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NRHA announces 2019 Rural Health Award recipients

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is proud to announce its **2019 Rural Health Award recipients** to be honored at the largest gathering of rural health professionals in the country **May 9** in Atlanta, Ga.

“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.”

The following organizations and individuals will be honored during NRHA’s 42nd Annual Rural Health Conference, which will bring hundreds of rural health professionals and students from across the country to Atlanta.

Stone Mountain Health Services (SMHS) is this year’s **Outstanding Rural Health Organization**. SMHS is a federally qualified health center with clinics located in the westernmost counties of Virginia. In 1991, SMHS opened its respiratory care clinics to provide holistic health care to active, retired, and former coal miners with black lung disease and other patients with occupationally acquired respiratory illnesses/diseases and/or exposures. The SMHS Black Lung Program has improved access to health services and information through outreach, preventive health and education, quality and efficiency of care, and strong community support and involvement.

The Bienville Parish School-Based Rural Telehealth Program has been named NRHA’s **Outstanding Rural Health Program**. Addressing the health care needs of school-aged children, the program forged collaborations with a hospital district service board, rural health clinic, and school district to bring health care services directly to six public K-12 schools. The Bienville Parish School District serves more than 2,200 students across 822 square miles, and in the 2017-18 schoolyear, Bienville school nurses facilitated 695 telehealth visits. Parents and teachers have expressed overwhelming satisfaction and a sense of pride in the program.

Maria Ryan, PhD, APRN, has been awarded the **Louis Gorin Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Health Care**. Through her expertise, creativity, and determination, Ryan has ensured Cottage Hospital, a critical access hospital in Woodsville, N.H., remains steadfast and successful. As CEO of the facility, Ryan is committed to providing accessible, compassionate, quality health care in her rural community and around the world. “Her loyalty to health and well-being extends not only locally, but nationally as well,” says Stephanie Chase, Cottage Hospital executive assistant. “Her integrity and consistent commitment are readily evident to her community, her board, her staff, and her patients.”

Paula Hill-Collins, DNP, is NRHA’s **Rural Health Practitioner of the Year**. As clinical director of the Health Wagon in Wise, Va., Hill-Collins helps lead a \$2.2 million nonprofit that serves some of the

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nation's poorest and most underserved individuals. As southwest Virginia's only dedicated safety net clinic, the Health Wagon provides quality, affordable, accessible care to more than 4,000 patients each year, 86 percent of whom are uninsured. In addition to a stationary clinic, Hill-Collins also leads one of the nation's oldest mobile health clinics, which acts as a medical home for many patients who cannot travel for treatment.

This year's **Outstanding Educator Award** recipient is **Michael Kennedy, MD, FAAFP**. As associate dean for rural health education at University of Kansas Medical School, Kennedy is involved in everything from presenting lectures to mentoring interest groups to precepting students and residents. He also directs the school's rural initiatives, including a pipeline program and elective and required preceptorships, which serve as a successful model for filling rural health care workforce needs. "His pure and honest portraits of life as a rural doctor in service to a community have moved us all," says Meghan Blythe, University of Kansas School of Medicine student.

NRHA's **Outstanding Researcher Award** winner is **Michael Meit, MA, MPH**. As co-director of the NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis, Meit's career is dedicated to rural public health, including publishing research in peer-reviewed journals and informing community stakeholders and policymakers. In 2008, Meit was among the first researchers in the country to identify the misuse of prescription drugs in Appalachia. "His research findings inform policy, guide philanthropic investments, and support rural community stakeholders' efforts to improve health and well-being," says Alana Knudson, NORC Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis co-director.

This year's **NRHA/John Snow Inc. Student Achievement Award** goes to **Kacie Hoyle Denton**. A medical student at Quillen College of Medicine, East Tennessee State University, Denton has undertaken an ambitious project that involves distributing digital cameras to refugee populations in Central America, allowing Denton to learn about factors that influence their health. "The benefit of this project was obvious, but the ability to pull it off successfully seemed remote," says Jason Moore, Quillen-East Tennessee State University professor of family medicine. "But that's just what Kacie did – she allowed a community of underserved, overlooked, and unrepresented people to not only tell their story, but show it as well." Denton also serves as coordinator for NRHA's Student Constituency Group.

Donald Quintin Brubaker has earned the **NRHA/John Snow Inc. Student Leadership Award**. A fourth-year medical student in the Rural Track Program at West Virginia University, Brubaker exemplifies student leadership and passion for rural health care. He saw a need for peer involvement in recruitment to the school's rural track and took a leadership role in developing an informational session held during medical school applicant interviews, which resulted in increased interest in the rural track program. Brubaker is also a student leader for Project REACH (Rural Education Alliance for Community Health), which addresses chronic pain and opioid dependency by creating shared medical appointments.

Susan Kunz, MPH, has been named NRHA's **Volunteer of the Year**. In addition to serving as chief of program development at Mariposa Community Health Center in Nogales, Ariz., Kunz has volunteered to chair NRHA's Health Equity Council for the last two years and has been instrumental in helping the council and the Health Equity Conference grow. Kunz is also a member of the association's Border Health Initiative group and has presented at many NRHA events. She's always willing to help NRHA's Government Affairs and Program Services teams, and she is an unwavering advocate of the association's mission.

The **President's Award** goes to **Bill Auxier, PhD**. Selected for the award by NRHA President Tim Putnam, DHA, Auxier serves as CEO of Rural Health Leadership Radio, which interviews rural health professionals from across the country. "This year's President's Award winner has taken it upon himself to seek out and share the stories of leaders and caregivers striving to make health care in rural America

better in spite of the overwhelming challenges we face,” Putnam says. “His effort has started to chronicle the voice of the heroes we should learn from and lessons we should pass down to the next generation.”

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