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New Georgetown University/UNC Report Finds Medicaid Expansion is Especially Important for Georgia's Rural Residents

Small towns and rural areas saw more than three times as large a decline in low-income adult uninsured rates in Medicaid expansion states as compared to states that have not expanded Medicaid

Atlanta -- Residents of Georgia's small towns and rural areas have the most at stake in the debate over whether or not to expand Medicaid. Medicaid expansion would reduce the uninsured rate for residents across the entire state; however, the most dramatic improvements to uninsured rates would likely be felt in small towns and rural areas of Georgia.

State decisions to expand Medicaid have paid off for residents of small towns and rural areas, according to a new report by Georgetown University's Center for Children and Families and University of North Carolina's NC Rural Health Project. States that expanded Medicaid saw more than three times as large a decline in the uninsured rates for low-income citizen adults living in rural areas and small towns than non-expansion states experienced for the period between 2008/09 and 2015/16. The uninsured rate for this population dropped sharply from 35 percent to 16 percent in rural areas and small towns in states that expanded Medicaid compared to a much smaller decline from 43 percent to 38 percent for the same population in Georgia.

"Expanding Medicaid has had a very positive impact on small towns and rural communities," Joan Alker, executive director of the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families and a Research Professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy. "Improved coverage rates typically translate to a more stable health care system and help rural areas and small towns maintain availability of health care providers in areas where shortages are all too common. Access to rural health providers is especially important to women of child-bearing age and those with chronic conditions such as asthma."

Rural areas tend to have higher rates of uninsured people. As the report shows, in many Medicaid expansion states, the gaps between non-metro and metro areas in the uninsured rate for low-income adults have largely been eliminated. In Georgia, large gaps remain in the uninsured rate among low-income adults in metro areas (30 percent) and non-metro areas (38 percent).

In many states that have not yet expanded Medicaid, residents of their small towns and rural areas will disproportionately benefit if the state decides to expand. States with the highest rate of uninsured adults in rural areas are South Dakota, Georgia, Oklahoma, Florida, Texas, Alabama, Missouri, and Mississippi. Rural areas in these states would benefit the most from a decision to expand Medicaid.

“Overall, the experience of Medicaid expansion states demonstrates the great opportunity for Georgia,” said Jack Hoadley, lead author of the report. “Not only does Georgia have the chance to reduce the number of uninsured adults overall, but it has a significant opportunity to bring down the uninsured rate in small towns and rural areas and narrow the gap between metro and rural areas.”

The data once again shows that states like Georgia can’t afford the status quo with one of the highest uninsured rates in the country and too many rural communities struggling in a worsening health care crisis.

“The results of Medicaid expansion in other states clearly demonstrate that it is the most cost-effective investment that Georgia’s policymakers can make in the health and prosperity of rural Georgians,” said Laura Colbert, Executive Director of consumer health advocacy group Georgians for a Healthy Future. “Without action on this issue, rural parts of our state will continue to fall behind.”

An estimated 360,000 low-income people live in rural Georgia and Georgia’s total rural population is an estimated 1.7 million people.

The full report is available at: ccf.georgetown.edu.