



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MEL & ENID ZUCKERMAN COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Center for Rural Health

ANNUAL REPORT FY 2026



Executive Summary

Daniel Derksen, MD, Director, Arizona Center for Rural Health

On July 4, 2025, an unprecedented federal investment in rural health of \$50 billion over five years was enacted as part of the 331-page P.L. 119-21 (aka H.R. 1 or OBBBA). It includes the five-page, Section 71401 Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) provision. CMS awarded the State of Arizona RHTP \$166,958,966 per year for five years. The state began posting funding opportunities ([AHCCCS RHTP website](#)) exactly one year later in July 2026.

Arizona's RHTP presents exciting opportunities to work with partners to improve and transform the health and wellness of Arizona's rural, tribal, border and vulnerable populations.

However, the P.L. 119-21 onerous Medicaid redetermination provisions (twice yearly + work requirements for the expansion population) begin with the new calendar year (January 2027). Forecasts predict dramatic increases the state's uninsured and rising uncompensated care that will affect low-income Arizonans and health providers, especially in the state's rural, tribal and border communities.

Failure to extend the tax credits that expired in December 2025, skyrocketed Affordable Care Act marketplace premiums. As a result, 120,000 fewer Arizonans enrolled in ACA plans in March 2026 compared to March 2025 effectuated enrollment .

The forecasts for FY 2027 and beyond are alarming – with threats to public benefit programs including supplemental nutrition assistance, Medicaid, Medicare, and others. Navigating near- and long-term perils requires collaborative, community-based engagement and preparation.

Starting 7/1/2026, AzCRH will embark on a statewide strategic planning effort (see page 3), working with our rural partners to improve AzCRH data, analysis, technical assistance, and funding opportunity education and dissemination.

Interest in Arizona's rural, tribal and border health opportunities and challenges is at an all-time high with standing room only at our February 2026 Rural Health Policy Forum and near record attendance (>350 in-person attendees) at our 52nd Annual Rural Health Conference June 2-3, 2026 in Flagstaff.

AzCRH houses federal, state and foundation grants and provides webinars, conferences, technical assistance, data, analyses and reports to inform and support Arizonans, providers and policymakers on rural health services, best practices, legislation, health workforce, insurance coverage, and funding opportunities.

The State of Arizona, the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and other federal, state and foundation grant funded AzCRH initiatives include: our state and federally funded and designated Arizona State Office of Rural Health that just received its five-year competing continuation notice of award for fiscal years 2027-2031; the HRSA Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program; the Flex EMS Supplement; the Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program; the ADHS-CDC funded Overdose Data to Action in States (OD2A-S) initiative; and a primary care graduate medical education (PC GME) initiative.

These are detailed in this FY 2026 AzCRH Annual Report. These initiatives allow AzCRH staff, faculty, and statewide collaborators to carry out its mission, provide technical assistance, funding, education and information exchange with rural, tribal and border health providers and systems. AzCRH efforts are perfectly aligned with the University of Arizona land grant mission.

On behalf of the AzCRH faculty, staff, students and collaborators across Arizona and the nation, I thank you for your partnership and look forward to continuing our work with you in FY 2027 and beyond!

Daniel Derksen, MD
Director

The Arizona Center for Rural Health's core mission is to improve the health and wellness of Arizona's rural and underserved populations.

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AzCRH Begins a Five-Year Strategic Planning Process for FY 2027

Joe Ichter, DrPH, Bryna Koch, DrPH and Daniel Derksen, MD

In FY 2027, the Arizona Center for Rural Health (AzCRH) launches a five-year strategic plan with in-person interviews at 25 partner sites. This process coincides with the federal notice of award for the five-year (7/1/2026 – 6/30/2031) competing continuation of the Center’s core state and federal designated and funded Arizona State Office of Rural Health (AzSORH).

The strategic plan process will refine - and where needed, redefine - how the Center can best support the health and well-being of Arizona’s rural, tribal, and border communities and respond with its partners to new Rural Health Transformation and other funding opportunities.

Phase I (July through September 2026) focuses on stakeholder engagement, performs a detailed environmental scan, convenes executive leadership and rural advisory teams, and conducts 25 in-person interviews with rural, tribal and border partner organizations across Arizona.

In July 2026, nine interviews were conducted in-person to strengthen relationships and gain firsthand insight into the successes, emerging challenges, and future priorities of our rural, tribal and border partners and the communities they serve.

Phase I will assess AzCRH strengths, opportunities, and areas for growth. Findings will guide the development of specific, measurable and achievable goals, strategic priorities, and implementation timelines to shape the Center’s work over the next five years.

Early Themes: Partners consistently expressed strong appreciation for AzCRH staff and faculty, technical expertise, and commitment to rural communities. Partners expressed unanimous support for the Center’s continued role as a trusted convener,

advocate, and resource for rural health at the local, state, and federal levels.



Site visit with Mariposa Community Health Center: Left to Right; Gabrielle Calvillo, Dr. Eladio Pereira, Jennifer Peters, Amy Taylor, Barbara Gudenkauf, Patty Molina.

Concerns included rural workforce shortages, financial sustainability, HR 1 impacts on Medicaid coverage, and ongoing challenges in rural access, recruitment and retention of providers for obstetric, behavioral health, primary and specialty care.

Phase II (October 2026 through March 2027) will incorporate in-person, onsite, digital and written evaluation feedback from statewide conferences to finalize the AzCRH five-year strategic plan, goals, timeline, evaluation data to continuously improve, adapt to challenges, and nimbly respond to new opportunities.

The strategic planning process and ambitious state-wide, in-person rural interviews will extend through March 2027, positioning AzCRH to build on its more than 40 years of service and strengthen its impact through collaboration, innovation, and service to Arizona’s rural, tribal and border communities.

State of Arizona Rural Health Transformation Program (AZ RHTP)

Daniel Derksen, MD, Director Arizona Center for Rural Health
Principal Investigator: Arizona State Office of Rural Health

On 7/4/2025 P.L.119-21, H.R. 1, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), was signed into law. The final 331-page enrolled bill includes the five-page Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) in Section 71401. The RHTP Section is perhaps the largest investment (\$50 billion over five years) in rural health in U.S. history.

Since P.L.119-21 was enacted, AzCRH, as the State of Arizona and federal designated State Office of Rural Health, has been developing and publicly posting briefs on the Arizona rural health workforce, how rural is defined, the state’s revised AZ RHTP narrative and budget, updates, public webinars, statewide meetings and other information on the Center’s AZ RHTP Toolkit.

The [AzCRH RHTP Toolkit](#) aims to inform and assist rural, tribal, and border providers respond to RHTP funding opportunities.

Arizona submitted its revised AZ RHTP narrative and budget and received CMS notice of award in January 2026 for \$166,988,956 per year for five years.

The Governor’s Office leads Arizona’s RHTP implementation through three state agencies: the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS, Arizona’s Medicaid Program), the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to carry out the priorities approved by CMS.

Since July 2026, Requests for Grant Applications (RFGA) are being posted on the [AHCCCS RHTP website](#).



Chelsea Peters, National Weather Service, Courtney Slanaker, American Red Cross at a Southern Arizona Extreme Heat Listening Session in Benson co-hosted with Southwest Center on Climate and Health (SCORCH).

Arizona State Office of Rural Health (AzSORH)

Connecting Communities. Advancing Rural Health

Jennifer Peters, AzCRH Program Manager, Daniel Derksen, MD, Principal Investigator (PI)

Since 1990, the Arizona Center for Rural Health has housed the State of Arizona and Federal (HRSA) designated and funded State Office of Rural Health (SORH). It is a core program, that complements but does not duplicate other AzCRH federal funded programs described elsewhere in this FY26 Annual Report (see AzFlex, AzSORH, OD2A-S sections).

AzSORH connects rural communities with the technical assistance, funding opportunities and support to improve the health and wellness of Arizona’s rural and underserved areas.

Every state has a SORH. Housed in the University of Arizona’s Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health, AzSORH is one of just 10 housed outside of a state agency, and one of only two in the nation embedded in a college of public health. This position strengthens its reach, research, and impact and is well aligned with the University of Arizona land grant mission.

Supported through a state-federal partnership with the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) via a 3:1 state to federal match, AzSORH serves Arizona’s expansive rural landscape (80% of the state’s land area) and includes 10.8% of its 7.6 million residents, through technical assistance, data dissemination, policy guidance, and cross-sector partnerships.

The State of Arizona’s Rural Health Transformation Plan (RHTP): Since H.R. 1 was signed into law in July 2025, AzCRH and all its programs, but especially AzSORH, have actively contributed to Arizona’s \$167 million per year over five years, CMS-approved RHTP. It is led by the Governor’s Office and administered through three key state agencies: the state Medicaid program – the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS); the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS); and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

AzCRH roles in Arizona’s RHTP included creating and publicly posting an AZ RHTP Toolkit, mapping rural and Tribal safety net facilities, defining rural, developing and updating health workforce policy briefs, providing informational webinars, convening statewide meetings and University of Arizona workgroups around Arizona’s RHTP priorities, updating and disseminating RHTP information, featuring RHTP state agency leaders in its statewide in person meetings, and coordinating with state partners to strengthen rural health systems without duplicating efforts.

Core AzSORH Objectives:

AzSORH links AzCRH’s faculty, staff, and resources with rural communities, organizations, and local, state, and federal partners to:

- Collect and disseminate rural health information and convene events that bring partners together.
- Provide technical assistance to rural communities and organizations.
- Develop and sustain rural health networks and partnerships.
- Support and expand the health workforce pipeline for rural and underserved areas.
- Analyze rural health data, produce actionable reports, and publish data visualizations.
- Identify and address the factors driving disparities in rural and underserved communities.
- Promote accessible, affordable, and culturally responsive care for all Arizonans.

Looking ahead: In 2026, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, HRSA in partnership with the State of Arizona awarded the Arizona Center for Rural Health a new \$4.9 million over five-years (FY 2026-2031) competing continuation award for the AzSORH Program with Dr. Derksen as PI.

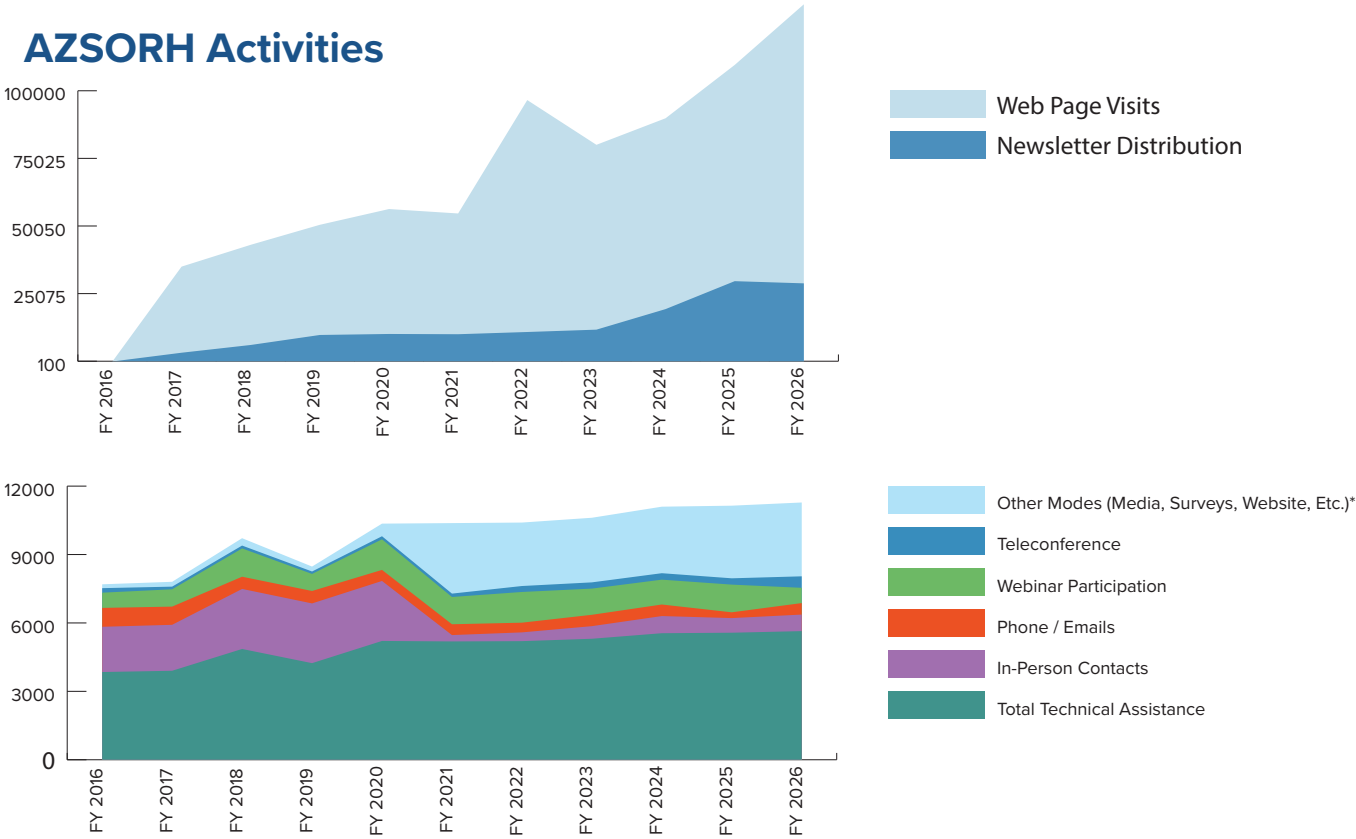
The AzSORH core objectives are: 1) collecting and disseminating rural health information; 2) coordinating activities to avoid redundancy; and 3) providing technical assistance to public and nonprofit entities.

FY26 highlights included supporting over 30 organizations on funding proposals; collaborating with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), Indian Health Service and Tribal-run (P.L. 638) clinic and hospital partners to expand existing and create new primary care graduate medical education (GME) residencies in Health

Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs); disseminating workforce data and policy briefs; creating and continuously updating the publicly posted AZ RHTP Toolkit to inform the state’s RHTP implementation; serving on the Arizona Health Improvement Plan (AzHIP) Steering Committee and workgroups shaping AzHIP 2026-2030, which prioritizes Workforce Development, Access to Care, Prevention, and Mental and Behavioral Wellbeing and embeds RHTP strategies into statewide planning; convening 195 attendees at the Rural & Public Health Policy Forum and 352 attendees at the 52nd Annual Arizona Rural Health Conference; and offering a webinar series reaching 512 participants.

AzSORH’s success is rooted in flexibility and responsiveness: recognizing that no single model fits all rural communities. The team is committed to its mission to improve the health & wellness of rural and underserved communities.

AZSORH Activities



Arizona Rural Hospital Flexibility Program (AzFLEX)

Jill Bullock, Joyce Hospodar, MBA, MPA, Brianna Rooney, DrPH and Estefania Mendivil Daniel Derksen, MD, Principal Investigator (PI)

Since 1999 the Arizona Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program (AzFlex), has been a consistent, vital force in strengthening rural healthcare access in collaboration with Arizona’s 17 federal designated Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) and their communities. The Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) funds the AzFlex Program and the Flex Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Supplement.

In FY 2026, Az Flex re-designed and distributed the ten-year (2014 to 2024) AzFlex Financial Indicators Report. Support for CAH Financial and Operational Improvement is a core program area for the AzFlex Program. The AzFlex team compiles, tracks and reports CAH financial data.

Trainings and Services

Over the last 10 Years, AzCAHs participated in trainings and services to improve their financial and operational performance, including:

- ▶ Billing and Coding Course
- ▶ Charge Master Review
- ▶ Swing Bed Program and RHC Work
- ▶ Medicare Cost Report Optimization
- ▶ Market Analysis
- ▶ Swing Bed Quality Reporting Tool
- ▶ Quality Network Contractor
- ▶ Practice Operations National Database (POND)
- ▶ OB Simulation Training
- ▶ Antibiotic Stewardship Program
- ▶ Trauma Managers Work Group



Rural EMS Recruitment, Retention & Reimbursement Project (R4 Project)

Amber Rice, MD and Tera Nicole Henson, MBA

The Arizona EMS Flex Supplement R4 project aims to strengthen and sustain the rural EMS workforce. During FY 2026 we worked to increase our partnerships with the seven participating EMS agencies, building on the FY 2025 activities, feedback and evaluations.

The University of Arizona R4 outreach team conducted outreach meetings with participating agency leadership. We analyzed data on what worked and identified areas of improvement related to Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) and Critical Care Paramedic (CCP) courses. The R4 team will implement a plan to improve the courses in the FY 2027 cycle. One key change is developing and

implementing a learning module with new study resources delivered as a podcast lecture and practice study questions to test knowledge.

Another key focus will be revising EMR and CCP guidelines. The R4 team reviewed current protocols to update guidelines to better fit the needs of rural EMS agencies. During FY 2026, nine of the 11 (82%) of CCP students successfully completed the course; one CCP student passed the national registry. Six of the 11 (55%) EMR students successfully completed the program; one EMR student passed the national EMR registry. More students are expected to test next year.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

In FY 2026 the University of Arizona R4 Project:

- ▶ Strengthened partnerships with the seven participating rural EMS agencies through collaboration, consistent communication and feedback.
- ▶ Incorporated podcast-style learning modules to improve training, learner engagement, and access to learning materials.
- ▶ Reviewed EMS protocols, revised and implemented new guidelines to enhance the R4 Project’s EMR and CCP courses.



Rural Hospital/ Emergency Department Obstetric Simulation Training

Jill Bullock, Erin McMahon, EdD, CNM, FACNM

In collaboration with the Nurse Midwife Program at the University of Arizona School of Health Professions, the Arizona Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility (AzFlex) Program continued their obstetrics (OB) simulation training program to improve maternal health outcomes in rural Arizona. The project addresses critical gaps in obstetric care for Arizona Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) without an active labor & delivery unit - also known as non-birthing facilities - by equipping health providers with emergency delivery skills.

The first training was held in January 2025 at White Mountain Regional Medical Center in Springerville, Arizona in Apache County, a region with some of the longest travel times to a hospital with an active labor & delivery unit (average travel time: 53 miles).

By February 2026 AzFlex provided education and training for ten more AzCAHs, including facilities in tribal communities and rural maternal health deserts - areas with little to no capacity to deliver babies or provide maternal health services.

Pre- and post-training evaluations showed significant improvements in participant confidence across key competency areas, with 168 of 188 (89%) attendees reporting substantially increased confidence in their ability to manage precipitous deliveries, recognize and respond to obstetric emergencies, perform basic delivery techniques, provide neonatal resuscitation, and make appropriate patient transfer decisions. The project was presented at the National Rural Health Association CAH Conference in September, 2025 and provided national visibility to this innovative rural maternal health workforce approach.

FY 2026 Highlights

A total of **179** participants trained at nine rural communities across Arizona, including White Mountain Regional Medical Center in Springerville (Apache County), Copper Queen Community Hospital in Bisbee and Douglas Emergency Department (Cochise County), Hopi Health Care Center in Polacca, (Navajo County) La Paz Regional Hospital and Parker Indian Healthcare Center, (La Paz County), Sage Memorial Hospital in Ganado on the Navajo Nation (Apache County), Northern Cochise Community Hospital in Willcox, (Cochise County), San Carlos Apache Healthcare Center, in Peridot (Gila and Graham Counties) Benson Community Hospital and Elfrida Fire Department, (Cochise County).



One week after the OB simulation training at Sage Memorial Hospital they shared the news, “WE HAVE DELIVERED THE FIRST BABY AT THE NEW SAGE MEMORIAL HOSPITAL!! A strapping young lad weighing in at 5 pounds 9 ounces, 16.5 inches long joined us at 0237!”

The Arizona Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program (AzSHIP)

Melissa Yslas, Program Manager, Brianna Rooney DrPH, PI

The Arizona Small Rural Hospital Improvement Program (AzSHIP) is a federally funded initiative led by the Arizona Center for Rural Health at the University of Arizona, supporting rural hospitals with 49 beds or fewer to meet value-based payment and quality care goals.

AzSHIP helps rural hospitals overcome operational and economic challenges, modernize care delivery, and address rural health disparities. In FY 2026, AzSHIP provided \$10,737 per hospital to 14 Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs) across Arizona, focused on Medicare Beneficiary Quality Improvement Project (MBQIP) activities.



AzSHIP investments empowered rural hospitals to deliver safer, more efficient, and patient-centered care, aligned with the State of Arizona’s Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) priority areas related to accessibility and medical technology.

FY 2026 Highlights & Community Impact

Quality & Safety:

- ▶ Eight CAHs invested in improving Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) patient satisfaction scores.
- ▶ Three hospitals strengthened clinical documentation via staff education on coding initiatives in support of accurate quality reporting and improved patient care.
- ▶ One hospital improved clinical data abstraction by developing dashboards, allowing rapid analysis of quality improvement data and tracking of sepsis rates to achieve near 100% compliance.

Data & Technology:

- ▶ Six CAHs implemented new data tools and workflows, streamlining MBQIP data collection and reporting.
- ▶ One hospital supported tele-pharmacy services that enhanced medication instructions and access and improved MBQIP metrics related to new medication education.
- ▶ AzSHIP supported training for four medical coders through the Arizona Health Information Management Association (AzHIMA) to support certification, professional growth, and improved coding accuracy for rural health services.

AzCRH Statewide Conferences

Mariah Erhart, MA, LAC, NCC | AzCRH Community Outreach Professional

The 2026 Arizona Rural & Public Health Policy Forum was held in person on February 17, 2026, at the Virginia G. Piper Auditorium in downtown Phoenix. The forum featured a keynote presentation from Meaghan Kramer, JD, Health policy Advisor, Office of Governor Katie Hobbs, and provided timely updates on state legislative priorities, public health law, and key U.S. Supreme Court decisions affecting public health. There were more than 195 attendees.

Forum sessions explored strategies to strengthen Arizona’s public health and rural health systems, advance health equity, support rural workforce development, and foster cross-sector collaboration to improve health outcomes in rural and tribal communities. As in previous years, the forum served as a valuable opportunity for policymakers, public health leaders, healthcare professionals, researchers, and community partners from across the state to exchange ideas, build partnerships, and inform future policy and practice.



Audience response at the 2026 Arizona Rural and Public Health Policy Forum.

On June 2–3, 2026, AzCRH hosted its 52nd Annual Arizona Rural Health Conference at the High Country Conference Center in Flagstaff, welcoming over 350 in person attendees – a new record! As one of the nation’s longest-running rural health conferences, the event continued its tradition of convening healthcare professionals, community leaders, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders committed to improving rural, border and tribal health.

A central focus of the conference was the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP), with leaders from the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) – Josue Macias, Executive Consultant, H.R.1 Implementation, and Marcus Johnson, Deputy Director, community Engagement & Regulatory Affairs; the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) – Sheila Sjolander, MSW, Deputy Director; and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) – Mary Foote, Director.



Dr. Derksen talks with LD18 State Senator Priya Sundareshan at the Policy Forum Reception.



Attendees at the 52nd Annual Arizona Rural Health Conference.

RHTP speakers shared updates on implementation efforts, cross-agency collaboration, and opportunities to strengthen healthcare delivery throughout rural Arizona. Other sessions highlighted behavioral health, workforce development, climate resilience and extreme heat preparedness, health equity, and innovative partnerships that support sustainable, community driven approaches to improving health outcomes.

Conference details, presentation materials, and attendee photos from February’s Arizona Rural & Public Health Policy Forum and June’s 52nd Annual Arizona Rural Health Conference are available on the Arizona Center for Rural Health website at crh.arizona.edu.

In Gratitude

A very special thank you to **Sheila Sjolander** for her many years of dedicated service at the **Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS)**. We are grateful for her leadership and productive partnerships throughout the years. We wish her the very best in her next chapter.



Thank you to **Marcus Johnson**, for his dedicated service with **Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS)** . We wish him all the best in his next endeavors.



Arizona Health Workforce Data System

Illuminating Arizona’s Pathways to Practice

Bryna Koch, DrPH, PI, Susan Coates, MBA and Charles Drake, MS, MA

Health workforce research and analysis inform decisions on policies and programs supporting pathways from education to practice.

With support from the Arizona Area Health Education Center (AzaHEC) Program, the Arizona Center for Rural Health (AzCRH) workforce team implements health workforce data collection, research and analysis. Our Arizona Health Workforce Data System (AzHWDS) includes a data warehouse that integrates public data from state and federal sources. It is the backbone of developing workforce reports and briefs, creating interactive reports and maps, and responding to requests for information and technical assistance.

The team’s signature report is the biannual (2019, 2021, 2023 and soon 2025) Arizona Health

Workforce Profile that provides data on 14 health professions. This report can support federal and state efforts such as the Arizona’s Rural Health Transformation (RHT) Program priority Rural Health Workforce Education and Training. The Profile helps inform collaborative efforts to recruit, train, and retain skilled health professionals by providing estimates of unmet need and supply at the county and sub-county levels.

The workforce team created workforce briefs, maps, and other products to support Arizona’s RHT Program planning and implementation. Intended to inform decision-makers about rural health system, rural geography, and rural workforce challenges, these resources are publicly available in the AzCRH RHT Program Toolkit.

Throughout the year we responded to requests for assistance with workforce data analysis to inform program and policy development for the following:

University of Arizona: AzaHEC Program’s Primary Care Graduate Medical Education (GME) initiative; Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences; Mel & Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health: School of Health Professions Physician Assistant Program and S32 Hermosa Mine Health Impact Assessment.



Dr. Koch touring South32 Hermosa Mine in Patagonia, Arizona.

Northern Arizona University: Department of Physician Assistant Studies

Bryna Koch, DrPH and Dan Derksen, MD provided health workforce data and trends to journalists about the regional and state level healthcare system and maternal health issues.

FY 2026 Highlights

Reports & Briefs:

- ▶ What is Rural?
- ▶ Arizona’s Rural Facilities and Population Factors
- ▶ Rural and Safety Net Facilities by Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) Rural Areas
- ▶ Rural and Safety Net Facilities by Frontier and Remote Area (FAR) Codes
- ▶ Tribal Health Facilities in Arizona
- ▶ Rural Maternal Health Transformation Program Opportunities
- ▶ Graduate Medical Education in Arizona



Rural Maternity Obstetrics Management Strategies (RMOMS) Program

Bryna Koch, DrPH, PI, Brianna Rooney, DrPH, Patrick Wightman, PhD

In FY24 the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) awarded Mariposa Community Health Center (MCHC) a four-year, \$4 million RMOMS grant to create a network approach to improving maternal care in rural Arizona. AzCRH provides support, evaluation and data reporting assistance.

The AZ RMOMS network partners include two federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), three critical access hospitals (CAHs), and one hospitalist group:

- Mariposa Community Health Center,**
Nogales, AZ (FQHC)
- Cobre Valley Regional Medical Center,**
Globe, AZ (CAH)
- Carondelet Holy Cross Hospital,**
Nogales, AZ (CAH)
- Canyonlands Community Health Center,**
Page, Safford, AZ (FQHC)
- Southern Arizona Laborists (Hospitalists)**
- The University of Arizona, Center for Rural Health,**
Tucson, AZ
- Mt. Graham Regional Medical Center,**
Safford, AZ (CAH)

In FY26, the AzCRH team collaborated with MCHC to transition the RMOMS network from the project’s development phase into implementation planning by:

- ▶ **Implementing eight monthly network meetings and five workgroup meetings.**
- ▶ **Leading required data collection and reporting activities with four participating partners, including providing technical assistance and data quality assurance.**
- ▶ **Completing the network maternal health needs assessment to prioritize interventions through literature review, secondary data assessment, and 13 key informant interviews.**

The needs assessment identified priorities were: training the perinatal mental health workforce, adopting obstetrics care coordination workflows, and building capacity for local health-care financial investment.

AZ RMOMS activities strongly align with Arizona’s Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) maternal health priority area to improve access to rural obstetrics care and enhance education and training through network learning, workforce planning, and rural obstetric readiness activities.

The AzCRH and MCHC team - Yara Castro, Rural Health Strategies Consultant; Heidi Pelayo, Maternal Health Program Supervisor; Bryna Koch, DrPH, Assistant Research Professor; and Brianna Rooney, DrPH, Assistant Research Professor presented their network approach at the National Rural Health Association’s Rural Health Access Conference in May 2026. Lessons from the FQHC Led RMOMS spotlighted how a borderlands FQHC in rural Arizona united three of Arizona’s 15 counties that span desert, mining towns, diverse community cultures, and tribal communities, to sustain labor and delivery services against the odds.



RMOMS team presented at the National Rural Health Conference. Left to Right: Brianna Rooney, DrPH, Bryna Koch, DrPH, Yara Castro, Heidi Pelayo.

Overdose Data to Action in States (OD2A-S)

Rocío Torres, MPH, Estefanía Mendiivil, Raymond Valenzuela, MPH, Alex Murphy, Bianca SantaMaria, MPH, Alyssa Padilla, MPH, Brianna Rooney, DrPH, PI, Todd Vanderah, PhD, Daniel Derksen, MD.

The AzCRH and the Comprehensive Center for Pain and Addiction partners with the Arizona Department of Health Services to implement the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) OD2A-S grant. Through statewide partnerships, education, and evidence-based resources, OD2A-S strengthens overdose prevention efforts and expands access to care in rural and tribal communities across Arizona.

- ▶ **Delivered** eight OD2A-S trainings and webinars, reaching 230+ clinicians, students, and public health professionals on CDC opioid prescribing guidelines, overdose recognition and naloxone administration, pain and substance use, and emerging drug trends.
- ▶ **Supported** the Arizona Perinatal & Pediatric Psychiatry Access Line (APAL) and education modules on perinatal pain and substance misuse, reaching 800+ future healthcare professionals and rural clinicians.
- ▶ **Maintained** a high performing monthly OD2A-S bulletin, with open rates regularly above 45%, click to open rates near 20%, and a growing subscriber list.
- ▶ **Partnered** with Pima County Health Department on a gas station outreach initiative, distributing naloxone and overdose prevention resources to ten sites across South Tucson, with 100% of sites accepting materials.
- ▶ **Co-facilitated** a pre-conference session at Arizona Community Health Workers Association (AzCHOW) Roots Conference, “A Legacy of Healing: Celebrating Two Decades of Community-led Solutions for Substance Use Disorders and Overdose Prevention,” in partnership with the Naloxone and Overdose Prevention Alliance (NOPAL).
- ▶ **Built** out a statewide online resource hub, verifying and categorizing 560+ treatment, prevention, and recovery resources by county, Medicaid status, and care continuum, with a focus on rural and tribal communities.
- ▶ **Developed** and disseminated multiple web-based resources on polypharmacy in older adults, nitazene overdose risks, perinatal opioid use disorder, family focused guidance on substance use, and rural opioid navigation toolkits.

Rural Health Transformation Program priority areas

- ▶ AzCRH’s OD2A-S program aligns with the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) areas of education and training and priority health initiatives through community outreach activities, including the Hand Drum Celebration on Navajo Nation and clinician education. These efforts equip rural and tribal communities with overdose prevention resources, navigation support, and connection to care.

Arizona Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program (AZ GWEP) – AzCRH Collaboration

Mindy Fain, MD, PI & Director and Lisa O'Neill, DBH, MPH, Arizona Center on Aging (ACOA)
Jill Bullock, Joyce Hospodar, MBA, Rocío Torres, MPH, Raymond Valenzuela, MPH

The HRSA-funded AZ GWEP goal is to train healthcare professionals to improve care for older adults through education, community partnerships, and age-friendly care models. It is aligned with the State of Arizona’s Rural Health Transformation Program aim to strengthen rural health systems by improving organizations’ work-force capacity.

Led by the Arizona Center on Aging, the AZ GWEP focus is to educate and train primary care and geriatrics providers, staff and other appropriate specialties to provide age-friendly and dementia-friendly care for older adults in integrated geriatrics and primary care delivery sites.

AZ GWEP works directly with rural sites to achieve Age-Friendly Health System status L1 (Participants) and L2 (Committed to Care Excellence). To date, three sites are recognized by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement as Level 1 and five as L2 sites. AZ GWEP presents at conferences, councils, and community groups, and includes partners such as the Alzheimer’s Association, Banner Alzheimer’s Institute, ASU, NAU, and Arizona Health Care Association.

AzCRH assisted the AZ GWEP effort by recruiting Arizona **Critical Access Hospital (CAH), Rural Health Clinic (RHC), Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC)**, and other rural sites to receive training and work toward national recognition as an “age-friendly” organization. During FY 2026, three CAHs received the training, two received recognition for ‘commitment to excellence’ and one completed the L1 milestone as a ‘participant.’



Jason Zibert, Rural Exec of Community Health and Engagement, Benson Hospital.

Age Friendly Health System status		
L1 (Participants)	L2 (Committed to Care Excellence)	Training
Gila Valley Clinic (RHC) Safford, AZ, Graham County	Benson Hospital (CAH), Benson, AZ, Cochise County	San Carlos Apache Healthcare, (CAH), Peridot, AZ, Gila County
Carondelet Holy Cross Hospital (CAH), Nogales, AZ, Santa Cruz County	Northern Cochise Community Hospital (CAH), Wilcox, AZ, Cochise County	Mariposa Community Health Centers, (FQHC), Nogales, AZ, Santa Cruz County
Banner Pantano Internal Medicine Clinic, Tucson, AZ, Pima County	Banner South Campus Internal Medicine Clinic, South Tucson, Pima County	
	Banner Pantano Geriatric Clinic, Tucson, AZ, Pima County	
	Quiburi Mission Nursing and Rehabilitation LTC, Benson, AZ, Cochise County	

Arizona Rural Recruitment & Retention Network (Az3RNET)

Joyce A. Hospodar | AzCRH Senior Advisor, Rural Programs

The Arizona Center for Rural Health, the Arizona Department of Health Services, and the Arizona Alliance for Community Health Centers are members of National 3RNET - a leader for community-based health professional recruitment and retention.

3RNET’s mission serves as a “recruitment engine” for rural health talent, attracting and retaining highly skilled providers, a key priority area under the Rural Health Transformation Program.

Az3RNET posts job opportunities for health professionals and employers located in rural and underserved areas and information about the Arizona State Loan Repayment Program and National Health Service Corps opportunities, and recruitment of J-1 visa physicians. Rural health clinics (RHCs), rural and critical access hospitals (CAHs), Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), behavioral health providers, and other healthcare organizations post job opportunities on the Az3RNET website.

Key metrics for FY 2026:

495 New Health Professionals

249 Active Jobs

20 Active Employers

13 New Employers



Superior, Arizona

The AzCRH Rural Health Professions Program (RHPP)

Bryna Koch, DrPH, PI, and Jennifer Peters

The AzCRH RHPP is a partnership with the Arizona Area Health Education Centers Program (AzaHEC) and its six Regional Centers. The mission is to increase the number of MEZCOPH graduates who choose to serve rural and underserved Arizona communities and populations.

The RHPP program offers graduate-level, community-based experiential service-learning courses in collaboration with rural and urban medically underserved communities, organizations, and local leaders. Students learn from public health experts, health providers, and others by collaborating on community projects and providing services. The four service-earning courses (and lead faculty) offered in FY26 were:

Family and Child Health in Urban Settings (Bryna Koch, DrPH).

Community Outreach: An Interprofessional Model (Sheila Soto, DrPH).

Border Health (Kate Ellingson, PhD).

Climate and Health (Mona Arora, PhD)

In FY26 the AzCRH RHPP:

- ▶ **Enrolled** 28 MEZCOPH students in four service-learning courses for a total of 2,295 community-based experiential learning contact hours.
- ▶ **Supported** three RHPP students to attend the 52nd Annual Rural Health Conference.
- ▶ **Funded** nine RHPP students to support rural health focused summer practicum experiences based on relationships and projects developed during their service-learning course. Practicum projects focused on preventing the effects of extreme heat in rural and medically underserved communities, enhancing farmworker health, and using digital technology to improve health access in rural healthcare facilities.

The RHPP program also engaged two cohorts, a total of six total AzaHEC Scholars, in FY26. The AzaHEC Scholars program fosters engagement via community immersions and applied interprofessional projects implemented through the AzaHEC Regional Centers.



Rural Health Professions Program Service Learning Climate and Health Students with community organization, Regenerating Sonora in Superior, Arizona. Left to Right; Imran Mithu, Pedro Flores Gallardo, Shunrang Chin, Maisun Maliha Ansary , Royani Saha, Cameron Dockens, Chris Casillas, Nathan Lothrop, Miracle Martinez, Mona Arora, Pidgeon, Ed Williams.



The AzCRH Internship and Rural Experiential Immersion Programs (IREIP)

Melissa Yslas, Executive Associate, AzCRH

The AzCRH Internship and Rural Experiential Immersion Programs (IREIP) provide opportunities for undergraduate and graduate health profession student internship, dissertation, graduate research assistant and other community-based, experiential learning immersions in Arizona’s rural and urban underserved areas. Students worked on program design, implementation, evaluation, and other projects.



Elaine Kang assisted with an assessment of U of A Flying Samaritans free medical and dental clinic services in Agua Prieta, Mexico. Mentors: Bryna Koch, DrPH and Brianna Rooney, DrPH.



Sanvi Lamba graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the U of A, W.A. Franke Honors College. She also assisted with an assessment of U of A Flying Samaritans free medical and dental clinic services in Agua Prieta, Mexico.



Charity Moparthy supported the Arizona Rural Maternal Obstetrics Management and Strategies (AZ RMOMS) network through research on telehealth strategies, distance-aware prenatal care scheduling, and rural lactation consultation models.



Alex Murphy graduated with a U of A Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience and Cognitive Science. She helped disseminate the CDC Clinical Practice Guideline to health professionals at the Arizona Center for Rural Health and is now an AzCRH employee.



Deborah Ojum assisted the AZ RMOMS network with research on telehealth, perinatal mental health, rural birth centers, and financial sustainability for rural maternal health care.



Grant Palmer surveyed Rural Health Professions Program (RHPP) preceptors and presented the findings at the 52nd Annual Arizona Rural Health Conference in Flagstaff.



Reed Sutton graduated from the U of A MEZCOPH in May 2026. He helped develop clinical tools for use in healthcare settings and wrote an OD2A-S rural health policy brief.

2026-IREIP Highlights:

Special thank you to the AzCRH RHPP Student Practicum that supported course development, community outreach, and final project creation for service-learning course delivery.

PHPM 597: Community Outreach: An Interprofessional Model of Service & Learning– **Violeta Dominguez (PhD Candidate)**

PHP 597C: Border Health Service-Learning Institute – **Alexis Ortega (PhD Student)**

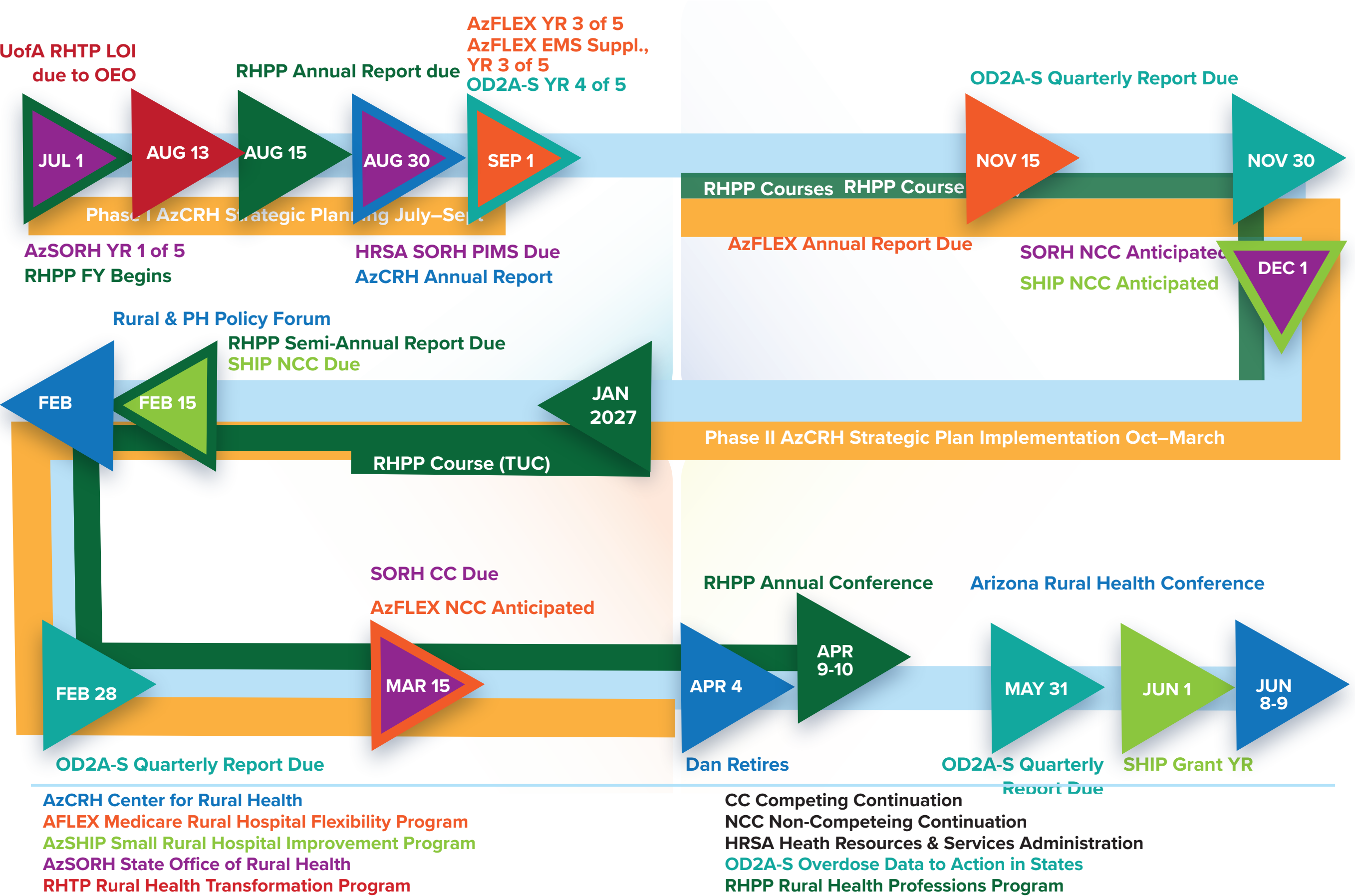
Congratulations to our FY 2026 AzCRH IREIP interns, graduate research assistants and graduates! Bear down!

Check out internship updates at <http://crh.arizona.edu/programs/internships>

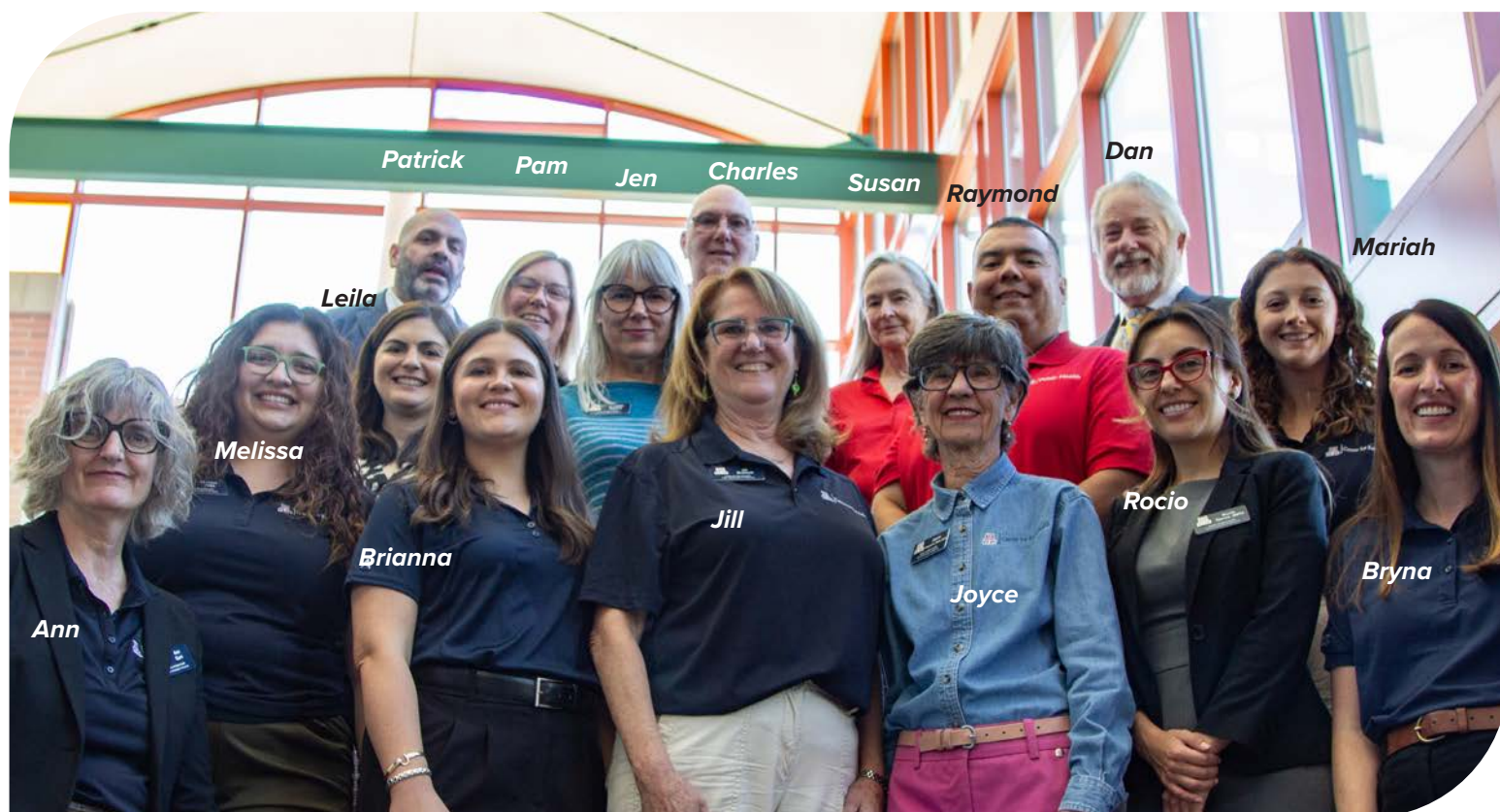


RHPP Service Learning students, Cameron Dockens and Shunrang Chin working on home repairs with Step Up Bisbee/Naco

AzCRH Deliverables FY27: July 1, 2026 to June 30, 2027



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