

Joshua Wynne:

Good morning everyone. That's a good North Dakota response, thank you. It's a pleasure to join all of you and welcome you on National Rural Health Day. My name Joshua Wynne and I am Vice President for Health Affairs at the University of North Dakota and proud to be Dean of the School of Medicine and Health Sciences. I'm delighted that all of you could join us today for an important announcement from the Rural Assistance Center.

It's an honor to be joined by several distinguished guests, including Tom Morris of the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, and Teryl Eisinger of the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health. I'd also like to welcome Tom Klobucar of the Veterans Administration Office of Rural Health. We are proud at the School to be home to the Rural Assistance Center for the last 13 years, and we're pleased to work closely with the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy to provide the services of the Rural Assistance Center, an initiative that has allowed UND to indeed serve the entire nation.

The UND School of Medicine and Health Sciences has a long-standing commitment to improving the health of rural people. The Center for Rural Health in particular is a national leader in rural healthcare. I'd like to emphasize that the School really tries to deliver on its mission to the health in rural communities. The Association of American Medical Colleges has ranked the UND School of Medicine and Health Sciences in the 95th percentile as far as the percentage of our graduates who actually practice in rural areas. We do this by a selection process, by an exposure process, and I think importantly, by the institutional commitment to serving the needs of rural North Dakota.

The RAC has been an important partner in that effort. It's located within the Center for Rural Health, and it takes advantage of the Center's 35-year experience and its numerous programs, including the North Dakota State Office of Rural Health, the Rural Health Reform Policy Research Center, and several national programs on Native American aging issues. It's now a pleasure to turn the program over to Kristine Sande, Program Director of the Rural Assistance Center, for today's special announcement.

Kristine Sande:

Thank you, Dean Wynne. Thank you to everyone who's joining us today, both live in person, as well as via webcast. I think it's very fitting to make this announcement on National Rural Health Day, which is a very special day for all of those of us who work in rural health.

On December 1st, the Rural Assistance Center will become the Rural Health Information Hub, or RHIfhub for short. For 13 years, the Rural Assistance Center has been here to help level the playing field for rural health, and we look forward to continuing to serve rural America under this new name for many years to come. As you know, those involved in rural healthcare must wear many hats within their organizations and their communities. They often don't have access to specialized resources for activities such as grant writing and searching for information. The RHIfhub is here to help, with information and resources targeted to rural health.

Issues faced by rural facilities and communities are often different from those faced by their urban counterparts. Just a few examples of that are higher rates of poverty, health disparities in elderly population, as well as under-resourced infrastructure, lower volumes of patients, long distances to needed services, lack of public transportation, and shortages of healthcare professionals. On top of that, rural specific information, such as rural definitions used in federal programs, and regulations for rural specific facilities like Critical Access Hospitals, may be difficult to locate and decipher.

The RHHub staff are well versed in the concerns that rural communities face, as well as the strengths of rural communities and the many national resources that support rural healthcare and population health. Our staff works to fill information gaps and provide easy access to resources and opportunities. We build connections that save users countless hours and ensure rural providers and facilities don't miss important information and opportunities.

The Rural Assistance Center has grown significantly since it was first launched in 2002 as an online library of rural health resources. Over the last several years, we've been working collaboratively with our funder, the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, and our partner organizations to create new tools and resources for our website. One example of this is the Community Health Gateway, a section of the site that is building and sharing an evidence base for what works for rural health. This repository of rural health models and innovations, as well as evidence-based tool kits, is increasingly important as communities look seriously at interventions that improve population health, address social determinants of health, tackle rural healthcare workforce issues, and reimagine how services are delivered.

We've also been working collaboratively with the Federal Office to create and grow the Testing New Approaches section of the website. This section features demonstration programs that test rural-specific approaches aimed at improving services, reimbursement, access, and quality of healthcare. We've also retooled our collection of topic guides, which serve as overviews of rural health topics and assist users in finding resources such as research, funding opportunities, maps, and organizations related to each topic. In recent years, we've added topic guides on healthcare access in rural communities, care coordination, and social determinants of health for rural people. Additionally, we've added how-to guides on finding statistics and data, as well as conducting rural health research, needs assessments, and program evaluation.

As our center has evolved, we've outgrown the Rural Assistance Center name, and we need a name that better reflects what we do and the services we offer. The Rural Health Information Hub will more effectively convey that we are that central point for rural health resources and opportunities, and for sharing successful models and lessons learned by rural communities and healthcare providers. We believe that the new name will help people who could benefit from our services more easily find us, by giving better clues about what we do.

The name will also be a good signal to Google and other search engines, again helping people who can use our services to find us.

Today we are entering an active transition phase to our new name, which will culminate with the official launch on December 1st. At that time, the domain name for the RHlhub will change to ruralhealthinfo.org, and all raconline.org pages will forward to that new domain name. While our name is changing, what won't change is our commitment to serving rural communities. Our staff is passionate about ensuring that rural Americans have access to quality healthcare and other key resources that they need to lead healthy lives. We will still be your guide for information, resources, and opportunities that can help you improve rural healthcare services and population health. Our users can rest assured that the services they rely on today from the Rural Assistance Center will still be available from the Rural Health Information Hub. Whether it's our web-based services, or the old-fashioned personal service provided through our resource and referral service, the Rural Health Information Hub will be here to help.

Now I'd like to introduce a video clip featuring Ann Morse Abdella. She's the Executive Director of the Chautauqua County Health Network in New York State. She'll be speaking about the importance of the services provided by the RHlhub.

Ann Morse Abdella: The RHlhub is probably one of the best resources and most valuable tools that I have available to me on a daily basis. If I have a question, it's my go-to, to start figuring out what my next steps are going to be.

I recommend RHlhub to folks all the time. Again, it's because it has such wide range for the information and the content that's there, that I'd challenge anybody not to be able to find something useful for themselves. If they have a question, they need to go there.

It's accessible. It's easy, and you cannot wait. You really ... In rural communities we cannot be passive about the changes that are happening. People need to get out there. They need to engage. This is a great way to take those first steps.

Kristine Sande: Now I'd like to introduce our next speaker, Tom Morris. Tom is with the ... He directs the Federal Office of Rural Policy.

Tom Morris: Great. Good morning, everybody. Nice to see some familiar faces and great to be back in North Dakota again. Just a real thank you to Kris for all the work she's done in shepherding RAC all these years, but also the transition to this new, exciting framing for the work you do is really important. I think this name change really just makes a ton of sense because it speaks to, I think, the real role that RAC has played, and that UND has played, and the Center for Rural Health has played, in being a national resource for rural health and for rural communities.

By statute, my office is required to have what they call a national clearing house of information for rural health. UND certainly did that in the first probably 10 minutes they had the grant. But they knew that was just the beginning. They looked farther beyond than just sharing information. They wanted to be a real resource for rural communities in a way that even we couldn't have envisioned at the time. I think what they've created really is an evolving and interactive, almost like a treasure trove of information and resources for rural communities.

Because they've been so good at adapting to the needs of rural communities, our investment in this activity has grown from \$600,000 in the first year to \$2.1 million currently. Kristine and her staff are always looking for new and innovative ways to serve rural communities. They realize that nothing stays the same, that what you did last year may not be what meets the need this year. That's made them a fantastic partner in this regard.

I think the reference she made to the Community Health Gateway is perhaps one of the greatest examples of their looking ahead and seeing where the need was going to be. They understand that in rural America you can't take projects from urban areas and downsize them and make them work for rural communities. The gateway is a good manifestation of that in the sense that they're identifying those models that work, and they're helping create a repository for them, so that other communities can learn about them and can replicate them. I think rural communities can learn more from each other than they can by trying to downsize an urban model, because situations and the challenges are so unique in rural areas.

That sort of activity that they've engaged in really speaks to sort of the special skill set I think they bring to this job. It's no coincidence that UND was the right partner for this activity. Many of the staff who work there, they grew up in rural areas. They know these issues well. When someone calls and says, "I need to know more about how I get a doctor to come to my town," that's not just an abstract concept to the folks on the other end of the call, or the ones getting the email. They've lived that. They know it. If they don't know it directly, they know their relatives have. Somebody calls and says, "My hospital's closing. What can I do about that?" They know how to respond to that. They know exactly what sort of information to send to them. If somebody's looking for funding, they know where to send them to the right grant, not to just tell them to go look in the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance. It's that personalized touch that I think really makes the difference.

Right now, I think we have more information at our fingertips than we ever had, and less time to sort through it all. I think that's what really is unique about what Rural Health Information Hub will be, what RAC has been, and that is that personalized touch, the ability to know that when you're emailing somebody, you're going to get a personalized response. If you need to talk to someone about it, you're going to have somebody on the other end of that phone line to

do that. That's something you just don't find in this day and time, and I think it speaks to what they do, and what they do so well.

In 2002, the RAC actually emerged out of the first ever HHS Rural Initiative, and here we are 13 years later. I think what UND has created is so much more than what we could have originally envisioned. It's such a critical tool and resource for rural communities across the country. I think this name, this new name, really clearly conveys what it's all about, and why this information hub is so important. It's a reflection, I think, of the national role that UND plays in providing this resource. We just couldn't be happier with the partnership. We look forward to the next 13 years, and many more beyond that. I just thank you for all the work you've done to make it happen.

With that, I'd like to introduce a video of Donna Newchurch. Donna's the Executive Director of the Louisiana Rural Ambulance Alliance. She's going to talk about how she's used RAC to help her communities in Louisiana. Thanks so much.

Donna Newchurch: Without the RHlhub, folks that live in rural communities really don't have access to a single point of information that would provide them with timely, accurate, and objective opportunities. That's a void I think that existed prior to the establishment of the RHlhub. For that singular reason, that is why they are so important.

Well, I can speak specifically to what they've done for my organization and for the EMS community. We have found 2 grant opportunities on the RHlhub. Not only did we find the opportunities there. We were also able to find the information and data that we needed to support the application, which in turn resulted in those applications being funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy.

The RHlhub personally means that I can pick up the phone and talk to any staffer, and they know exactly what I'm talking about. They have the knowledge, they have the expertise, and they have the history around rural health that nobody else in the country seems to have.

I would absolutely recommend the RHlhub to others working in rural health. As I said, they are the experts in objective data, and that is exactly what you need when you're putting together a program, when you're making adjustments to your programs. There's absolutely no reason to reinvent the wheel. Some rural community has some facet, or similar problem that you have, and somebody has a similar solution. That similar solution can be found on the RHlhub.

Teryl Eisinger: Hello. I want to first congratulate the Rural Assistance Center on a great name change. The RHlhub will really, truly describe the work that you do around the country and for all of the communities across the nation, and I congratulate you

on helping users to understand the services that you offer better, and the role that the RHlhub will play.

Now, the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health has been engaged with the Rural Assistance Center and RHlhub since its beginning, working together with the state Offices of Rural Health to grow the knowledge and the use of the hub since its inception. We really do strive to improve the level of information to rural communities. Personally, I know the staff at the resource center to be experts in their own right, to be dogged about finding those answers, and to be willing to respond to the work and the information that I need, sometimes at a very last moment. It's information that I need and when I need it, from a person that I trust on the other end of the phone, and to be really able to understand what I'm looking for.

I love the features on the website. It's so much more than a website. The features on the website that allow me to take this mass of information that comes to me, and customize it for exactly how I want to use it. That fire hose of information that's coming to all of us is so very difficult to manage. The way that the RHlhub is set up allows me to find just exactly what I need, when I need it.

I also very much appreciate the support that the staff and the Center bring to the State Offices of Rural Health around the country. They've been very concerned to make sure that the State Offices of Rural Health understand the new RHlhub, and the State Offices are very excited to see the resource roll out in the way that it's rolling out, and we thank you for that Kristine, and to your staff. Personally, I know that all rural leaders really need to understand and work the principle that this hard work that we try to do every single day cannot be done by ourselves. We have to link with others. The RHlhub is a great way to do that. They're great friends on the other end of that phone.

Certainly, as we do our work in the State Offices of Rural Health and with the National Organization of the State Offices of Rural Health, we try to reach isolated rural providers, and we hope that, and we know that those providers really need that resource.

I'd like you to listen to a video clip from Bill Finerfrock who's a great advocate from the National Association of Rural Health Clinics for those isolated rural providers. Thank you, Kristine and the staff.

Bill Finerfrock:

Rural providers and rural communities have unique challenges getting access to information. They tend to be remote from where a lot of the sources of information occur. It's difficult for them to attend meetings very often. If you're a rural physician, for example, and you want to go to a conference, you have to leave your practice. That may mean that the practice actually has to close while you're away. So it becomes particularly challenging for folks to get access to information, and the RHlhub really can serve as that resource, and serve as the

information source for folks to get things they might not otherwise have access to.

It's just a really nice resource. It's nice to know that there's someone out there collecting that information, making it available, things that we can't do. We're focused on the Rural Health Clinics program, but we get ... We interact with Critical Access Hospitals, FQHCs, so it's nice to be able to have one place where we can go. If I need some refresher, I have a question, something I can't quite remember, I want to make sure I remember correctly, the Rural Health Information Hub is a great resource to go there and get that quick information.

Kristine Sande:

Thank you to all our speakers. It's always nice to hear nice things said about our program. We really appreciate that you took the time to come here today and be with us, as we enter this transition phase. At this point, I will open it up for questions, if there are any questions from the audience, either here, or via webcast.

It doesn't look like we have any questions at this point. So again, thank you all for being here with us today. We definitely would like to wish you a happy National Rural Health Day. Go Rural!