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Contact:
Alex Olson
816-756-3140
aolson@NRHArural.org

NRHA announces 2017 Rural Health Award recipients

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is proud to announce its 2017 Rural Health Award recipients.

“We’re especially proud of this year’s winners,” says 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.”

The following organizations and individuals will be honored May 11 during NRHA’s 40th Annual Rural Health Conference, which will bring more than 800 rural health professionals and students to San Diego.

CommWell Health (CWH), which celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2017, is this year’s **Outstanding Rural Health Organization**. “Tri-County,” as it was originally known, opened in rural Newton Grove, N.C. for migrant farmworkers and their families, growing for 20 years in its original location. In 2010, Tri-County rebranded to CWH and has since added nine practice locations throughout southeastern North Carolina. Since then CWH has expanded its services, including a mobile dental program for some of the counties’ most vulnerable schools, and has implemented research examining best practice models of care for HIV-positive patients who are homeless and experience substance abuse and mental health diagnoses.

North Carolina – Rurally Engaging and Assisting Clients who are HIV positive and Homeless (NC-REACH) has been named NRHA’s **Outstanding Rural Health Program**. NC-REACH is an innovative medical home model which focuses on HIV-positive homeless or unstably housed individuals co-diagnosed with a mental health or substance abuse disorder, helping to provide HIV primary care, behavioral health, housing and care coordination services. The study is funded for five years by the federal government through the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA), HIV/AIDS Bureau’s Special Projects of National Significance (SPNS) program. NC-REACH focuses on the association between housing status and retention in medical care and supportive services, specializing in rural populations, migrant farmworkers (all races) and monolingual Spanish-speaking Latinos. NC-REACH has established a Community Housing Coalition, which shares and exchanges resources to find available housing and long-term care for HIV-positive patients.

The **Louis Gorin Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Health Care** is given to two individuals this year. **Jim Dickson**, CEO of Copper Queen Community Hospital (CQCH), has an unwavering commitment to providing rural southern Arizonans with accessible, affordable, high-quality health care. His efforts brought state-of-the-art care to southern Arizona through renovation and expansion of the

hospital and RHC diagnostic and treatment services. Dickson has achieved this through innovative and unparalleled collaborations with major health care systems in Arizona using telemedicine for sophisticated diagnostic and specialty care in Cochise County, saving residents the expense and travel to Tucson or Phoenix for services. In addition to his work in health care, Dickson identifies and addresses unmet community needs, creating the first library for middle school students in Bisbee and offering scholarships to Cochise County high school graduates for training to land well-paying local jobs.

Howard Yonas, MD, is a nationally-recognized neurosurgeon and innovative researcher in rural and frontier patient care. Upon moving to New Mexico in 2005 from Pittsburgh, Pa., Dr. Yonas built the first freestanding department of neurosurgery. Unable to ignore the disparity in the available neurological and neurosurgical care for rural patients of New Mexico, Dr. Yonas kept money on hand for patients who needed transportation between their home and the facility. Even while doing surgery, research and running a 70-person department, Dr. Yonas applied for a CMS Innovation Grant to develop a neuro-emergent telemedicine health care delivery system. Access to Cerebral Critical Emergency Support Services, or ACCESS, is now available to any rural frontier hospital in New Mexico.

C. Donovan Beckett, DO, is NRHA's **Rural Health Practitioner of the Year**. Dr. Beckett, known to many as 'Dino,' was born and raised in Williamson, W.Va., and returned home in 2003 to serve his community after graduating from the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine. He opened a family practice in his home town and joined efforts to reinvigorate the community through his clinic. Many of Dr. Beckett's patients had little or no insurance, so he started hosting a free clinic one day a month—then several days a week. This led to his decision to transition to a non-profit federally qualified health center. The Williamson Health and Wellness Center, located in a renovated building downtown, is the parent organization of the Mingo County Diabetes Coalition and Williamson Farmer's Market. Dr. Beckett and his staff prescribe healthy eating with vegetable prescriptions filled on site and follow-ups with diabetes educators and community health workers in the same location to improve coordinated care and health outcomes. Thanks in part to these efforts, Williamson, W.Va. was awarded one of six Culture of Health Prizes from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2014.

This year's **Outstanding Educator Award** recipient is **Lisa McKeithan**. A native of rural North Carolina, McKeithan is a certified rehabilitation counselor and currently holds the title of principal investigator of the North Carolina Rurally Engaging and Assisting Clients who are HIV positive and Homeless project (NC-REACH) at CommWell Health, a federally qualified health center in Dunn, N.C. She travels throughout the year speaking at local and national conferences about evidence-based practices for effective interventions. McKeithan's dedication to public service is rooted in the belief that there must be a sustainable workforce of healthy workers to secure the infrastructure of the community. She has been essential in educating service providers who work with rural populations, and continues to advocate for programs to help patients who are homeless/unstably housed and develop community partnerships in rural communities.

NRHA's **Outstanding Researcher Award** winner is **Barbara C. Lee, PhD** in recognition of her outstanding leadership and tireless efforts in addressing child health and safety in agricultural environments. Ignited by her experiences as a rural-hospital nurse, Dr. Lee decided to pursue a PhD and start her own research program. Now a senior scientist with the Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation, Marshfield, Wis., she has directed the National Institute for Occupational Safety Health (NIOSH)-funded National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety since its establishment in 1997. Dr. Lee has chaired major efforts to set a national agenda for childhood agricultural injury prevention and led initiatives to develop voluntary standards for children's work in agriculture and for protecting non-working children

who live on and visit farms. She is also a past president of the International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health. Dr. Lee has authored more than 35 peer-reviewed publications and secured more than \$16 million in external funding. Recognizing the power of public-private cooperation, Dr. Lee was a leader in the establishment of the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA) in 2007. She served as executive director of ASHCA for nine years until the organization moved to Washington D.C. in 2016.

This year's **NRHA/John Snow Inc. Student Awards** honor two exceptional students. During her time in the PhD program in Health Services Research, Policy, and Administration at the University of Minnesota Rural Health Research Center, Student Achievement Award winner **Peiyin Hung** has served as a research assistant, taking the lead in designing policy-relevant products and challenging the field of rural health policy to apply rigorous methods to quantify the health effects of changes in health care financing, delivery, or organization on women, mothers, families, and rural communities. Hung's dissertation research fills an important gap in the literature on women's health care access in rural areas, using geographic and administrative data to explore the predictors and effects of hospital and obstetric unit closure on distance to a childbirth facility and on other birth outcomes. Hung's published research on this topic has been highlighted by national media in stories about maternity care access in rural communities. In all of her work, Hung is motivated by a deep desire to engage in policy-relevant research that will improve the health status and well-being of rural populations.

After graduating from Montana State University, Student Leadership Award winner **Julie Middleton** began working as project coordinator and research assistant for Montana's Rural Health Initiative, part of the Montana Office of Rural Health and Area Health Education Center. After working on the policy side of health, Middleton decided to pursue a more hands-on approach to rural health and matriculated at the University of Washington School of Medicine as a part of the Montana WWAMI class. While in medical school, Middleton also became involved with the National Rural Health Association. She has served as chair of the Student Constituency Group for two years, and was instrumental in expanding social media presence and growing the Student Liaison Program. Her leadership style has fostered a NRHA Student Board that has produced active members that are currently engaged in a collaborative project to create NRHA's student press kit, which contains quick-reference sheets for students learning about rural health.

Tim Wolters has been named NRHA's **Volunteer of the Year**. Wolters is director of reimbursement at Citizens Memorial Hospital in Bolivar, Mo., and brings his eye for detail to NRHA's budget and financial reports. He has served as a speaker for NRHA at several conferences and helped with the hard work of the nominations committee. His willingness to serve, his objective viewpoint, and his attention to detail have made him a prized asset to NRHA.

The **President's Award** this year goes to **Mary Sheridan**, director of the Idaho Office of Rural Health. Sheridan exemplifies the dedication, resilience, and creativity of NRHA members, and works seamlessly with the teams she serves on to empower rural communities. She has shined in leadership and cooperative roles with the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health, the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, and the National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network. She always knows how to make the most of limited resources and boundless energy, and her encouragement and teamwork have had national and international impact.