

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**April 11, 2025**

**Center for Rural Pennsylvania Hosts Hearing on Advancing Rural  
Mental Health Awareness and Support**

**HARRISBURG** — On April 8, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors held a public hearing at the Capitol Building in Harrisburg to advance awareness and support for rural mental health. The hearing brought together lawmakers, mental healthcare professionals, and community leaders to discuss ongoing challenges and potential solutions related to mental health care in rural Pennsylvania.

“We know rural Pennsylvania faces a unique set of challenges when it comes to mental health care,” said Senator Gene Yaw, Chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors. “Limited access to providers, long distances to travel for treatment, and a shortage of specialized resources all contribute to a system facing significant barriers. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is working to find innovative solutions to address these challenges. This hearing was an important step towards building a more accessible and supportive mental health system for all Pennsylvanians, no matter where they live.”

“The testimony shared at this hearing highlights the urgent need for ongoing collaboration and solutions to address the mental health challenges facing rural Pennsylvania,” said Representative Eddie Day Pashinski, Vice Chairman of the Center’s Board. “This effort includes expanding access to services, tackling workforce shortages, and reducing stigma.”

“We want Pennsylvania to be a place where mental health services are accessible and effective, no matter where you live,” said Senator Judy Schwank, member of the Center’s Board. “But in our rural communities, people often face a unique set of challenges when it comes to getting the care they need. This hearing is an opportunity to explore some of the most common barriers to mental health care in rural Pennsylvania and begin identifying solutions.”

“I was grateful for the insight provided by mental health professionals, judges, and other officials who testified concerning the unique challenges that exist in rural communities, including homelessness,” said Representative Dan Moul, member of the Center’s Board. “Homelessness is a far more complex problem than I imagined, particularly for those with mental health and substance abuse challenges. Clearly, there is no easy fix, but as we examine this issue, I am hopeful solutions can be found that will build on the resources available.”

“The mental health struggles in our rural communities are not just data points—they’re daily realities for countless Pennsylvanians,” said Dr. Kyle C. Kopko, Executive Director of the Center. “This hearing shed vital light on the challenges and, more importantly, the opportunities to expand care, break down barriers, and ensure no one is left to face these issues alone.”

Testifiers included:

- The Honorable Judge Tiffany L. Cummings, Magisterial District Court 04-3-03, Tioga County
- Annette (Annie) L. Strite, M.A., M.H./I.D.D. Administrator and Mental Health Director
- Andrea B. Kepler, L.C.S.W., Administrator, Dauphin County Mental Health, Autism and Developmental Programs
- Chris Santarsiero, Vice President of Government Affairs, Connections Health Solutions
- Kimberly Jones, M.S., L.P.C.S., Vice President of Clinical Operations, Connections Health Solutions
- Brittney McCarthy, Strategic Account Manager, Connections Health Solutions
- Dr. Jamie Zelazny, Assistant Professor of Nursing and Psychiatry and Co-Director of the Digital Health Hub, University of Pittsburgh
- Dr. Brayden N. Kameg, Assistant Professor of Nursing, University of Pittsburgh; Director of the Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Residency Program, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System
- Dr. Brian Schurr, Central Keystone Counseling

To access the hearing recording and testimony, visit the Center's website at [www.rural.pa.gov](http://www.rural.pa.gov).

# # #

KMP