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April 1, 2025

SORH Short Rows is the quarterly newsletter from the Georgia State Office of Rural Health (SORH) for all matters rural. It provides an update on the progress made to improve rural health in Georgia's hospitals, primary care practices, FQHCs, stakeholders, vendors, health care advocates, and legislators.

Leading the Fight Against Rural Health Disparities

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Thanks to Gov. Kemp, Assembly for Rural Support

As we welcome spring – albeit the record pollen – I'm thrilled to share the latest updates from the State Office of Rural Health (SORH).

I am proud of all that we've accomplished together as a team and a community over this past quarter, and I look forward to many wins moving ahead as we work closely to close healthcare coverage gaps and strengthen services for rural Georgians. One great example you'll read in this edition of "Short Rows" is how Rural Hospital Stabilization Grant funds are helping Emanuel Medical Center in Swainsboro to expand its emergency department.

Another big win for rural Georgia is Governor Kemp recently signed the Amended FY25 budget in early March which includes \$862 million for Hurricane Helene storm relief. Part of these funds will go toward low-interest loans to farmers impacted by Helene as well as grants to rural hospitals in affected areas. Furthermore, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services extended in March the public health emergency for Hurricane Helene for another 90 days due to the ongoing impact of the storm.

Thank you for your continued support, and we look forward to sharing more updates in the months

ahead.

Nita Ham, Executive Director

State Office of Rural Health

SORH Bids a Fond Farewell to Beth Walker

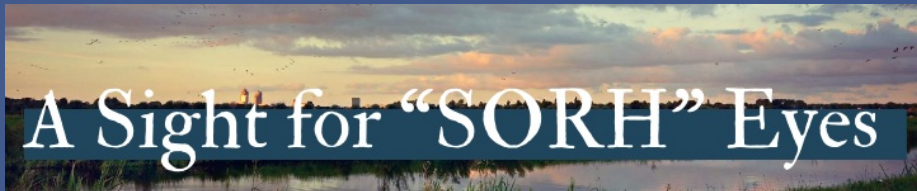


The State Office of Rural Health (SORH) bids a fond, yet bittersweet, farewell to a beloved member of our team. As of March 27, Beth Walker, senior manager of the Primary Care Office and Farmworker Health program, has closed the chapter of her professional life to begin a new chapter filled with family, relaxation, and lots of fun with her twin grandsons.

Her SORH family will miss her more than we can describe, and will always remember her as a kind, organized, dedicated professional who tirelessly served the rural residents of Georgia for over eight years at SORH. Her customer service skills cannot be matched, and her patience, humor, and resilience are admired by everyone who had the pleasure to work with her.

In his last message to the Scouts, Boy Scouts founder Robert Baden-Powell said, “Each and every one of us can make an impact or difference in this world and leave it better than when we came”. Beth Walker made both an impact and a difference at SORH, and through her humble, selfless service to the Department of Community Health, State Office of Rural Health, we are better than when she came.

Here's to you, Beth Walker! Enjoy your next chapter. We love you.



SORH Farmworker Program Staff Visit Ellenton Clinic



Pictured above (L-R) are SORH Staff members Beth Walker, Tina Register, Emma Abernathy, Ellenton clinic manager, Tiffany Hardin, and Remy Hutchins, District Program Manager, Georgia Department of Public Health.

The Georgia Farmworker Health Program staff, at the State Office of Rural Health (SORH), conducted a site visit at the Georgia Ellenton Farmworker Health Clinic in Colquitt County recently. The Ellenton Clinic is one of six clinics managed by the Georgia Farmworker Health Program that provides healthcare to migrant and seasonal workers.

Focus on Rural Health

Emanuel Medical Center Expanding Emergency Department with Rural Hospital Stabilization Funds



Emanuel Medical Center is continuing progress on the expansion of its emergency department with funding received through the Rural Hospital Stabilization Grant Program, administered by the State Office of Rural Health.

Despite being in the small community of Swainsboro, Emanuel's emergency room remains consistently busy. Recognizing the need to expand and renovate the emergency

department, Emanuel Medical Center applied \$875,000 awarded in 2023 from the Rural Hospital Stabilization Grant Program as well as \$500,000 awarded in 2024 through the Rural Hospital Support Grant for Hospital Stabilization to implement the changes. The renovation will increase the capacity and efficiency of the ED by including a 40 percent increase in available treatment beds.

“We wanted to make sure that we are providing optimal care to our community while ensuring efficiency and cost-effectiveness,” said Emergency Department Manager Brooke Marsh. “So much planning went into making this project come to fruition.”

While deciding on what the expansion would look like, representatives from Emanuel toured other facilities to gain ideas before finalizing plans.

The groundbreaking ceremony was held on September 10, 2024, and construction officially began on September 16, 2024. The renovation will include the addition of three bays, a fast-track space to address low acuity patients, two ligature-free mental health rooms, two negative pressure rooms, new indoor and outdoor signage, a new covered bay for ambulance services, and an expansion of the medication room.

Once completed, Emanuel’s optimized emergency department will feature a fast-track area so that lower-acuity patients can be seen more quickly by providers. Likewise, higher-acuity patients will receive the traditional optimized care in a hospital room setting. Upon arrival, patients will be registered, and a nurse will determine if they need to be checked into a room or simply visit the lower-acuity area of the emergency department.

“We cannot wait for the work to be completed and for the community to see the updates,” said Marsh. “We are very excited about the future of Emanuel Medical Center.” The expansion project is expected to be completed in May 2025.



Emanuel Medical Center's
Emergency Department expansion project is in progress and expected to be completed in May. The improved ED is intended to optimize care for both high and lower-acuity patients.

From Hospital Services

Global Measure Removed from MBQIP- **CAHs Will Discontinue Hospital Commitment to Health Equity Measure**

The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) announced in March that the Hospital Commitment to Health Equity measure will be eliminated from the Medicare Beneficiary Quality Improvement Project (MBQIP) core measure within the Global Measures

category.

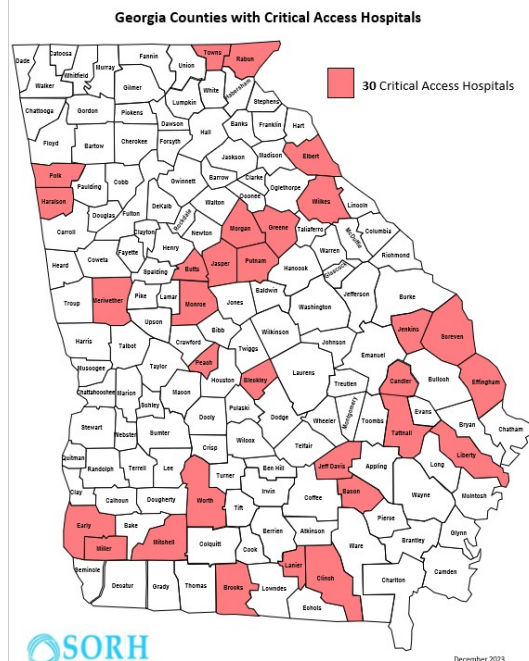
The MBQIP 2025 set of Core Measures is a list of quality measures FORHP within the Health Resources and Services Administration has adopted for use in MBQIP, a component of the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility (Flex) Program. Flex supports Georgia's 30 critical access hospitals (CAHs) by providing education and technical support for quality, financial, operational, and population health improvement.

Effective in the FY 2025 Flex cycle beginning September 1, 2025, CAHs participating in the Flex program will no longer implement and score themselves on the five domains outlined in the measure, nor be required to submit an annual report.

The CAH Quality Infrastructure global measure was also reworded to meet new administration guidelines but remains active, as well as the other measures within MBQIP, including Patient Safety, Patient Experience, Care Coordination, and Emergency Department.

The newly revised MBQIP 2025 Measure Core Set Information Guide can be referenced on the Rural Quality Improvement Technical Assistance Resource Center at the link:
<https://www.telligen.com/rqita/mbqip-measures/>.

For questions about the Flex Program, contact Dawn Waldrip at dawn.waldrip@dch.ga.gov.



National Health Service Corps New Site Application Cycle Opens this Spring



The National Health Service Corps' (NHSC) new site application cycle will be open from approximately April through May 2025. Actual dates will be announced by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

The benefits of becoming an NHSC-approved site are to help your site attract and retain qualified primary care providers, provide opportunities to network with other NHSC-approved sites and community organizations, and direct access to the Georgia Primary Care Office that helps with increasing access to primary care services in your community.

By becoming an NHSC-approved site, healthcare providers may take advantage of the NHSC Loan Repayment Program (LRP), which affords clinicians award amounts of \$75,000 for a full-time, two-year service commitment, or \$37,500 for a half-time, two-year service commitment. With continued service, NHSC LRP clinicians may be able to pay off their student debt.

To be eligible for NHSC approval, sites must be located and treat patients from a Health Professional Shortage Area. The list of sites are located at <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area>.

To read the full story, click [here](#).



Farmworker Program

Strategies for Navigating Unique Challenges of Farmers Discussed at 2025 Farm Stress Summit

The Georgia Farmworker Health Program staff, Tiffany Hardin and Tina Register, attended the 2025 Farm Stress Summit at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro on March 13. The summit, held at the university's Center for Professional Excellence, focused on addressing the critical issue of farm stress and mental health within the agricultural community, providing tools for coping, and strategies for positive collaboration.



Hosted by the University of Georgia Extension Service, the event brought together over 1,200 healthcare providers, counselors, nonprofit leaders, county officials, policymakers, Georgia Farm Bureau members, school system personnel, agricultural producers, agribusiness owner/operators, and faith-based leaders. Participants were given the opportunity to network, share knowledge, and foster collaborations in support of farm families, and learn diverse perspectives about generational farming, agriculture-related stress, community care, and breaking the conversational barriers involving mental health in the agriculture community.

To read the full story, click [here](#).



You Might be Rural If...



...the railroad crossing arm signals patience "train"ing!

Have you ever approached a railroad crossing just as the red and white crossing arm is about to lower? The lights begin to flash, and the approaching train horn grows louder and more frequent. Your anxiety builds because you realize you're about to be stuck, forced to sit patiently as what seems like 500 slow-moving box cars creep by. It always happens at the most inconvenient time, when you're in a hurry, headed to work or late for an appointment.

The railroad crossing arm can be considered a true symbol in the virtue of how to be patient, especially in rural areas. According to the Federal Highway Administration, approximately 60 percent of public at-grade crossings are in rural areas, compared to 40 percent in urban areas. For both urban and rural areas, most crossings are located on local roads.

An average of 80 trains a day cross the diamond in the south-central Georgia community of Cordele where this photo was taken, making it one of the busiest rail crossings in the Southeast. Norfolk Southern, CSX Transportation, and the Heart of Georgia Railroad, a Genesee and Wyoming short line, all use the Cordele crossing.

Recognizing the attraction for the railfan community, Cordele opened a viewing platform in 2021 in its Railway Park, providing a better and more comfortable spot for photographers and rail enthusiasts to watch the passing trains...or you could just *patiently* watch from the comfort of your car.

Photo by Dawn Waldrip



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DCH Mission Statement

The Department of Community Health will provide Georgians with access to affordable, quality health care through effective planning, purchasing and oversight.

We are dedicated to
A Healthy Georgia.

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