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NRHA announces 2020 Rural Health Award recipients

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is proud to announce its **2020 Rural Health Award recipients**. The Rural Health Awards are given each year to individuals and organizations in the field of rural health who have dedicated their time and talents to improving the health and well-being of others.

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

Baldwin Family Health Care is this year’s **Outstanding Rural Health Organization**. For more than 50 years, BFHC has provided critical care to six largely rural counties in Michigan. As the first federally qualified health center in the state, the organization has demonstrated leadership in providing medical, dental, behavioral health, pharmacy, vision, mammography, x-ray, and outreach programs/services focused on rural and underserved populations. “BFHC continues to develop programming and services that integrate all vital parts of health care to promote and increase the overall health and well-being of a person and the community as a whole,” says Shane Douglas of Neighborhood Health Association in Toledo, Ohio.

The Collaborative Courts Addiction and Drug Service Program at Margaret Mary Health has been named NRHA’s **Outstanding Rural Health Program**. Addressing the substance abuse treatment and mental health needs of rural Batesville, Ind., the program has a 70 percent completion rate despite 100 percent of patients being documented IV methamphetamine and heroin users, which is about 10 times the average of outpatient programs as a whole. Ninety-five percent of patients are employed within a month of entering the program, and only 10 percent of patients who complete the program go on to re-offend. “By working together as a community, the program has become a viable way to tackle every angle of the addiction epidemic in a way that is sustainable, cost-effective, and accessible,” says Tim Putnam, Margaret Mary Health CEO and president.

Greg Puckett has been awarded the **Louis Gorin Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Health Care**. As executive director of Community Connections, a community-based nonprofit in Princeton, W.V., Puckett continually pushes for strong public policy, leads others to combat the problems associated with addiction, challenges the norms on negative health outcomes, and embarks on community revitalization/stabilization efforts. He is also involved with a number of state and national committees dedicated to addiction and mental health issues. “He dedicates his personal time to mentor young people by coaching high school swimming, producing community-based murals and environmental impact projects ... and is an advocate for change,” says Jennifer Farmer of Virginia Tech.

Jeff Viar, DO, is NRHA’s **Rural Health Practitioner of the Year**. A rural health clinic physician for Foothills Medical Associates in Columbus, N.C., with more than 20 years of rural experience, Viar also provides care at a retirement community and a substance abuse clinic, and serves as a trustee on the hospital board. A champion for education, he partnered with the area health education center to bring a family medicine residency program to the clinic, inspiring the

next generation of providers to stay in their rural community. “He makes you feel like he has no where else to be, even though you know there are patients in every other room waiting on him,” says one of Viar’s patients. “He truly cares.”

This year’s **Outstanding Educator Award** recipient is **Andrea Wendling, MD**. Serving as director of rural medicine curriculum and professor of family medicine at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, Wendling developed a pipeline program for undergraduate students from rural backgrounds that provides opportunities to job shadow or volunteer, practice interview skills, and learn about the uniqueness of rural medicine. She also serves as director of the university’s Leadership in Rural Medicine Program. “Dr. Wendling is a rural health warrior,” says Shelby Owens of Michigan State University College of Human Medicine. “She is a true inspiration for rural students, residents, educators, and researchers.”

NRHA’s **Outstanding Researcher Award** winner is **Jan Eberth, PhD**, who serves as associate professor of epidemiology at the University of South Carolina and director of the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy-funded Rural and Minority Health Research Center. Eberth leads policy-relevant research on rural health issues related to cancer disparities, access to care, and the unique challenges experienced by rural persons of color. “Dr. Eberth’s commitment to rural health research is saliently seen in her service and advocacy for rural health research and in her mentorship of the next generation of rural health researchers,” says Whitney Zahnd, University of South Carolina Rural and Minority Health Research Center research assistant professor.

This year’s **NRHA/John Snow Inc. Student Leadership Award** goes to **Jennifer Kowalkowski**. As a midcareer student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Kowalkowski is using her 15 years of professional experience to think critically about the needs and priorities of rural health. She has conducted studies to address rural health workforce disparities in Wisconsin, including the state’s first rural-urban analysis of RN workforce data, and she regularly advocates on behalf of rural nurses. “Jennifer Kowalkowski’s vision, commitment, and engagement make her an up-and-coming leader and innovator in rural health and nursing education,” says Tim Size, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative executive director.

Lisa Simon, DMD, has earned the **NRHA/John Snow Inc. Student Achievement Award**. A medical student at Harvard Medical School, Simon received a microresearch award from the Collaborative for Rural Primary Care Research Education and Practice and presented early results of her project on primary care providers’ views on oral health at a rural Indian Health Service site at NRHA’s 2019 Annual Rural Health Conference. “Through persistence and with a small amount of funding, she has engaged a community in addressing a significant rural health issue,” says Randall Longenecker, Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine assistant dean of rural and underserved programs.

Timothy L. Putnam, DHA, has been named NRHA’s **Volunteer of the Year**. Putnam served as NRHA’s 2019 president and is also president and CEO of Margaret Mary Health in Batesville, Ind. “To put it simply, I was incredibly impressed with Tim Putnam’s presence leading NRHA’s volunteer board and staff last year,” says NRHA’s Alex Olson. “He’s a passionate and successful ambassador for rural health, and he served the position with energy and sincerity, handling some of the highest demands and biggest challenges we’ve seen at NRHA with grace and an even keel.”

The **President’s Award** goes to **Tommy Barnhart**. Selected for the award by NRHA President Pat Schou, Barnhart serves as president of Ten Mile Enterprises LLC and has more than 45 years of experience in health care finance and operations working with hospitals, long-term care

providers, home health agencies, hospices, clinics, and other health care entities. “Tommy Barnhart represents the best of what a NRHA leader should be,” said Pat Schou, 2020 NRHA president. “We all need to emulate Tommy Barnhart for his work and NRHA dedication.” Barnhart has been extensively involved in NRHA for nearly 20 years, serving as Rural Health Clinic Constituency Group chair, Rural Health Congress chair, association secretary, and association president. He is also currently the chair of NRHA’s Global Health Committee.

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