



# A Briefing: Promise & Programs in Rural Illinois<sup>1</sup>

***Rural Partners: The Voice of Rural Illinois  
connecting people and communities with resources***

Population projections show that rural Illinois will face serious issues in the next decade and beyond, with population declines, shrinking young population cohorts, and increasing proportions of elderly that may retire and/or move out of Illinois, closing many small businesses that have provided essential services for many years. This may result in loss of tax revenues needed to support infrastructure, education, and other services important to maintaining local quality of life in some areas.

Anticipating these changes and designing programs to take advantage of resources and opportunities now will help avert more serious issues in the future. For nearly three decades, as the state's federally designated rural development council, Rural Partners has been a voice for rural Illinois, helping public officials design policies to improve the quality of life and enable rural areas to prosper. Working with the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA), Rural Partners helps state agencies learn about and evaluate ways to advance rural counties and promote prosperity. This policy brief suggests approaches to expand opportunities for successful strategies.

## ***Changing Demographics***

An aging baby boomer population cohort will reshape the demographics of rural counties across the U.S. Most rural Illinois counties can expect population declines in the next 10 to 15 years. In some cases, significant changes are expected (Figure 1), although predictions at the county level are difficult because of the impact of local changes such as a large employer leaving. Equally important is the substantial increase in elderly populations that will require additional services to keep rural areas attractive as places for retirees to live. Retirees often have substantial wealth, so providing opportunities for them to invest time and money into making

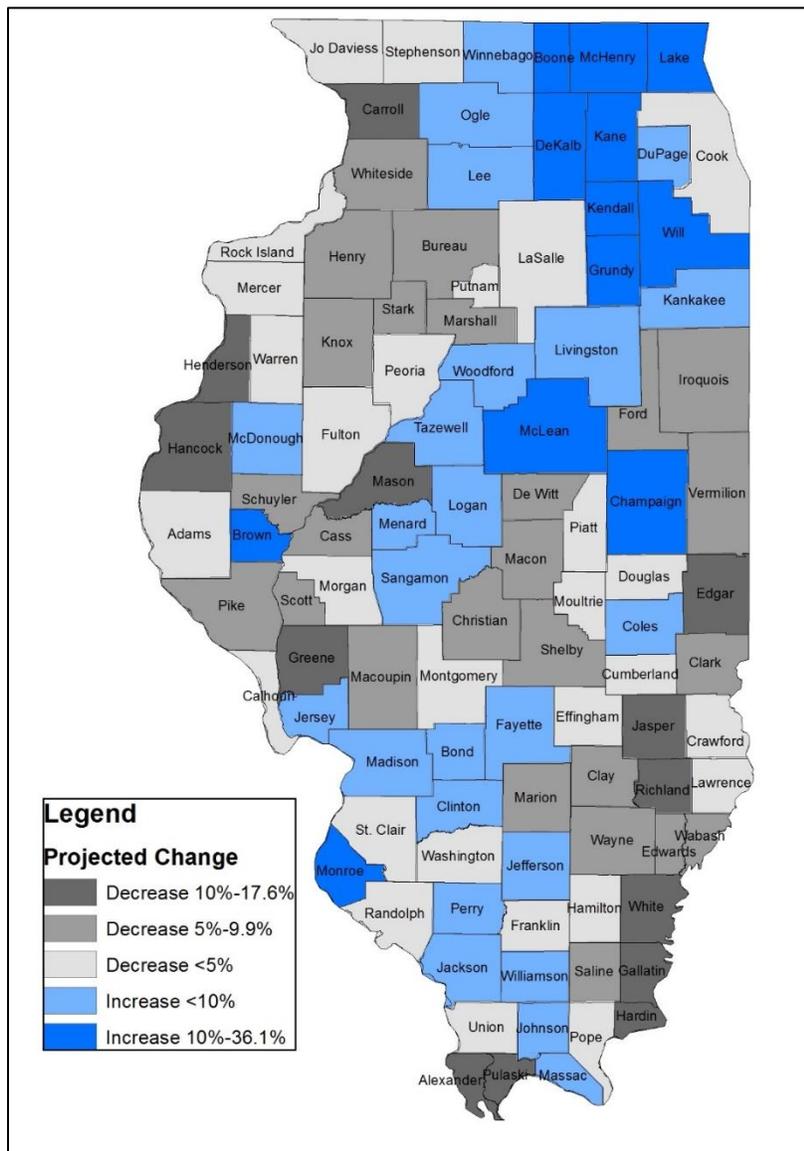
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<sup>1</sup> Not all positions and recommended actions outlined in this paper are shared by members of the Board of Directors of Rural Partners or their agencies and institutions.

their communities better places to live is important. Young populations have the highest projected rate of decline, which is of concern since they represent the future workforce.

Illinois also is losing population due to outmigration, often blamed on several factors, including property taxes higher than surrounding states (INN; Chicago Tribune). While property taxes are a factor in some cases, employment opportunities, proximity to family, cost of living, and quality of education may matter as much in location decisions (Center for Tax and Budget Accountability).

**Figure 1. Projected County Population Changes in Illinois, 2015-2025**



Regardless, outmigration, especially by families, will shrink future labor forces and reduce local markets which, combined with business owner retirements, means business closures in small towns. Rural areas must use innovative approaches to retain essential goods and services.

Between 2015 and 2025, 66 Illinois counties are likely to lose population, with 38 counties losing more than 5%. Elderly residents will represent 22.5% of the population in rural Illinois, an increase from 17.1% in 2010. Finally, the average dependency ratio (less than 20 and more than 65 years of age) will be 72.1% in 2025.

Nationally, from 2007 to 2012, the share of business owners age 50 years or older increased from 46.0% to 50.9%, and data are expected to reveal that the age of business owners in Illinois has increased at a similar

rate by 2017<sup>2</sup>. Per capita income in rural counties is \$40,273, compared with \$56,009 in metro areas (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Expected population changes offer opportunities for state and local agencies to develop and implement strategies designed to retain current residents and attract new residents, including retirees and young families. Many rural areas offer attractive and safe living environments, access to recreational sites, affordable housing, and access to high quality public services such as education. Affordable access to high quality Internet service will open opportunities for residents of any age to work remotely, either part-time or full-time, and pursue high-paying jobs in an attractive, relatively low-cost setting.

However, the expected demographic changes require an organized and coherent set of state and local strategies that increase the capacity of rural counties to reach their potential. This policy brief: a) identifies demographic changes; and b) suggests policy alternatives. Among the many possible approaches, workforce, economic development, health care, and technology issues are especially important to a stronger rural Illinois. The key to future rural prosperity is to act now and help rural areas build on their potential.

### **Local Economic Development and Job Creation**

Rural counties lag metro areas in job creation and face the prospect of decreases in working age populations, which will make attracting employers more difficult. Lower wages in rural areas encourage young graduates to leave their home communities for higher paying jobs in larger employment centers. Likewise, they pursue higher education only to find few suitable job opportunities in sparsely populated rural areas. Growing proportions of rural residents working and shopping in large centers and relying on Internet purchases shift spending away from small communities, further eroding downtowns.

*Replacing Local Businesses.* Business owners are retiring in significant numbers, often with no heirs or buyers for the business. Often, they have no organized succession plan and the business closes. The result is these businesses that provided services are gone, further reducing the attractiveness and quality of life in rural areas. These trends are likely to continue, if not increase. At the same time, a recent Gallup Poll (2018) reported that 27% of the 1,449

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<sup>2</sup> Data are unavailable specifically for Illinois. The U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Business Owners is conducted every five years and 2017 data have not yet been released.

respondents said they would prefer living in a rural area, higher than those preferring any of the other residential options (Newport, 2018).

Residents in some small rural communities have responded by pooling modest investments to purchase a business about to close, or reopen one that has already closed. Often, these community supported enterprises (CSEs) include grocery stores, restaurants, or other venues considered essential to the livability of the area, especially for a growing elderly population. The reopened businesses carry a broader range of merchandise and provide more services than the stores that closed. The stores also provide places where residents can socialize and interact.

Small communities in Vermont, Kansas, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and other states have succeeded with CSEs. In Vermont, a state agency, the Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV), provides educational programs and technical assistance to development groups in small communities and helps them organize groups of residents to purchase and manage small businesses (Walzer & Sandoval, 2015). This agency provides a relatively low cost approach to: a) inform local groups about investment opportunities; and b) provide technical assistance, either by contract with another agency or in-house, to help them organize successful ventures. These general stores improve access to local goods and services, plus they enhance the social capital and livability in the area. This local access will be especially important to a growing number of elderly residents, some of whom have limited mobility. Illinois currently does not have a strong program to promote these types of local investments.

The Main Street Employee Ownership Act (MSEOA) offers an opportunity for financial institutions to work with Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) nationwide to explore ways retiring business owners can sell a business to employees and community investors (H.R. Res. 5236, 2018). This initiative can be a basis for more organized business succession planning initiatives. While the MSEOA approach is less suited to small businesses with only a few employees, additional input and technical expertise available in the SBDCs can help residents restart businesses or prevent them from closing. More support for SBDCs in Illinois to expand these types of programs could help small rural communities.

*Attracting Young Families.* Rural areas are challenged by loss of young adults, which affects the future workforce, demand for education, housing markets, and tax bases. Access to high quality Internet service opens opportunities for this tech-savvy generation to start consulting businesses or other creative activities and help stimulate rural communities. A major issue is

attracting a sufficient mass of young adults to rural areas, so promoting attractions such as local recreational resources, affordable housing, high quality schools, and other amenities statewide can help stabilize the population.

Rural areas are less likely to attract large employers than in the past, and automation will eliminate many jobs; nevertheless, these areas must bolster the workforce and replace retiring employees. Some states are considering loan forgiveness or property tax relief programs for first-time home buyers who stay in the area for a specified number of years. These programs could involve forgiving college debt as well as home loans, both of which can be attractive to young families. Rural areas making substantial investments in local resources and attractions could possibly qualify for technical assistance or financial support from state agencies in local efforts to attract and retain young families.

Illinois communities are successfully using programs such as IIRA's MAPPING the Future of Your Community, and programs from University of Illinois Extension that provide a planning process or help in supporting business expansion and retention. Support for these programs, which are tailored to local needs and defined by local leadership, is crucial.

*Constraining Growth in Property Taxes.* Population declines and shifts in needs for public services due to growing elderly populations, along with eroding tax bases, will make it more difficult to finance and deliver critical public services. Illinois has, far and away, the largest number of local governments, with 8,500, as estimated by the Office of the Comptroller, and is tied with New Jersey for the highest effective property tax rates. Fortunately, advances in technology offer innovative approaches to manage and deliver these services at less cost. The past number and configuration of governments may be less well-suited for the future. Local governments in rural counties need guidance and technical assistance in finding new ways to collaborate and deliver services at lower cost.

Recent legislative changes and additional options for collaborations and restructuring local government open new opportunities for rural areas to finance and deliver services. New York and Ohio help local governments review new arrangements for service delivery. New York offers financial incentives to local governments to promote collaboration and identified ways to reduce property taxes through a more efficient delivery system (New York). Ohio has a web site ([www.skinnyohio.org](http://www.skinnyohio.org)) with examples of proven successes and grants to help local governments try new approaches. Recent legislation in Illinois provides local public officials with more

options to combine functions or collaborate among agencies but does not yet offer direct technical assistance or financial incentives that promote these objectives.

#### *Action Items*

- Work with local community leaders to design an educational program that encourages residents to invest in essential businesses that, otherwise, would not exist to serve local needs. This could include a business succession program with training and incentives or an education/technical assistance program to help organize community supported enterprises;
- Support existing Illinois programs such as IIRA's MAPPING the Future of Your Community and University of Illinois Extension's programs in community and economic development;
- Help rural communities create and market an incentive program(s) to encourage young families and retirees to locate in rural areas and start businesses. Loan forgiveness programs, training activities, or other approaches successful in other states can be considered; and
- Design technical assistance or financial incentives that encourage local leaders in rural counties with population declines to evaluate the current numbers of governments and arrangements for delivering services and find ways to reduce property taxes. A comprehensive statewide locally-driven effort could provide incentives and technical assistance in evaluating local options. The Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) and the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies (NIU-CGS) designed an electronic guidebook and database available to local leaders to find efficiencies in delivering public services and possibly reduce property tax burdens (Walzer and Blanke).

### **Public Transportation in Rural Communities**

The need for efficient public transportation in rural areas will grow along with the number of retirees and non-drivers (Gurnon 2018; Merrett 2018). While technology and home-delivery services will make it possible for more people to comfortably obtain food and other necessities, other services such as medical and dental, work programs, and developmental programs, as well as recreational transportation, will not be easily accommodated. Rural public transportation must be subsidized, because with the declining and dispersed populations, the tax base will not be sufficient to operate a transit system in most rural areas. As many as 80 federal programs can fund transportation services for people with disabilities, older adults, and lower-income people. The Department of Transportation funds rural public transportation systems and

the remaining federal programs fund (and sometimes operate) specialized transportation services (rides for their clients only).

Rural residents can find it difficult to access social services and healthcare because they are unable to understand, access, or navigate their transportation options. Some rural public transportation systems perform efficiently and some do not – there are no minimum performance standards. A specialized transportation provider (such as a senior center which provides transportation to clients) with seats vacant may travel nearly the same routes as another specialized provider (such as a human service agency serving individuals with disabilities) with vacant seats. A wiser and more efficient use of taxpayer money would be to combine clients of both agencies into a single vehicle. A rural public transportation system operating instead of, or in concert with, other agencies would be more efficient in providing rides to all residents -- including those from several agencies. This is an example of transportation coordination.

#### *Action Items*

- Empanel a Rural Illinois Coordinating Committee on Transportation (RICCT) led by an agency that does not fund public or specialized transportation services;
- Form standing working groups, which at a minimum, will include Non-Emergency Medical Transportation, Mobility Management, and Performance Measures; and
- The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), the Illinois Rural Transit Assistance Center (an agency in the IIRA at Western Illinois University), and the rural Human Service Transportation Plan (HSTP) coordinators should collaborate in creating an effective mobility management program to respond to rural residents who need assistance in accessing transportation.

At the state agency level, this committee can help fill service gaps by understanding how each agency's actions affect those of other funding bodies, and then collaborate for the benefit of the entire rural and specialized transportation environment versus those of a specific agency.

### **Changing Work Force Issues**

Expected demographic trends will bring several changes in the workforce. Retirements will exceed new entrants into the work force. The number of retirees “not in the labor force” increased 26% between 2000 and 2016, contributing to already suppressed labor force participation rates in rural counties. In July 2018, the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) reported the current seasonally unadjusted unemployment rate in Illinois was 4.3%, only slightly above the national average unemployment rate of 4.1%

([http://www.ides.illinois.gov/LMI/Pages/Local\\_Area\\_Unemployment\\_Statistics.aspx](http://www.ides.illinois.gov/LMI/Pages/Local_Area_Unemployment_Statistics.aspx)). By most economic measures, such unemployment rates are at or near “full employment.” Despite this impressive achievement, Illinois now faces an unprecedented skilled labor shortage that presents serious implications for sustaining the State’s robust activity in high-tech, manufacturing, health care and construction sectors. According to a 2018 IDES report:

- The prime working-age population in Illinois declined from 57.7% of the total population in 2000 to 49.4% in 2016.
- The number of retirees “not in the labor force” increased 26% between 2000 and 2016, with the largest growth occurring after the 2007-2009 recession (Reinhold, 2018).
- Recent U.S. Census data showed that Illinois lost 37,508 people in 2016, placing the state population at its lowest in nearly a decade (Eltagouri, 2016).
- Older generations of craftsmen and skilled laborers such as electricians, plumbers, machinists, welders, steamfitters, boilermakers, ironworkers and carpenters are aging out of the workforce or leaving Illinois, while younger generations struggle to replace them.

These trends suggest a need to examine more closely options for rural Illinois to not only attract new residents but also to retain those currently in the workforce with the skills needed by employers. In some instances, older workers can be encouraged to continue working beyond traditional retirement age, when employers adjust schedules or make the workplace more elderly-friendly. To address these issues, industry leaders, educators and policymakers can:

- Help K-12 schools, community colleges and universities strengthen career and technical education programs related to skilled trades, design classroom resources that introduce students to a continuum of competency-based training opportunities, prepare young adults for journeyman programs and apprenticeships, and then guide them toward successfully entering the Illinois workforce. Special attention should be paid to preparing students for jobs currently in the region, which is especially important in rural areas to avoid a loss of trained personnel to other areas;
- Encourage current workers in skilled trades to continuously upgrade the skills they need for emerging new technologies and to remain viable in the marketplace by participating in vocational programs offered by community colleges and other agencies. Providing transportation to obtain this training and access jobs that match their skills is also important;
- Facilitate public-private sector partnerships to yield new innovative approaches that produce highly skilled workers through collaborative efforts seen more as an investment

than an expense. Workforce Innovation Boards (WIBs) are successful examples of these types of partnerships;

- Employer participation in career and technical education (CTE) programs by offering internships and apprenticeship programs has succeeded in many areas. Offering career information and exploration opportunities at the K-12 level provides a better understanding of local jobs and career paths; and
- Examine best practices in other states to encourage qualified workers beyond traditional retirement age to remain in the labor force.

*Child care issues.* The task of finding affordable, high quality child care can be daunting for working parents with young children. In the past several decades, the percentage of families in which both parents work outside the home has increased substantially. At the same time, a growing body of research has affirmed the role of early care and education in shaping children's educational, health, and social outcomes. Many small towns and rural communities have inadequate child care options, especially in areas with substantial declines in both incomes and populations. The economics of running a day care have become even more difficult with state budget cuts that undermine child care subsidies. In response, some communities support development and funding of centers near a major employer such as a hospital or manufacturing plant, but in a growing number of cases, they have difficulty finding a qualified center director. More training facilities, guidance, and support to train personnel could help alleviate this situation and increase the number of workers available.

*Access to transportation.* Rural residents typically travel longer distances to work than in metro areas, and often to jobs with lower real wages. Thus, in some cases, residents don't enter the work force because the net gain in income is relatively small compared with participating in public assistance programs. A better coordinated public transportation system, along with skill development programs listed earlier, could encourage these residents to more actively participate in the labor force and perhaps alleviate some job shortages.

*Promising Practices.* An example of a successful public-private effort is the *Go Build Tennessee* initiative launched in 2016, patterned after the *Go Build Alabama* model. This comprehensive workforce development initiative helps reshape public opinion, enhance the image of the construction industry and inform young people, parents, educators and others about opportunities in the trades (<https://www.gobuildtennessee.com>). After two years of ongoing communications, collaboration, and outreach, the model has been delivered to millions of Tennessee residents. A recent study of the impact reported 74% of students were more likely to

pursue a career in the trades after hearing *Go Build*'s message, and the program reduced the difference in awareness of Tennessee's opportunities in the construction industry in rural versus metro areas of the state to only 4%. Substantial increases in vocational course enrollments and graduation rates also occurred.

The Tennessee Legislature approved Tenn. Code Ann. § 4-41-101 in 2015 to create the *Go Build Tennessee* Program (the "program"). By statute, the program was implemented and is administered by a corporation, whose duties include securing funding to promote and foster the development of a comprehensive statewide program designed to attract and increase career opportunities for secondary and postsecondary students in the construction industry. The corporation has an equal number of commercial and industrial building contractors and subcontractors, residential building contractors and subcontractors, and road-building contractors and subcontractors.

To fund the program, the legislature created a *Go Build Account* within the state board for licensing contractors. Amounts remaining in the account at the close of each fiscal year do not revert to the general fund. Instead, the year-end balance is invested by the state treasurer for the sole benefit of the account. A minimum of half of the total fiscal year fund balance resulting from contractor licensing revenues collected, after expenditures, is allocated to the *Go Build Tennessee* Corporation solely for the implementation, administration, and management of the program. On April 20, 2018, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam signed SB1922/HB1917, extending the *Go Build Tennessee* program operations through July of 2024.

*Action Items:*

- Illinois has industry leaders, educators and policymakers who could replicate or possibly expand the *Go Build* concept;
- Rural Partners of Illinois, in conjunction with the GRAC and IIRA, could help facilitate and organize a knowledgeable team of professionals to design a type of "*Go Build*" for Illinois;
- Current efforts in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) program can be focused on needs and opportunities specific to rural areas with special attention to tailoring programs and skills needed by employers in rural counties. Perhaps examine and revise the requirements for program certifications in rural areas;

- Special attention can be paid to organizing efforts to keep older and experienced workers in the labor force past traditional retirement age by helping employers design a more conducive working environment for these employees; and
- Increase access to education and employment opportunities through better coordinated public transportation opportunities. Likewise, examine the public transportation infrastructure, in light of projected population declines, to determine how they can be better financed given possibly lower tax bases.

### **Accessing Services in the Future through Technology**

Technology has transformed the performance of schools, hospitals, public safety, work environment, connectedness to friends and family, and ability to access markets. Yet thousands of rural Illinois residents do not have access, do not understand the need for broadband, refuse upgrades, or rely on occasional access at the library or Wi-Fi hot spots. This lack of ready access to high-speed Internet, or lack of information, limits the potential of some rural areas.

Today's customers and tomorrow's residents will demand to be connected wherever they go. Rural downstate communities feel the need to respond to those expectations, but in some cases are perplexed as to where to go for help. Rural communities, economic developers and broadband providers in Illinois must work together to *educate* customers on the critical need for broadband.

It is important to note that not all of rural Illinois is behind the technology curve. Many of the most rural and difficult to serve communities in Illinois are ably served by small independent rural broadband providers, but many are not, and much work remains to connect all of rural Illinois. A priority should be to ensure that independent providers can build on past progress and help connect the remaining counties.

Rural communities served by these providers would not be where they are without critical partnerships. Partnerships through the FCC's Universal Service Fund (USF) and the USDA's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) broadband loan program have helped local, Illinois-based, independent rural broadband providers deliver fiber-based high speed broadband networks in rural Illinois. USDA continues its mission by providing low interest broadband buildout loans to independent rural broadband companies. The RUS program has made millions of dollars in low interest loan funding available to broadband companies for decades, helping to connect more broadband customers to the world

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/ILRUSTelecomMoultrie.pdf>.

Several states recognize the need to ensure that rural broadband networks are properly funded. Some have created critical state USF funds, or have appropriated budget dollars to help build broadband projects in unserved areas, or both.

- <https://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/broadband/grant-program/>
- <https://nysbroadband.ny.gov/>

Farmers, grain bin operators, agribusinesses, banks, schools, libraries, hospitals, small businesses, public safety agencies and rural families depend on robust broadband networks. New and innovative ways are needed to educate all customers on the practical need for higher speeds and better networks, as technology becomes a larger part of daily life. Policymakers must fulfill the promise envisioned by Congress, the FCC and the Administration to build and maintain broadband networks, so that future generations have the option to raise their families and thrive in the smallest of rural communities.

*Action Items:*

- Advance the efforts by the FCC, USDA, Congress and states to fulfill customers' needs for broadband, and fulfill the promise of a healthy future for rural Illinois;
- Continue and support efforts of rural independent broadband providers, by supporting incentives to build and maintain broadband networks in rural communities; and
- Create a strong and effective plan to educate rural Illinois residents on the value of broadband, and its ability to connect rural Illinois to government services, jobs, friends and family, health care, education, and public safety, and ultimately to create better lives through greater connectivity and economic growth.

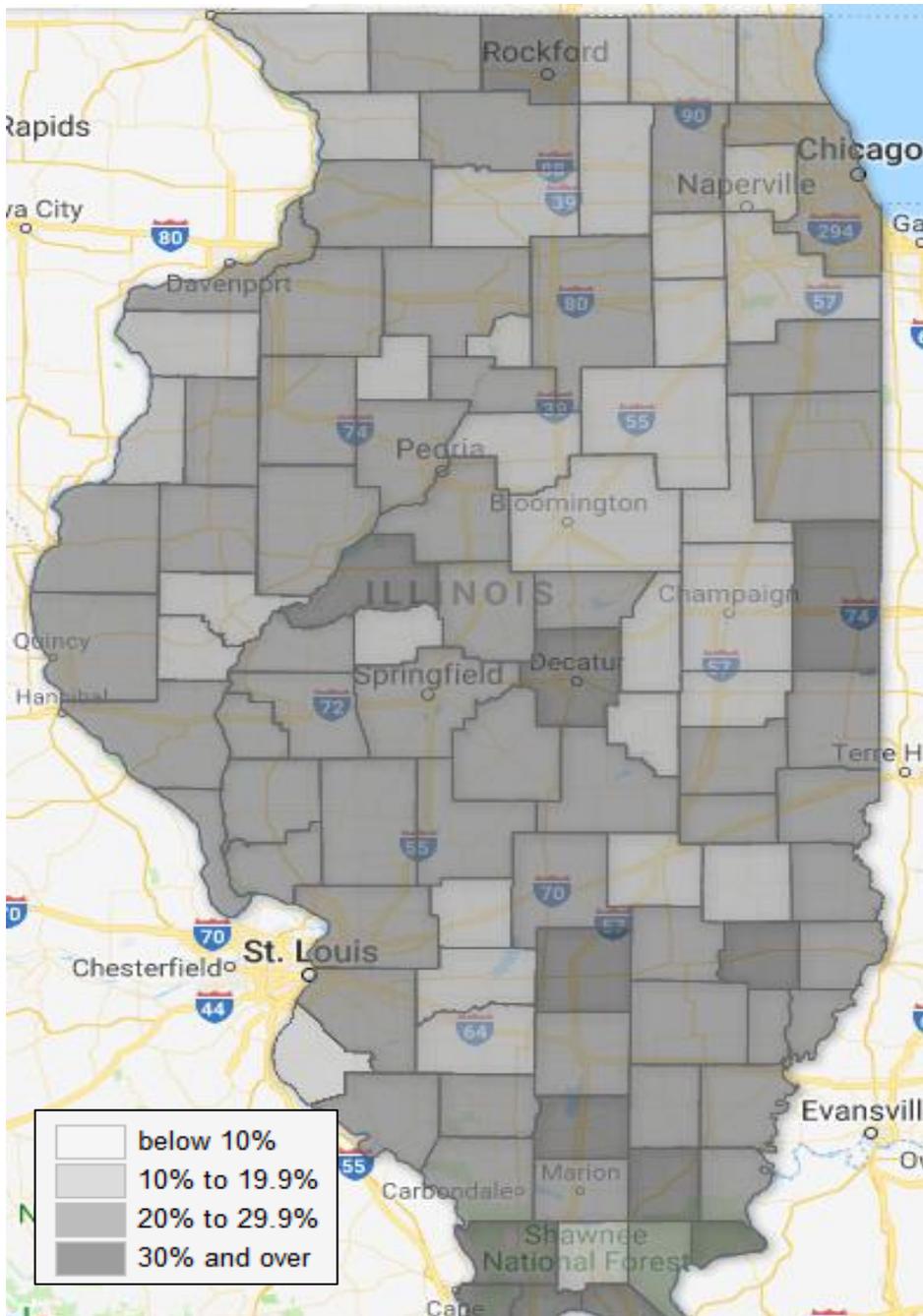
### **Strengthen Rural Health Care Access**

Rural communities must overcome many barriers to accessing health care. They often lack providers for an aging population, lag behind in the latest technologies and practices, and do not have the resources to disseminate health information efficiently. Because health permeates nearly all aspects of life, it is essential to develop ways of improving access to health care and promoting education on health topics in the rural counties of Illinois. While the issues to tackle are numerous, three major areas of concern include: combatting the opioid crisis, protecting and enhancing Medicaid, and addressing the shortage of health care professionals.

*Building a Medicaid System for a Healthier Illinois.* Medicaid is the federal-state partnership providing health insurance coverage to low-income families and individuals.

According to the Illinois Health and Hospital Association (IHA), Illinois has the lowest Medicaid spending per beneficiary of any other state. State and federal leaders should reform Illinois’s Medicaid program to ensure beneficiaries have access to needed health care services. Figure 2 shows FY2017 Medicaid Coverage in Illinois and mentions two rural Illinois counties (Saline and Alexander) as having more than 40% Medicaid recipients (illinoishealthmatters.org, 2018).

Figure 2. Percentage of County Residents Covered By Medicaid, FY2017



*Source: Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, FY2017 enrollment data & U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2016.*

*Action Items:*

- Protect the Medicaid program and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) by maintaining current Medicaid expansion commitments and the basic structure of the Medicaid program, and permanently reauthorizing CHIP;
- Incentivize the use of primary care and medical homes to coordinate care, improve quality of care, reduce cost, and focus reimbursement on primary care and preventative services;
- Expand Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) to improve access and case management through a fee schedule that accounts for high risk, high cost, and highly vulnerable patients;
- Minimize fragmentation by incentivizing community-based primary care services with linkages to secondary and tertiary services, integrating behavioral health services in the medical home, and increasing use of preventive and outpatient services;
- Expand access in rural communities by updating Medicaid telemedicine reimbursement rules, and positioning telemedicine to support multipayer and all-payer models;
- Enhance the effectiveness of Medicaid Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) by addressing high rates of claim denials, strengthening provider appeals processes, and implementing common definitions and criteria for denials across MCOs. Improve outcomes for chronic conditions by reimbursing community health workers. Assess the liability of managed care plans to reduce cost and improve health outcomes;
- Work with state and federal officials to update Illinois’ Federal Medicaid Assistance Percentage (FMAP) and to address inequities in reimbursements to providers in Illinois; and
- Provide independent oversight and review of the Medicaid program with data transparency for taxpayers and the public through a publicly available dataset for research and evaluation of the Illinois Medicaid program.

*Addressing the Opioid Crisis in Illinois.* Heroin abuse and addiction is a long-standing social problem. However, in the past two decades, it has been worsened by a rapid increase of prescription opioid overuse. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) review of mortality data estimated that of the nearly 44,000 drug related deaths in 2013, more than 24,000 were from prescription opioids or heroin. And, while the age-adjusted rate of opioid analgesic deaths has leveled off in recent years, the death rate from heroin related deaths has almost tripled since 2010 (SIU School of Medicine, 2016). The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

estimated an increase in the number of persons (age 12 and older) who abuse or are dependent on prescription opioids and heroin from 1.5 million in 2003 to 2.3 million in 2012 (SAMHSA, 2013).

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), opioid overdoses killed 1,946 people in Illinois in 2016. This was an 82% increase from 2013. Opioid-related deaths in 2016 were:

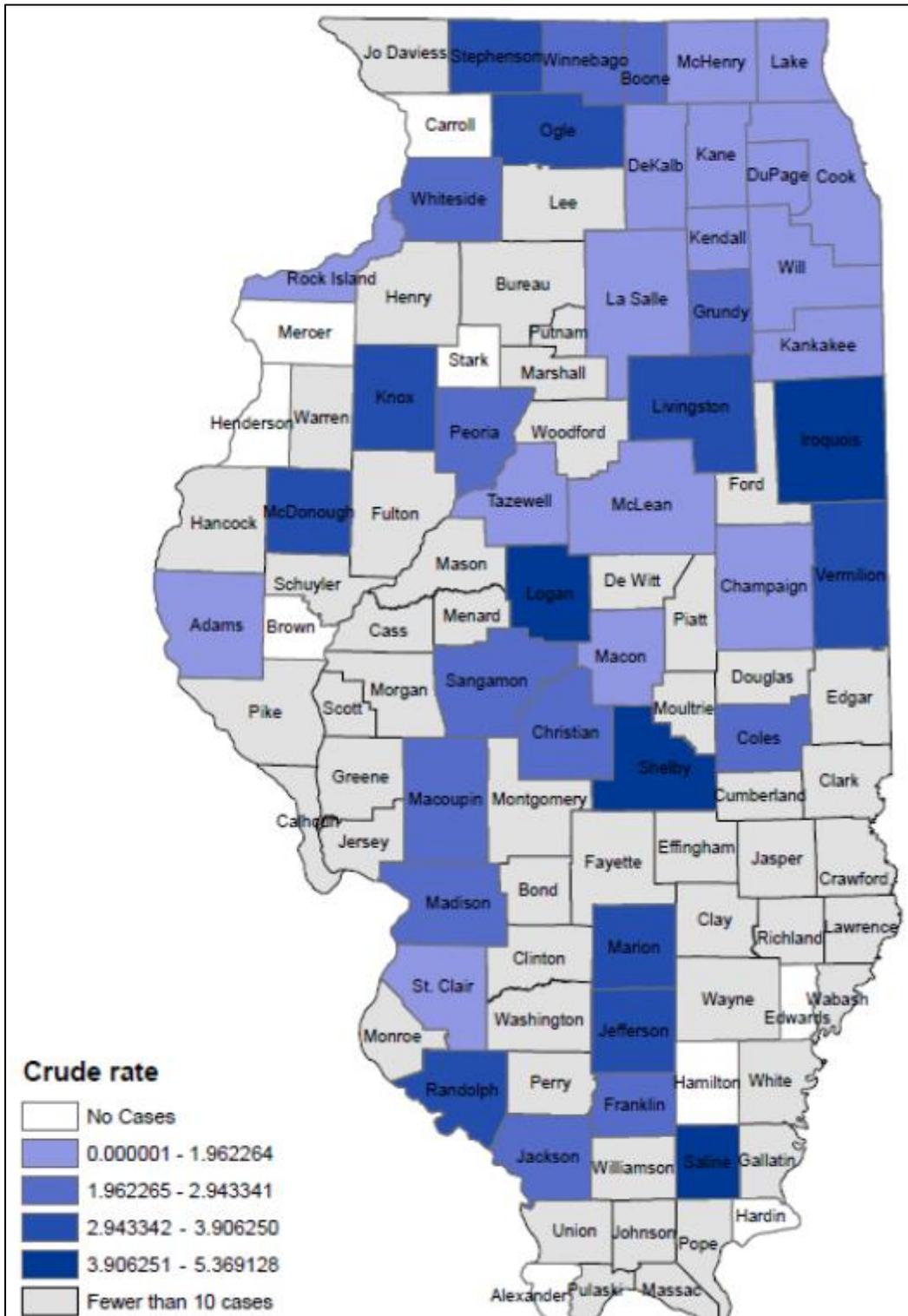
- More than 1.5 times the number of homicide deaths;
- Approximately twice the number of fatal motor vehicle accidents; and
- 30% higher than gun-related deaths.

Emergency department visits due to opioid overdose increased 77% from 2015 to 2016. Figure 3 shows the rate of emergency department visits due to opioid analgesic overdose (per 10,000 population), 2016 (IDPH, 2018). The highest rates of overdose have been reported in pockets of rural counties throughout the state.

*Action Items:*

- Education and Stigma Reduction – Increase and distribute information and resources related to opioid use and relevant Illinois laws, such as the Good Samaritan Law. Increase funding and availability of prevention programs in schools and community centers in Illinois. Non-medical opioid use of prescription opioids was reported by 40,000 Illinois teens (SAMHSA, Behavioral Health Barometer: Illinois 2015, 2015);
- Support Justice-Involved Populations – Increase funding and availability for deflection and diversion programs throughout the state to decrease the number of opioid overdose deaths following release from an institution or correctional facility. Expand medication-assisted treatment (MAT) to justice-involved populations. Currently, only 45% of state prisons nationwide provide inmates with referrals to methadone clinics and only 29% provide inmates with referrals to buprenorphine-therapy clinics (Nunn, 2009); and
- Comprehensive Rescue Framework – Support increasing the number of first responders and community members who have access and can administer Naloxone. Currently, some police departments have incorporated a follow-up component that includes law enforcement and/or public health or community service professionals to connect an individual with opioid use disorder (OUD) treatment. Naloxone distribution programs need to be expanded with better funding.

Figure 3. Emergency Department Visits, 2016



Source: Illinois Department of Public Health, State of Illinois Comprehensive Opioid Data Report, 2017, page 13.

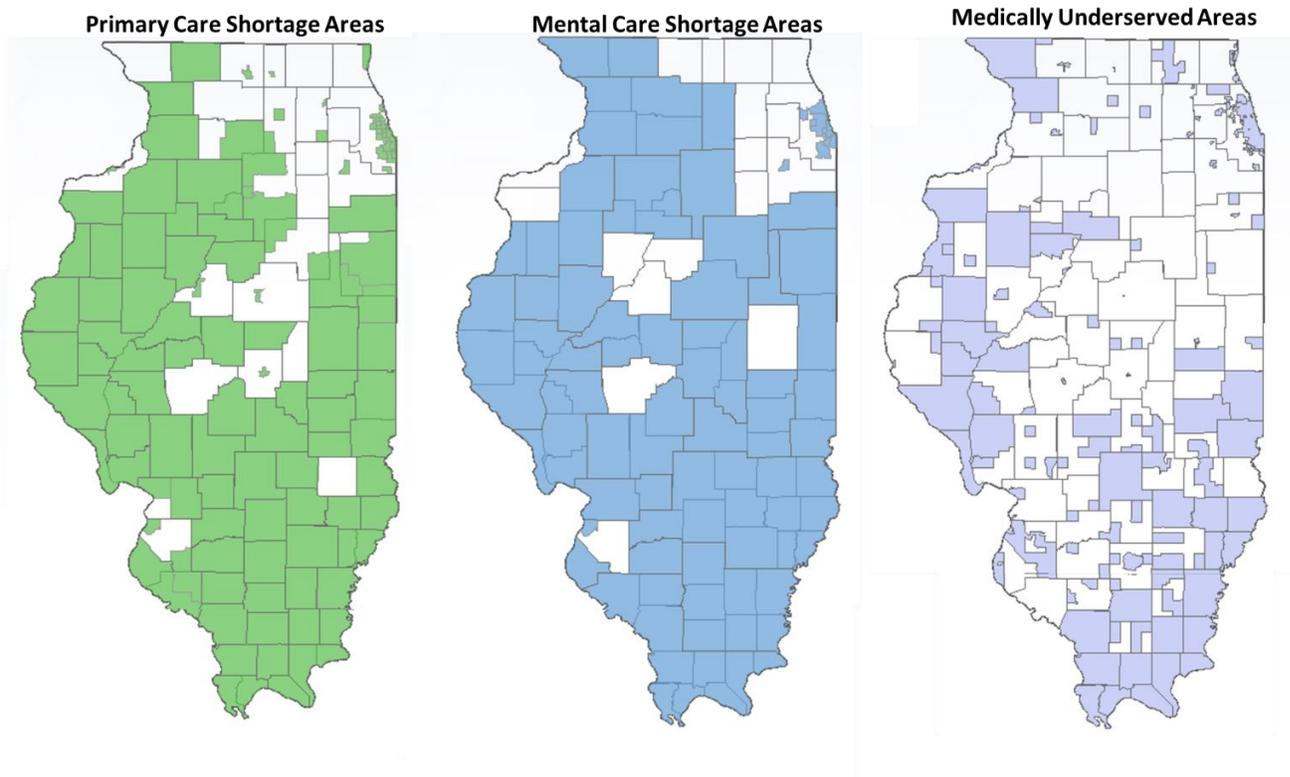
*Shortages in Health Care Professionals.* Research commissioned by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) shows that the demand for physicians will continue to outpace the rate of physicians entering the workforce, resulting in an increasing shortage of primary care and specialty physicians nationwide through 2030 (AAMC, 2018). Similar shortages are projected for direct health care workers (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services; Health Resources and Services Administration; National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, 2018) and nurses (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, 2018) during the next decade.

Moreover, patients prefer health care providers with similar demographics, and minority health professionals more often care for minority, underserved and poor patients (Gabard, 2007). These factors highlight the need to reach underrepresented students to enter the health care field, especially since these potential health career students may lack the role models and self-efficacy needed to pursue a health care career (Boekeloo BO, 2015). Health care worker shortages are expected to be particularly acute in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA).

HPSA is a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) designation for shortages in the number of health professionals in primary medical care, dental and/or mental health. HPSA may designate a geographic area, a population (low income and/or Medicaid eligible), and facilities (FQHCs). Shaded areas in Figure 4 note Primary Care HPSAs and Figure 4 notes Mental Health HPSAs (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, 2018). The HRSA Medically Underserved Area or Population (MUA/P) designation (Figure 4) denotes too few primary care providers, high infant mortality, high poverty or a high elderly population (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, 2018). Most rural counties are HPSA or MUA/P areas. Many counties meet both designations.

Current programs try to address the health care professional shortage in rural areas. Several are facilitated by the SIU School of Medicine and University of Illinois Extension in partnership with local hospitals and schools, but funding is needed to expand these efforts.

Figure 4. Health Care Shortage Areas



Source: U.S. Health Resource & Services Administration, *Quick Maps* online mapping tool, available at: <https://data.hrsa.gov/maps/quick-maps>

*Action Items:*

- *Health Career Exploration Programs* – Fund existing and new programs aimed at health career exploration for Illinois students, especially in rural areas.
  - Secondary school programs are critical to help students identify their interests prior to postsecondary education or training programs. First generation college students and those coming from rural areas can especially benefit from these programs because of the exposure to local healthcare facilities and professionals.
  - Middle school programs expose students at an earlier age to health careers and the sciences. This is especially helpful for students who might be interested in dual credit courses in secondary school and helps them have a better idea of the field or sector to pursue as a possible career.
  - Postsecondary programs such as health career student clubs (e.g., allied health or pre-med programs) can enhance college experiences for students. These programs can help students identify mentors in their field of work and provide learning opportunities outside of the classroom and in the community.

## Summary

The next 10 to 15 years will be difficult for many rural counties in Illinois but an updated and coordinated statewide rural development plan with current programs can help local leaders find and take advantage of new opportunities. Such a statewide economic development plan was prepared in 2014 by the Quinn Administration and should be reviewed for possible updates and possible implementation, along with current development efforts (Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, 2014). That plan was built on clusters and assets in rural regions. It could be implemented quickly using current resources and agencies.

Statewide, Illinois has a mechanism in place to work with local leaders to find and implement innovative development approaches. This system can be effective in bringing together leaders from public and private agencies to design and implement programs. This policy brief presents some of these opportunities, and Rural Partners, working with the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA), can help state policymakers update some development programs specifically designed to address rural issues.

The policy issues discussed here are only several possible strategies that state and private agencies can implement together. Rural counties face issues which differ from their metro counterparts and it is important for Illinois to advance a statewide strategy(ies) that empower and support local policymakers in making decisions leading to strong rural economies and population stability, if not growth. Other states facing similar trends are moving ahead to update their development strategies: Michigan has a Prosperity Regions initiative; Wisconsin has a Future Regions Initiative; Indiana has Sustaining Hoosier Communities; and New York funds economic development initiatives unique to its regions. Ohio has an active initiative to help local governments reorganize their public service delivery system ([www.skinnyohio.org](http://www.skinnyohio.org)).

Illinois has an opportunity to step forward and lead the way with new and innovative plans and approaches, some of which are suggested in this policy brief. As a statewide 501(c)(3) organization, with public-private membership and a focus on rural improvement, Rural Partners has access to the expertise needed and stands ready to assist with efforts to forge a strong future for rural Illinois.

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