What’s New

**AHRQ Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report.** The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) issued its annual report, mandated by Congress, providing a comprehensive overview of the quality of health care received in the U.S. and disparities experienced by different racial and socioeconomic groups. In addition to trends and changes in disparities over time, the report looks at initiatives across the country demonstrating quality improvement for vulnerable populations. For example, **Project ECHO** (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is a telehealth-based program jointly funded by federal and state government agencies and private partners that provides medical education and access to specialty treatment in rural and underserved areas.

**Funding Opportunities**

**HRSA Forecasts $2 Billion for FY2018.** The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the HHS agency that houses FORHP, has forecasted around 40 funding opportunities for Fiscal Year 2018. This includes approximately 765 expected awards and nearly $2 billion in potential funding to cities, states, and local community-based organizations. HRSA is the primary agency for improving health care to people who are geographically isolated and medically vulnerable, with bureaus that focus on primary care through health centers, the health workforce, HIV/AIDS, organ donation and transplantation, maternal and child health, and rural health. To help evaluate grant applications submitted by rural organizations, our office is always looking for qualified reviewers with expertise in social, cultural and health care issues of rural populations. Grant application review is a process that most often takes three days or less over internet and phone and non-federal grant reviewers receive an honorarium.

**Students to Service (S2S) Loan Repayment Program – October 19.** The National Health Service Corp (NHSC) is now accepting applications for their 2018 Students to Service Loan Repayment Program. The S2S awards up to $120,000 to medical and dental students in their final year of school in return for a commitment to provide primary care services full-time for at least 3 years at an approved NHSC site in an underserved rural, tribal or urban area. One in every four NHSC clinicians serves in a rural community. For more information, review the [2018 Application and Program Guidance](#) and attend an informational webinar for applicants on Thursday, September 7 at 7:00 pm ET.

**Rural Health Research**

**Regional Differences in Rural and Urban Morality Trends** – The North Carolina Rural Health Research and Policy Analysis Center examined data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and found that the difference in rural mortality is increasing nationwide, with the highest urban-rural differences in the southeastern part of the country.
Policy Updates

Comments Requested: USDA Summer Meals Program – October 23. Since July 2016, the Summer Food Service Program has been providing healthy meals to nearly 4 million children in lower-income communities while school is out, with model programs around the country. However, these programs serve a small portion of the kids receiving free or reduced price meals during the school year, particularly in rural areas where families live farther from school. This USDA study plans to better understand the facilitators and barriers to the summer meals program, the benefits and challenges for program sponsors, and factors influencing children’s participation. Commenters can suggest ways USDA can identify strategies to increase participation in rural summer meals programs.

Resources, Learning Events and Technical Assistance

Wellness for Farm and Ranch Women – Thursday, August 31 at 8:30 pm ET. The AgriSafe Network hosts this free thirty-minute webinar with simple steps to wellbeing for farm and ranch women. AgriSafe Clinical Director Carolyn Sheridan will hold additional sessions for women on Tuesday, September 5 and Thursday, September 7.

Input Needed: CMS Behavioral Health Payment Model – September 8, from 10:00 am – 5:00 pm. The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation within CMS will hold a public meeting to discuss ideas for a behavioral health payment model to improve care and access to health services for beneficiaries. Ideas shared will assist CMS consideration of a model to address behavioral health payment care and delivery. There is a significant need for mental and behavioral health services in rural areas, including among rural children who are more likely to experience mental, behavioral, and developmental challenges than kids in urban and suburban areas, as reported by the CDC. Comments and ideas may also be submitted by mail or email. These comments and registration to attend in person must be submitted no later than August 25th.

Overview of MIPS for Small, Rural, and Underserved Practices – Friday, September 8 from 1:00 - 2:30 pm ET. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the National Rural Health Association will host a webinar on the Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS) track of the Quality Payment Program. Topics that will be covered include: overview of the Quality Payment Program, overview of MIPS, flexibilities and resources for small practices, overview of Virtual Groups, and resources offered by technical assistance organizations. Rural providers including Critical Access Hospital clinicians interested in learning more about the participation requirements of MIPS and options for voluntary reporting, particularly for Rural Health Clinics and Federally Qualified Health Centers, should plan to participate.

Save the Date and Register for 3RNet’s Annual Conference – September 12-14. The National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network (3RNet) will hold its annual conference in Scottsdale, AZ. 3RNet members represent over 5,000 communities across the U.S. that actively recruit physicians and other health care providers to work
in rural areas. Attendees will benefit from workshops and a speaker line up sharing insight on rural recruitment challenges, resources and tools.

**Training Series for Health Care Providers on Prescribing Opioids** – Ongoing. The CDC has an eight-part online training series to help health care providers apply CDC’s prescribing recommendations in their clinical settings through interactive patient scenarios, videos, knowledge checks, tips, and resources. Rural practitioners report their concern about the potential for opioid abuse, but at the same time report insufficient training in prescribing opioids. For this reason, the CDC created the *2016 Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain* and associated training. Topics in the series include communicating with patients, treating chronic pain without opioids, and prescribing decision making.

**Approaching Deadlines**

**State Systems Development for Maternal and Child Health** – September 5

**Rural Promise Neighborhoods** – September 5

**Housing farm laborers** – September 11

**Comments Requested: Policy for Hospital Outpatient Services** – September 11

**Comments Requested: Physician Fee Schedule/Diabetes Prevention** – September 11

**Behavioral Health Integration for Native Americans** – September 16

**Comments Requested: 340B Drug Pricing Program** – September 20

**USDA Loans for Rural Broadband** – September 30

**Research to Reduce Tobacco Use** – October 11

**Comments Requested: CMS Cancels Cardiac Bundles** – October 16

**Comments Requested: CMS Revises Joint Replacement Bundles** – October 16

**Students to Service (S2S) Loan Repayment Program** – October 19

**Comments Requested: USDA Summer Meals Program** – October 23

**Address Suicide Research Gaps in Rural Communities** - November 2

**Drinking Water and Waste Disposal for Rural and Native Alaskan Villages** – Ongoing

**HIT Strategies for Patient-Reported Outcome Measures** – Ongoing

**HIT to Improve Health Care Quality and Outcomes** – Ongoing
Summer Food Service Program – Ongoing

The Announcements from the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy are distributed weekly. To be added to the distribution list, please send an e-mail with subject line "Subscribe" to Michelle Daniels at MDaniles@hrsa.gov.