



Newsletter From Rep. Tara Shephard District 79

February 27, 2026



Improving Rural Health

Arkansas is moving forward with a major investment in rural healthcare through the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP). In December, the state was awarded \$208,779,396 for Fiscal Year 2026 as part of a nationwide, multi-year effort through the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to strengthen healthcare access in rural communities. Over the next five years, the program will distribute \$50 billion to states to reinforce and modernize rural health systems.

For Arkansas, this investment is especially significant. About 45% of our population—roughly 1.3 million people—live in rural areas, and 63 of 75 counties qualify as fully rural for federal program purposes. Many residents travel 25 to 35 miles to reach a hospital or specialty clinic. Nearly half of rural hospitals in the state are considered vulnerable to closure, and workforce shortages continue to strain providers. Rural communities also face higher rates of chronic disease, lower median incomes, and greater reliance on public insurance coverage.

The state's application incorporated feedback from healthcare professionals, hospitals, higher education institutions, community nonprofits, and members of the Arkansas General Assembly. An online portal generated more than 300 ideas from Arkansans on how best to use the funds.

Arkansas' plan focuses on four initiatives: HEART, promoting healthier lifestyles and preventive care; PACT, improving coordination of specialty, trauma, and telehealth services; RISE AR, strengthening the rural healthcare workforce; and THRIVE, expanding telehealth, technology-enabled monitoring, and modernized emergency response systems. While the funding was announced in December, the work continues. Public meetings with stakeholders across the state began this week and will continue next week to gather additional input as implementation moves forward.

This program represents a significant opportunity to build a stronger, more connected rural health system and ensure families can access quality care close to home. We've included the dates and information on our website at arkansashouse.org.

