

BUILDING A HEALTHIER RURAL ILLINOIS

Understanding and Addressing the Challenges of COVID-19

THE CHALLENGE:

Rural Illinois is in need of sustained, sweeping change to improve the social, economic and environmental factors that determine health outcomes. Illinois' rural communities suffer from **The Five D's**:

- **DISADVANTAGE:** Rural communities started the pandemic at a disadvantage in health and economic outcomes and available resources compared to metropolitan regions.
- **DESERTS:** Rural communities are deserts of essential services, from data to health care to grocery stores and more.
- **DISCONNECTION:** Existing rural services are fragmented and siloed. Additionally, the digital divide in rural communities creates barriers not only to high speed broadband but also to digital literacy.
- **DISPARITY:** Similar health, economic and social disparities exist in both rural and underserved urban areas.
- **DEVELOPMENT:** Sustained social and economic development is needed in rural areas.



THE RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Improve Digital Literacy and Expand Telehealth Access
- Increase Mental Health Services
- Create Statewide Taskforces to Study and Act on Rural Health Improvement
- Construct Regional Offices of Health to Coordinate Services, Reduce Redundancies and Maximize Impact
- Ensure Collaborations of Health, Education, and Social Services to Create Systems of Care
- Invest in Rural Leadership Retention and Development
- Prioritize and Sustain Rural Development Rooted in Regional Connection and Local Assets
- Commit to Equity

The Rural Health Summit partner organizations will be releasing a series of policy recommendations through January 2022. View the schedule, read the recommendations and register for topic-specific webinars at <http://www.siumed.edu/popscipolicy/rural-health-summit.html>.

TAKE ACTION:

We invite policymakers and corporate and community leaders from across the state to come together to work for a healthier Illinois. Success will involve creation of public-private partnerships, measures to effectively show progress and innovation to bring lasting health improvement.

ABOUT THIS REPORT:

[Southern Illinois University \(SIU\) School of Medicine Department of Population Science and Policy](#), [SIU Paul Simon Public Policy Institute](#), [SIU Medicine Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development](#) and [University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health](#) convened rural stakeholders for 11 discussion forums to better understand and address the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Illinois. Using the [2019 report on the most pressing issues facing rural Illinois](#) as a foundation, 80 leaders from 55 organizations in diverse fields such as public health, health care, academia, industry and government met virtually to discuss how the pandemic is creating new challenges and fostering new innovation. Forums focused on rural **economic development, health workforce, children's growth and development, nutrition and fitness, mental health, opioids, public health systems, caring for an aging population and healthy housing**.