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## House Select Committee on Advancing Rural and Small Town Health Care

July 15, 2024, at 1:00 p.m.

Virtual Meeting

<https://studies.viriniageneralassembly.gov/studies/678>

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The House Select Committee on Advancing Rural and Small Town Health Care (the Committee) met virtually with Delegate Rodney T. Willett, chair, presiding.<sup>1</sup> Delegate Willett began the meeting by welcoming the presenters and emphasizing that they are mostly independent providers who are not affiliated with a larger health care system. Materials presented at the meeting are accessible through the [website](#).

### Consideration of Topics for September 17, 2024, Meeting

Delegate Willett highlighted the following topics for the Committee's September 17 meeting on the Eastern Shore that have been suggested by Committee members and members of the public: (i) diabetes and obesity in rural areas; (ii) the economic impact of hospital health systems in rural areas; (iii) pharmacies, including their operations, the data they provide that can be used to improve health outcomes, and the methods they use to deliver prescription drugs to economically disadvantaged populations in rural areas; and (iv) the transportation challenges faced by health care systems in rural areas. He encouraged Committee members, stakeholders, and members of the public to suggest other potential topics for the September meeting.

### Presentations: Rural Health Care Providers

*Roger Palmer, DDS*

*Laura Settles, DDS*

*Dana Stallings, DNP, APRN, FNP-C, PMHNP, CDCES, BC-ADM*

*Sterling Ransone, Jr., MD, FAAFP*

*Laura Peyton Ellis, MD*

*Amanda Umlandt, OD*

*Jeremy Walden, PsyD, MSCP*

Delegate Willett asked each health care provider to begin the presentations by sharing a brief biography and an overview of the practices that are working or not working in each provider's rural area.

- Dr. Palmer has practiced dentistry in Emporia for 48 years and is involved with several local and regional dental organizations, including the Virginia Dental Association. He highlighted some of the difficulties patients face when trying to access dental care in his area, including a lack of specialists, adequate transportation, and dental practice staffing shortages in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Palmer also noted that his area needs more dental

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<sup>1</sup> **Members Present:** Delegate Rodney T. Willett (chair), Delegate Ellen H. Campbell, Delegate Joshua G. Cole, Delegate Israel D. O'Quinn, Delegate Kannan Srinivasan, Delegate H. Otto Wachsmann, Jr.

**Members Absent:** Delegate Robert D. Orrock, Sr. (vice-chair), Delegate Nadarius E. Clark, Delegate Amy J. Laufer, Delegate Daniel W. Marshall, III, Delegate Candi Mundon King, Delegate Mark D. Sickles

hygienists and that it is difficult to convince young dentists to move to rural areas because they feel that they must take jobs with large corporations or in more populous areas to make enough money to pay off student loan debt from dental school. He suggested that programs that help dentists who serve rural areas and have a certain proportion of Medicaid patients could be beneficial for assisting with some of these access issues.

- Dr. Settles practices dentistry in Wythe and Bland Counties and graduated from dental school about four years ago. She discussed how oral health impacts overall health and talked briefly about her involvement with the Appalachian Highlands Community Dental Center in Abingdon, which provides additional training in advanced procedures to dentists. She reiterated the challenges with access to care in rural areas that were highlighted by Dr. Palmer and, as a recent dental school graduate, also talked about the burden and impact of student loans on young dentists.
- Dr. Stallings is the owner of and a health care provider at Southside Diabetes in Franklin. She noted that Franklin is one of the least healthy areas not only in Virginia but also in the country and expressed concern about the lack of incentives for business providers in the rural health care space. Specifically, she pointed to a lack of state-funded grants or programs for rural or female-owned health care businesses. Dr. Stallings also spoke about the difficulty of fulfilling the collaboration agreement requirement for nurse practitioners with fewer than three years of full-time clinical experience and praised the autonomous practice program for nurse practitioners. She suggested allowing autonomous practice nurse practitioners to collaborate with nurse practitioners who have fewer than three years of full-time clinical experience.
- Dr. Ransone, who has practiced family medicine in Deltaville for 29 years, talked about his involvement with regional and national medical organizations, including his tenures as president of the American Academy of Family Physicians and the Medical Society of Virginia. He also noted the lack of access to health care in rural areas, emphasizing that practices in rural areas are closing, reducing access points for patients. Dr. Ransone reiterated that it is difficult to attract young physicians to rural areas to practice unless they are from those rural areas. He also shared a list of potential improvements for rural health care and, in response to a question from the Committee, emphasized the importance of reducing the administrative burden on practicing physicians.
- Dr. Ellis, who was raised in Essex County, is a third-year resident in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Connecticut. She shared her perspective as a medical professional who left the Commonwealth for training but would like to come back. Dr. Ellis discussed the barriers she faces to returning to rural Virginia to practice, including significant student loan debt and the lack of formal medical education in the administrative tools needed to practice independently, and spoke about the challenges with substance abuse disorders among obstetrical patients and the effect those disorders have on pregnancy outcomes.
- Dr. Umlandt is an optometrist in private practice in Grundy and is a former president of the Virginia Optometric Association. She spoke about the difficulty of finding an associate to train in her area, noting that because there are no other optometrists in the Grundy area, she rarely takes time off and that her practice would face significant difficulty if she had a personal medical emergency.



- Dr. Walden, who is a clinical psychologist with a practice in Midlothian and a satellite clinic in Ashland and is also the president-elect of the Virginia Academy of Clinical Psychologists, reiterated many of the previous speakers' points on the difficulties he faces as a health care provider in a rural area. He suggested that providing and increasing access to technology integration, using teletherapy and audio-only teletherapy, and using a hybrid care model could help alleviate barriers to health care in rural areas. Dr. Walden also discussed the importance of increasing the existing mental health care workforce with the new psychological practitioner distinction, the importance of in-network reimbursement of training, and improving the in-network reimbursement model.

### **Public Comment and Next Meeting**

No members of the public commented at the meeting, but several people submitted written comments, which are available [\*online\*](#).

The next meeting of the Committee will be August 16 and 17 on the Eastern Shore.

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For more information, see the [\*Committee's website\*](#) or contact the Division of Legislative Services staff:

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