Rural areas could face challenges during fall and winter

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TUCSON, Ariz. (KOLD News 13) - Dan Derksen, M.D. with the University of Arizona’s Center for Rural Health, said two of the most common factors for COVID-19 impacts, are socio-economic status and living in a rural area, among other risk factors. “COVID-19 has disproportionately affected certain populations,” said Derksen.

Drive times to get care can often be much longer than urban areas and smaller hospitals serve large geographic regions. It’s a problem many in rural areas have faced before the pandemic.

The Robert Graham Center estimates by 2030, Arizona will need nearly two-thousand more physicians to keep up with demand. Derksen said the Arizona surge line and telehealth have helped ease some of the burden on healthcare systems, but rural areas still face challenges—especially as we enter the fall and winter.

“We’ve never really emerged from the first wave,” he said.

Flu and other respiratory illnesses could pile on with COVID-19 infections.

“(It) could add stress to the systems that are always borderline stretched, especially in these rural areas,” said Derksen.

Right now, trends are looking more positive, with hospitalizations, daily cases and other daily statistics trending down. Santa Cruz county has almost double the amount of deaths per 100,000 people than Pima County. Federal dollars have helped, sending about $71,000 to 16 rural and critical access hospitals for COVID-19 support, most of those also got another $8,500. Derksen said testing and contact tracing will help these communities continue to see better stats.

“For these very small communities, it’s very important because we have these people spreading the virus and never having a symptom,” he said.

According to the Center for Rural Health, about 18 percent of COVID-19 deaths in Arizona have been indigenous people, who make up less than 5 percent of the population.