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NRHA announces 2011 Rural Health Award recipients

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is proud to announce its 2011 Rural Health Award recipients. The following organizations and individuals will be honored May 5 during the 34th Annual Rural Health Conference, which will attract more than 900 rural health professionals and students to Austin, Texas.

“We’re proud of this year’s winners,” said Alan Morgan, NRHA CEO. “They have each already made tremendous strides to advance rural health care, and we’re confident they will continue to help improve the lives of rural Americans.”

St. Mary’s/Clearwater Valley Hospitals and Clinics will receive the Outstanding Rural Health Organization Award. Located in Cottonwood and Orofino, Idaho, the two critical access hospitals and their eight satellite medical clinics provide outstanding care to three counties with 28,000 residents.

Johnson County Community Hospital will receive the Rural Health Quality Award. A dedicated staff of physicians, physical therapists and other health care professionals offers inpatient care coupled with a state-of-the-art, 24-hour emergency department to the community of Mountain City, Tenn., as well as parts of North Carolina and southwest Virginia.

Alaska Federal Health Care Partnership is this year’s Outstanding Rural Health Program. A formalized, voluntary partnership of Alaska’s federally funded health care agencies, the partnership is located in Anchorage and is affiliated with six regional tribal hospitals, 39 independent native health agencies and their 203 tribal health centers and clinics, maximizing statewide partnerships to provide affordable health care.

Dennis Kepka, MD, is NRHA’s 2011 Rural Health Practitioner of the Year. With a passion for rural communities, Kepka and his wife, Jennifer, moved to Ellsworth County, Kan., after practicing elsewhere for several years. During his tenure in his native Ellsworth County, Kepka started three rural health clinics, provided training for more than 30 physician assistant students, has provided prison and jail medical services and was the sole medical provider in the county for 18 months. Kepka has practiced medicine in Ellsworth County for more than 21 years.

Susan Stone, DNSc, will receive the Distinguished Educator of the Year Award. As president and dean of the Frontier School of Midwifery and Family Nursing in Hyden, Ky., Stone has devoted her career to advancing the education of rural health care providers throughout the United States. Stone has been instrumental in the growth and success of the school, which has more than 1,000 students and 3,000 graduates.

Robert Elliott, MD, will receive the Outstanding Researcher Award. At the Elliott-Elliott-Head Breast Cancer Research and Treatment Center in Baton Rouge, La., Elliott and his staff have created an environment where a woman can receive complete breast care and be treated by a team of skilled health care professionals. At the center, more than 20 years of research have played a pivotal role in the advancements Elliott and his staff have made toward treatment of breast cancer.

Erika Ziller will receive the Louis Gorin Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Health Care. A senior research associate with the Maine Rural Health Research Center at the Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine in Portland, Ziller has become a nationally recognized researcher. In 2010, she produced several key policy briefs on the scope and consequences of rural un-insurance and under-insurance.

Gena Cooper will receive the Student Leadership Award. A third-year medical student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a member of the Wisconsin Academy of Rural Medicine, Cooper has worked in the Office of Energy Independence and as a program analyst for Gov. Jim Doyle. She also serves as NRHA's Rural Medical Educators' student liaison.

Colin Buzza will receive the Student Achievement Award. Buzza is a medical student at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, where he is also pursuing his master's degree in public health. He volunteers with the University of Iowa Mobile Clinic, which delivers care to rural areas, especially farm workers and uninsured populations, and is a coordinator for the Iowa City Free Mental Health Clinic.

NRHA's Annual Rural Health Conference is the largest gathering of rural health professionals in the nation. John Snow Inc. provides scholarships to the student awardees to participate in the event.

"Every year, rural Americans come together to gain education and raise awareness on behalf of the 62 million Americans who live in rural areas and desperately need access to affordable health care," said Morgan.

NRHA is a nonprofit organization working to improve the health and well-being of rural Americans and providing leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education and research. NRHA membership is made up of 20,000 diverse individuals and organizations, all of whom share the common bond of an interest in rural health.

www.RuralHealthWeb.org