



Rural Quality of Life: Opportunities and Challenges for the Rural Care Economy

Testimony before the Senate Agriculture Committee

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Good morning, Chair Stabenow, Senator Boozman and members of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Thank you to Senator Bennet for the kind introduction and thank you all for the opportunity to testify today.

I am Dr. Joseph Carrica, but I simply go by JC, and I am the CEO of Southeast Health Group in southeast Colorado where the cattle outnumber the residence 7-1. I am also a fourth generation Otero County resident, as my Basque sheepherder family homesteaded in Colorado in 1909. Southeast Health Group is located in the historical agricultural plains of southeastern Colorado, nowhere near mountains or skiing, and we are largely represented by farmers, ranchers, ag workers, and their families.

**Partnerships:** I would like to briefly touch on several of the important mental health and substance use issues we are seeing in rural Colorado. But before I do, I would like to acknowledge the great partnership we have with Colorado State University Extension office, Colorado Department of Agriculture, Agrability, Farm Bureau, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, the National Council on Mental Health Wellbeing, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network. These organizations have done a tremendous job in Colorado bringing “rural stress” to the forefront of mental health and substance use discussions. We share products, promote each other’s programs, and cross-train on what we find to be effective interventions for our agriculture community that I call home. I would also like to thank Sens. Jon Tester and Chuck Grassley for the Seeding Rural Resilience Act, which recognized that farmers, ranchers, and other rural Americans are at particular risk of suicide given a variety of stress-

inducing factors, including social isolation, economic challenges, and poor access to mental health resources and support services.

**CCBHCs:** In the spring of 2021 we were notified that we were awarded a CCBHC readiness grant. While we began to develop our competencies regarding services to veterans and native American/Indigenous Peoples as a requirement of CCBHC, we found an opportunity to begin mimicking special population work for rural stress and embedded our Ag Advisory Board into our CCBHC transformation. This advisory board develops culturally competent marketing material, while providing training and education on behavioral health interventions.

Most recently, members of this advisory group developed a Soil Health & Mental Health: Growing Together support group. It has volunteer representation from the seed industry, the water conservation district, crop protection, behavioral health, ag research, and of course our farmers and ranchers.

During conversations on weather, commodities, the increased price of fertilizer and diesel, bank loan payments, and how to deal with the end of legacy ranches and farms as children are not returning to take the operations over, mental health check-ins covertly happen. As a result, this summer we created a safe space in Rocky Ford, Colorado where we offer free coffee, doughnuts and conversation two days a week. All of the Ag Advisory Committee's efforts are now coined the Coffee Break Project.

**Technology/Tele-health & Access:** CCBHC funding allowed Southeast Health Group to purchase and deploy nearly 100 iPad's, with paid data packages, into the region to accommodate those that have access to care issues, whether that is transportation, profound remoteness, or simply the fear of having your car, or pickup seen in our parking lot. This tele-service now keeps five therapists very busy.

It is also clear that Covid has worsened the opioid epidemic across the US. Rural communities have especially been hit hard with heroin overdoses, the resurfacing of methamphetamine, and now the acceleration of fentanyl distribution and deaths. I was granted the privilege of being appointed to the Colorado's Opioid Crisis Recovery Funds Advisory Committee and while I believe the settlement funds across the state with undoubtedly help us build infrastructure to address this opioid addiction problem, it is going to take cross-system, across-locale collaboration to develop a well-coordinated effort over a couple of decades to have measurable impacts. We are seeing early wins in our region by introducing opioid addicted patients to alternative health care options through our pain management program that is coordinated by our physical therapy and physical health departments.

**Rural Children's Mental Health:** As I come to the end of my presentation time, I would be amiss to not mention the concern I have for my athletes. I have coached girls fastpitch softball for over twenty-years at the collegiate, high school, and club level and am gravely concerned about the Covid-19 pandemic effects on my kids. It is extremely important that our rural schools have the ability to provide consistent mental well-being supports and provide our educators and administrators training on useful and effective interventions.

Thank you again for your invitation, and allowing me to share just a glimpse of the great collaborative efforts currently happening in Colorado to address rural stress supported by our CCBHC award and the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Program. Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions you may have for me.