

Office of Rural Health: New effort for rural communities

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A new national effort to assist rural communities with health care is now in place.

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been established, according to Oregon's U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley and Mississippi U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith.

The ORH will enhance the CDC's rural health portfolio, coordinate rural health efforts across CDC programs, and develop a strategic plan for rural health at the agency, according to a release from Merkley's office.

The new office will accelerate innovation, making scientific and communication resources tailored to current rural public health needs, build and improve public health functions, and provide public health infrastructure leadership.

After both Merkley and Hyde-Smith advocated for the formation of the office, language establishing the ORH was included in the Fiscal Year 2023 omnibus signed into law by President Biden last year.

“Folks living in rural communities deserve national policy makers’ attention to the problems they face,” Merkley said. “I’ve been pushing for action on this with my bicameral Rural Health Equity Act, and I’m thrilled that we’re taking the next step toward making this crucial health resource a reality for our rural communities. Too often, we rely on one-size-fits-all solutions for our national health challenges, instead of specific plans to address the unique challenges to providing and accessing health care in rural communities. With the establishment of this center, I’m thinking of my House partner on the Rural Health Equity Act, Congressman Donald McEachin, who passed away last fall. This is yet another piece of his long and lasting legacy of making sure that every member of our communities can access the resources they need.”

“The COVID pandemic highlighted the health care disparities in rural areas, especially, in rural states like Mississippi where the public-health response to the virus was less effective than in more urbanized regions,” Hyde-Smith said. “Senator Merkley and I fought to establish a CDC Office of Rural Health because people living and working in rural areas need to know their health care needs are not secondary to more urban areas. This new office should be empowered to look across CDC programs to ensure the agency’s work properly addresses the needs of the 57 million Americans who live in rural communities.”

In November 2021, Senator Merkley introduced—alongside the late Congressman A. Donald McEachin (D-VA-04)—his bicameral Rural Health Equity Act, a piece of legislation to establish a new Office of Rural Health within the CDC and to help address the unique health care challenges and inequities faced by rural communities across America. This vision has now been fulfilled by the provisions included in the omnibus legislation.

To strengthen their previous calls to action, Merkley then teamed up with Hyde-Smith and they led 11 lawmakers in a bipartisan, bicameral letter to the Appropriations Committee chairs urging for the creation of the ORH to address the health care service needs of rural communities and to work with public health practitioners in these areas.

Their letter called for a designation of the ORH to identify and improve health disparities and challenges faced by rural communities. They also urged using the office to serve as the primary contact within the CDC on matters pertaining to rural health, and to coordinate within the agency to develop and promulgate policies, programs, and initiatives to improve health care and services for rural populations.

National reaction

“The National Rural Health Association applauds Congress for establishing an Office of Rural Health within the Centers for Disease and Control in the FY 2023 appropriations bill,” CEO of the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) Alan Morgan said. “We appreciate the leadership and dedication exhibited by Senator Merkley, Senator Hyde-Smith and Representatives McEachin and Guest in getting this important provision across the finish line. Given the devastating impact of COVID-19 on rural areas and the CDC’s extensive role in managing the health and disparities of distinct populations, it is essential that rural America’s voice is

well-represented within the agency moving forward. NRHA looks forward to working closely with the new office to address the unique health challenges affecting rural Americans."

Oregon reaction

"The establishment of the ORH in the CDC is moving us in the right direction," said Robert Duehmig, Interim Director of the Oregon Office of Rural Health. "This office will assist the CDC in addressing the disparities and challenges facing rural Oregonians and rural Americans. It will give the CDC the ability to play a pivotal role in supporting our rural public health agencies in responding to and preparing for public health emergencies while identifying and improving health disparities in rural communities. This is a win for rural Oregon."