

## **Saving Our Rural Hospitals**

Coming in early 2020, the COVID-19 crisis hit at an especially bad time for Texas rural hospitals, as many were already struggling to survive. In fact, 2019 saw a record number of them close across the nation, and almost half of those that survived were operating at a loss, according to a report from the Chartis Center for Rural Health.

Unfortunately, Texas leads the nation in hospital closures—twenty of our rural hospitals have been forced to close since 2010. Tennessee comes in second with twelve closures. Even without a costly pandemic to cope with, rural counties present problems that make health care delivery difficult: populations tend to be older, sicker and poorer, and many lack health insurance. Even those with insurance struggle with high deductibles and co-pays. As a result, people often go to the doctor or the hospital only when they become very ill. Illnesses that might have been prevented or treated with relatively little costs turn into disasters, imposing high costs on local hospitals, as well as needless suffering for those affected.

The situation was already especially dire for the handful of states like Texas that have refused to expand Medicaid coverage, even though the federal government picks up 90% of the cost. Not coincidentally, the states that have not expanded Medicaid saw the highest numbers of rural hospital closures. Before the pandemic and the escalating unemployment numbers almost 18% of Texans lacked insurance; now that number is rising to frightening levels. An estimated 659,000 have already lost coverage and the number seems likely to grow even larger.

The next Texas legislative session will be forced to confront this crisis. Perhaps representatives can come up with a better solution than Medicaid expansion. If so, Texas voters are entitled to know what it is before they cast their ballots.