The Need to Control Hospital Spending Without Harming Patients

Hospitals are an essential part of the healthcare system. Although far more care is being delivered in patients’ homes, physicians’ offices, and ambulatory surgery centers today than in the past, there are many types of services that cannot be safely delivered in any setting other than a hospital.

Moreover, it is important for every community to have adequate hospital capacity available when it is needed. During the coronavirus pandemic, hospitals unexpectedly needed to provide care for tens of thousands of patients with COVID-19. Some communities were forced to erect temporary hospitals or inpatient units in order to ensure there would be adequate capacity to treat all patients who needed care.

However, hospitals are also very expensive. The United States spends more than $1.2 trillion each year on hospital services. More than one-third (38%) of total healthcare spending goes to hospitals, a far larger share than any other healthcare sector. Over the past two decades, national spending on hospital services tripled, more than the increase in total healthcare spending and far more than the growth in personal income. Hospital spending is expected to increase even faster now due to inflation, supply chain problems, and staff shortages.

Because hospitals represent such a large portion of total healthcare spending, it will be almost impossible to make health care or health insurance more affordable unless methods are found to control the growth in spending on hospital care. However, this must also be done in a way that preserves the ability of all citizens to obtain high-quality hospital care in a timely fashion.

As the country searches for policies that will control or reduce hospital spending while maintaining access to quality care, it is essential to recognize that the nation’s hospitals fall into two very different categories: (1) small rural hospitals, and (2) urban and larger rural hospitals. These two groups of hospitals differ dramatically in terms of both the amount they contribute to healthcare spending growth and the size of the financial challenges they face in delivering healthcare to the communities they serve.

How Rural Hospitals Differ From Urban Hospitals

Almost one-half of the nation’s short-term general hospitals are located in rural areas. Rural hospitals differ from urban hospitals both in terms of their size and their distance from other hospitals:

- Most rural hospitals are the only source of hospital care in their community. Most cities and urban areas have multiple hospitals that patients can use, but most rural communities have only one hospital that is easily accessible, if they have a hospital at all.
- Two-thirds of urban hospitals are less than 5 miles away from another hospital, and almost 90% are within a 15 mile drive from another hospital.
- In contrast, almost two-thirds of rural hospitals are more than 20 miles away from the next closest hospital, and one-fourth are 30 miles or more away.

- Most rural hospitals are much smaller than urban hospitals. Although there are some large hospitals located in communities that are classified as rural, most rural hospitals are much smaller than most urban hospitals. The size of a hospital has traditionally been defined in terms of the number of inpatient beds it is licensed to operate, but most of the services that hospitals deliver today are ambulatory care services, not inpatient care. Consequently, a hospital’s total annual

![Cumulative Growth in National Hospital Spending and Personal Income, 2000–2020](chart)

Sources: CMS National Healthcare Expenditure Accounts, BEA Personal Income Data

![Driving Distance to Closest Alternative Hospital](diagram)

Sources: CMS Provider of Services data, Google Maps
expenses is a better measure of a hospital’s relative size than the number of inpatient beds:

- Most urban hospitals have over 200 inpatient beds, whereas most rural hospitals have 25 or fewer beds.
- One-half of urban hospitals have expenses of $250 million or more, whereas only 2% of rural hospitals are that large.
- One-half of rural hospitals have total expenses of $35 million or less, whereas only 4% of urban hospitals are that small.

There are six major differences between small rural hospitals and other hospitals that must be considered in establishing policies and payments for hospital services:

1. Most small rural hospitals lose money delivering services to patients, while most urban hospitals and larger rural hospitals make profits on patient services. The primary source of revenues for most hospitals is the payments for services they receive from health insurance plans. Most small rural hospitals are paid less for services by insurance plans than the cost of delivering those services. In contrast, most larger rural hospitals and urban hospitals have been paid more – often significantly more – than it costs them to deliver services to patients.

2. Small rural hospitals lose money on patient services because of inadequate payments from private insurance plans, whereas urban hospitals and larger rural hospitals make large profits on services to patients with private insurance. Most hospitals lose money on Medicaid and uninsured patients. However, while large hospitals can offset these losses with the profits they make on patients who have private insurance, small rural hospitals cannot.

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**Six Differences Between Small Rural Hospitals and Other Hospitals**

Small rural hospitals – those with annual expenses below the median for rural hospitals ($35 million in 2020) – deliver many of the same kinds of essential services as larger hospitals do – they have emergency services available around the clock, they provide basic laboratory tests and imaging studies, and they provide inpatient care and outpatient care for a wide range of health problems. However, they face far greater financial challenges in delivering essential healthcare services than both urban hospitals and larger rural hospitals.

There are over 1,000 small rural hospitals in the country, representing one-fourth of the nation’s total short-term general acute hospitals. Most states (43) have at least one small rural hospital; in 23 states, at least one-fourth of all the hospitals in the state are small rural hospitals, and in 6 of those states, 50% or more of the hospitals are small rural hospitals. Small rural hospitals are the principal source of healthcare for the residents and workers in many of the nation’s agricultural areas and ranchlands, which require large amounts of land for crops and animals but have relatively few residents per square mile. In many cases, these hospitals are also the only source of primary care for the communities they serve.

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**Total Hospital Expenses in 2020**

![Total Hospital Expenses in 2020](chart)

**Number of Small Rural Hospitals by State**

![Number of Small Rural Hospitals by State](chart)

**Median Margin on Patient Services, 2019**

![Median Margin on Patient Services, 2019](chart)
Prior to the pandemic, the median profit at small rural hospitals on services delivered to patients with private insurance (including Medicare Advantage plans) was only 2.3%. Almost half (46%) of small rural hospitals lost money delivering services to patients with private insurance.

In contrast, the median profit on services to patients with private insurance was 27% at large rural hospitals and 35% at urban hospitals.

A common myth about small rural hospitals is that almost all of their patients are on Medicare or Medicaid or are uninsured. In fact, on average, almost half of the services at small rural hospitals are delivered to patients with private insurance, only slightly lower than the percentage in urban hospitals. As a result, low margins or losses on patients with private insurance, combined with losses on Medicaid and uninsured patients, cause small rural hospitals to have large overall losses on patient services.

In 2017, the median small rural hospital had fewer than 4,000 ED visits per year (about 10 visits per day). In contrast, the median was over 16,000 ED visits per year at larger rural hospitals and over 42,000 visits at urban hospitals (10 times as many as the median small rural hospital).

Because of the smaller number of visits, the median small rural hospital had an average cost per ED visit of $476 in 2017, 60-70% higher than the $276 cost per ED visit at the median large rural hospital and the $304 cost per ED visit at the median urban hospital.

Most urban hospitals charge more than four times as much as it costs them to deliver services. As a result, the median profit at urban hospitals on services delivered to patients with private insurance was 27%.

4. Small rural hospitals charge less relative to their costs than urban and larger rural hospitals, which contributes to losses from private insurance plans. The prices that any hospital charges for its services have to be high enough to cover the costs of delivering the services and also high enough to offset the losses on services delivered to those patients who do not have insurance, who cannot pay the cost-sharing amounts required by their insurance, or who have an insurance plan that pays less than the cost of services. However, many hospitals charge far more than is necessary to cover their costs.

Most urban hospitals charge more than four times as much as it costs them to deliver services. As a result, the median profit at urban hospitals on services delivered to patients with private insurance was 27%.
result, they can provide large discounts to private insurance plans and still make significant profits on their services. In 2019, the median urban hospital charged 4.7 times what it cost to deliver services, more than double the markup at small rural hospitals, and the median large rural hospital charged amounts that were 3.1 times its costs. One-fourth of urban hospitals charged prices more than 6 times what it cost them to deliver services.

- In contrast, at most small rural hospitals, their charges are less than twice what it costs them to deliver their services. In 2019, the median small rural hospital charged only 1.8 times what it cost to deliver services. As a result, small rural hospitals suffer financially when they are forced to provide large discounts to health insurance plans.

6. **Small rural hospitals are more likely to close due to inadequate revenues.** If a hospital does not receive sufficient revenues from insurance payments or government funding to cover its costs over multiple years, it will ultimately be forced to close. Over 100 rural hospitals have closed in the past decade, and nearly 80% of these closures have been small rural hospitals. Many more small rural hospitals would likely have been forced to close during the pandemic had it not been for the large federal grants they received. Since these grants were only temporary and small hospitals experienced significant increases in costs during the pandemic, more small rural hospitals may have to close in the near future unless better ways of paying them are implemented.

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**Efforts to Control Healthcare Spending Need to Differentiate Small Rural Hospitals and Larger Hospitals**

Clearly, there are very significant differences between small rural hospitals and larger hospitals, both urban and rural. These differences have important implications for designing policies that control or reduce spending on hospital services while ensuring access to essential health services for citizens in all parts of the country:

- Little in the way of savings can be achieved by reducing payments to small rural hospitals. Although small rural hospitals represent 25% of the short-term general hospitals in the country, they only receive 2% of nation-
al spending on hospital services, and they account for less than 2% of the significant increase in national hospital spending that has occurred in recent years. Revenues at small rural hospitals increased by a total of $5 billion nationally from 2013 to 2019, compared to an increase of more than $200 billion at urban hospitals. Even a large reduction in spending on services at small rural hospitals would have only a minuscule impact on total national healthcare spending.

- Reducing payments to small rural hospitals will accelerate closures and reduce access to services for rural communities. Policies and programs designed to reduce spending on hospitals by cutting payments for hospital services or reducing utilization of hospital services will have a far more negative impact on small rural hospitals than larger hospitals, because profit margins at most small rural hospitals are already low or negative. Even a small reduction in revenues at small rural hospitals could force more of them to close. Although revenues decreased for most hospitals in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the majority of urban hospitals and large rural hospitals remained profitable, whereas an even higher proportion of small rural hospitals lost money on patient services. Many small rural hospitals were only able to continue operating because the special federal assistance provided to hospitals during the pandemic enabled them to offset these losses.

Small Rural Hospitals Need Better Payments from Both Private and Public Payers

The data show that there is little to be gained by reducing spending on small rural hospitals and much to be lost by doing so. Conversely, providing adequate payments to small rural hospitals could preserve access to essential healthcare services for rural communities with minimal impact on overall healthcare spending. The losses on patient services at all of the small rural hospitals in the country could be eliminated for less than $2 billion per year – less than two-tenths of one percent of total national spending on hospitals.

Unfortunately, Medicare payment policies are making things worse for small rural hospitals rather than better:

- Cuts in Payments to Critical Access Hospitals. Although Medicare payments under the Inpatient Prospective Payment System (IPPS) are being increased in 2023 by the highest amount in 25 years, most small rural hospitals will not benefit from this. Over 80% of small rural hospitals are designated as Critical Access Hospitals, which are not paid under IPPS. Medicare payments to Critical Access Hospitals have actually been reduced because of the return of sequestration reductions. Medicare now pays Critical Access Hospitals only 99% of what it costs the hospitals to deliver services, which means that most small rural hospitals will be guaranteed to lose money on services they deliver to Medicare beneficiaries.

- Reducing Access to Inpatient Care. A new federal Rural Emergency Hospital program has been promoted as a way of preventing rural hospital closures. However, it would require a small rural hospital to close its inpatient unit, thereby eliminating a service that proved to be essential in most communities during the pandemic. In addition, the payments for the hospital’s outpatient services would no longer be based on the cost of delivering hospital services in rural areas.

- Creating Budgets That Are Smaller Than What It Costs to Deliver Care. The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) has proposed creating “global budgets” as a way of helping small rural hospitals. However, CMMI’s demonstration program to test this concept (called the CHART Model) would cut the amount of Medicare revenue the hospitals have received in the past, and their payments in the future would no longer be based on the actual increases in the costs of delivering services in rural areas.

Moreover, while most proposals for helping small rural hospitals have focused on changing payments under Traditional Medicare, the primary cause of financial losses at small rural hospitals has been inadequate payments from private health insurance plans (including both employer-sponsored insurance and Medicare Advantage plans). As a result, even if Medicare payments for small rural hospitals were increased, it would not be enough to prevent rural hospital closures unless there are also significant increases in payments from private health insurance plans and state Medicaid programs.
The Two Types of Hospitals in the U.S.

Creating A Better Way of Paying Small Rural Hospitals

The financial problems at small rural hospitals are caused not only by the inadequate amounts paid by private health insurance and Medicaid plans, but by the problematic method all payers use to pay for services. Small rural hospitals are paid for delivering individual services to patients, but there is no fee or other payment at all for what residents of a rural community would likely view as one of the most important services of all – the availability of physicians, nurses, and other staff to treat an injury or serious health problem quickly if the resident experiences an injury or problem. Having health insurance that pays fees for ED visits, laboratory tests, or treatments is of little value if there is no Emergency Department, laboratory, or treatment capability available in the community for the resident to use.

A hospital’s ability to deliver a service on short notice is often referred to as “standby capacity,” because a minimum level of personnel and equipment must be standing by in case a patient needs the service, even if it turns out that no patient actually does need it. The coronavirus pandemic made many people aware for the first time that current payment systems do not ensure that hospitals have enough standby capacity to handle unexpectedly large increases in the number of patients who need hospital care. While large hospitals can pay for the costs of standby capacity using the profits they make on delivering services, small rural hospitals do not have that ability.

Community fire departments aren’t supported by fees charged for fighting fires, and small rural hospitals can’t be supported solely through fees paid when people are sick. In order to preserve and strengthen essential hospital services in rural communities, small rural hospitals need to receive Standby Capacity Payments from both private and public payers in addition to being paid Service-Based Fees when individual services are delivered.

A Better Way to Pay Small Rural Hospitals

The Standby Capacity Payment would support the fixed costs of essential services at the hospital, and Service-Based Fees would only need to cover the variable costs of those services.

The details on how to design and implement this approach are described in the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform’s report Saving Rural Hospitals and Strengthening Rural Healthcare. Citizens, businesses, local governments, state government, and the federal government must all take action to ensure that every payer provides adequate and appropriate payments for small rural hospitals before more rural communities lose access to essential healthcare services.