votervoice.net/mobile/NRHA/Bills

For more on the importance of rural healthcare:
https://ruralhospitals.chqpr.org/Importance.html

For stats on the disparities between rural and urban health: https://www.ruralhealth.us/about-us/about-rural-health-care

For more from the AHA: https://www.aha.org/advocacy/rural-health-services

For more on the upcoming NRHA conference:
https://www.ruralhealth.us/events/schedule/annual-rural-health-conference

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