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NRHA announces 2015 Rural Health Award recipients

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is proud to announce its 2015 Rural Health Award recipients. The following organizations and individuals will be honored April 16 during NRHA's 38th Annual Rural Health Conference, which will attract 650 rural health professionals and students to Philadelphia.

"We're especially 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."

The **Rural Behavioral Health Primary Care Collaborative** and the **Innovative Readiness Training Collaboration** will both be recognized as Outstanding Rural Health Programs.

The **Rural Behavioral Health Primary Care Collaborative**, a program of the Western Montana Area Health Education Center, facilitates the delivery of mental health services by pairing critical access hospitals with University of Montana faculty. Through partnerships with three rural hospitals, pre-licensed, post-doctorate psychologists and a pre-licensed social worker provide services in rural Montana communities, working alongside physicians to directly intercept patients who are in need of behavioral intervention to improve overall health.

Innovative Readiness Training Medical Missions, a collaboration between the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) and the U.S. Department of Defense, provides health care services to medically underserved rural communities throughout the eight states of the Mississippi River Delta and Alabama Black Belt regions at no cost to patients. The missions also serve as vital training exercises for military medical personnel in reserve forces. The DRA and DOD partner with local health centers and organizations and government agencies to educate patients and communities on the importance of preventative care, local facilities that can provide future care and health insurance options.

Sakakawea Medical Center and Coal Country Community Health Center will share NRHA's Outstanding Rural Health Organization Award. In a health care culture where the need for health care organizations to collaborate and cooperate is often discussed, this critical access hospital and community health center serving patients in rural North Dakota have combined efforts resulting in a higher quality of care and improved financial gains. This success story demonstrates what can come from strong leadership, innovation and collaboration.

Wendel Ellis, DO, is NRHA's 2015 Rural Health Practitioner of the Year. Ellis is a model of community involvement in western Kansas, providing free school physicals and serving as Wallace County medical director, a nursing home medical director and EMS medical director for Greeley and Wallace counties, and as the deputy district coroner. His role has extended to mentoring and teaching students of all ages, combining professionalism, skill and patient concern with a wry sense of humor.

Steven R. Shelton, a certified physician assistant (PA), will receive the Louis Gorin Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Health Care. He serves as executive director of the Texas Area Health Education Center-East, based in Galveston. Shelton's 40-year career in rural health has included nationally recognized work in primary care workforce development, health literacy, PA education and practice and addressing health disparities. He has helped mobilize community response in events including the Columbia space shuttle accident, the West Fertilizer plant explosion and Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike.

K. Bryant Smalley, PhD, PsyD, will receive NRHA's 2015 Outstanding Educator Award. Smalley is a clinical psychologist and executive director of the Rural Health Research Institute at Georgia Southern University. He has operated a broad range of rural health initiatives spanning research, training and outreach, and engaging more than 30 faculty and 20 students from various universities, as well as more than 50 community partners. Smalley has also authored numerous grants and articles on rural health.

Mark Holmes, PhD, will receive NRHA's 2015 Outstanding Researcher Award. Through his leadership of the North Carolina Rural Health Research and Policy Analysis Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the organization has developed a leading reputation in rural health research. His work on Medicare rural hospital reimbursement policy and the Critical Access Hospital Financial Indicator Report, produced by the Flex Monitoring Team, garnered Holmes' national attention. He has authored more than 50 published articles and has presented at numerous meetings.

Alex Spencer will receive this year's Student Leadership Award. Spencer is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Washington School of Medicine in the Targeted Rural and Underserved Track. He created a new program available to all rural health students to promote leadership and membership within NRHA: the Student Liaison Program. Through this initiative, any student may connect with other students and share ideas on how rural health education can be improved in an official capacity. He also volunteers as chair of NRHA's Student Constituency Group Board and a board member of the Western Washington Area Health Education Center.

NRHA's Annual Rural Health Conference is the largest gathering of rural health professionals in the nation. John Snow Inc. provides a scholarship to the student awardee to participate in the NRHA conference or other educational pursuits.

"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 wellbeing of rural Americans and providing leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education and research. NRHA membership is made up of 21,000 diverse individuals and organizations, all of whom share the common bond of an interest in rural health.