



American Hospital  
Association™

Advancing Health in America

# 39TH ANNUAL AHA RURAL HEALTH CARE | LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

FEBRUARY 8-11, 2026 | SAN ANTONIO, TX

JW MARRIOTT SAN ANTONIO HILL COUNTRY

39TH ANNUAL  
AHA RURAL  
HEALTH CARE  
LEADERSHIP  
CONFERENCE

FEBRUARY 8-11, 2026  
SAN ANTONIO, TX

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- 3 Enter your first name, last name and email address. Please use the email address associated with your registration.
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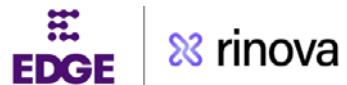
# THANK YOU TO OUR CONFERENCE SPONSORS

(AS OF JANUARY 8, 2026)

## PRESENTING SPONSORS



## SUPPORTING SPONSORS



Cybersecurity



# THANK YOU TO OUR CONFERENCE SPONSORS

(AS OF JANUARY 8, 2026)

## SUPPORTING SPONSORS





**The AHA Rural Health Care Leadership Conference provides Continuing Education from various providers.**

### **Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME)**

This activity has been planned and implemented in accordance with the accreditation requirements and policies of the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME) through the joint providership of the Academy for Continued Healthcare Learning (ACHL) and the American Hospital Association. ACHL is accredited by the ACCME to provide continuing medical education for physicians.

This activity is approved for AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™.

Physician assistants, nurse practitioners, and nurses may participate in this educational activity and earn a certificate of completion as AAPA, AANP, and ANCC accept AMA PRA Category 1 Credits™ through their reciprocity agreements.

### **American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE)**

By attending the 2026 AHA Rural Health Care Leadership Conference offered by the American Hospital Association, participants may earn up to 15.25 ACHE Qualified Education Hours toward initial certification or recertification of the Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives (FACHE) designation.

### **AHA Certification Center**

The Rural Health Care Leadership Conference qualifies for 15.25 AHA Certification Center continuing education credits (CECs) toward CHC, CHFM, CHESP, CMRP and CPHRM recertification.

### **HFMA CHFP and FHFMA Maintenance**

The 2026 AHA Rural Health Care Leadership Conference sessions are eligible as continuing education credits toward the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA) certification maintenance requirements for active CHFP and Fellows when self-reported. The program or session(s) are approved by HFMA for certification maintenance. For more information about HFMA certification maintenance and to report activities as a CHFP or Fellow of HFMA: [www.hfma.org/maintain](http://www.hfma.org/maintain).

## SOLVE CHALLENGES AND SHARE SOLUTIONS

Keep an eye out for these icons throughout **#AHA Rural Health**. We will use them to highlight educational programming and enhance Sponsor connections.

Our **educational programming** focuses on these critical focus areas:



**Transforming Care Delivery and Payment**



**Building a More Flexible and Sustainable Workforce**



**Igniting Innovation**



**Improving Behavioral Health**



**Patient Centricity Through Digital Transformation**



**Financial and Operational Excellence**



**Governance Excellence**

## SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8

**8:00 AM – 6:00 PM REGISTRATION**

Ballroom Level

**9:00 AM – 12:00 PM HOSTED BUYER FORUM – SESSION 1 | Invitation Only**

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom A

Learn how AHA members can join the [Hosted Buyer Forum](#).

**9:00 AM – 2:00 PM PRE-CONFERENCE INTENSIVE | Additional Registration Fee \$599 per pair**

Iris/Lily



Governance

**Board Chair and CEO Intensive: Strengthening Governance and Leadership**

Pam Knecht, *President and Chief Executive Officer, ACCORD LIMITED*

Jamie Orlikoff, *President, Orlikoff & Associates, Inc., National Advisor on Governance and Leadership to the American Hospital Association, and health care governance expert*

Research shows high-performing boards drive organizational success. Effective governance relies on a strong board chair and a collaborative chair-CEO partnership. However, many hospital boards face challenges finding members willing to take on the demanding chair role, and current chairs seek guidance in navigating evolving responsibilities.

This intensive, interactive workshop is designed for board chairs and their CEOs to attend as a pair. Led by two governance experts, it will offer practical strategies to enhance chair effectiveness and strengthen the chair-CEO partnership. Breakout sessions will provide real-time governance advice, with content tailored to participant needs based on a pre-session survey. Participants will leave with action plans to strengthen their organization's governance leadership effectiveness.

Note: This AHA members-only session is limited to board chairs and CEOs. Registration is \$599 per pair, and CEOs must register both attendees. Continental breakfast and lunch provided.

10:00 AM – 2:00 PM **PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP** | Additional Registration Fee \$129 per person

Workforce

**Rural Health Care Leadership Bootcamp**April Allen, *Principal, WittKiefer*Jen Braun, *Director, Workforce and Organizational Development, American Hospital Association*Susan Doherty, MA, LNHA, *Vice President, Field Engagement, Rural Health and Regional Executive Team, American Hospital Association*Lindsey Dunn Burgstahler, *Vice President, Programming and Intelligence, American Hospital Association*Teresa Mallett, *Chief Executive Officer, Madison Regional Health System, Madison, S.D.*

Grand Oaks G

This immersive half-day bootcamp is designed to equip emerging leaders with the knowledge, tools and confidence to step into executive roles within rural hospitals and health systems. Through interactive discussions, scenario-based exercises and real-world insights from seasoned rural health executives, participants will explore the unique challenges and opportunities of rural health care leadership.

The workshop will cover a broad range of leadership essentials — from operations and governance to community engagement. A dedicated segment will focus on understanding the rural policy landscape and how the AHA's rural policy agenda supports hospitals in advocating for better resources, flexibility and sustainability in rural communities. Registration for this session is limited to employees of hospitals and health systems only. Lunch will be provided.

1:30 PM – 4:30 PM **HOSTED BUYER FORUM – SESSION 2** | Invitation Only

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom A

Learn how AHA members can join the [Hosted Buyer Forum](#).2:00 PM – 2:30 PM **REFRESHMENT BREAK**

Grand Foyer

2:30 PM – 4:00 PM **PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS** | Complimentary

Workforce

**Health Care Workforce Well-being: Scaling Change**

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

Elisa Arespacochaga, *Group Vice President, Clinical Affairs and Workforce, American Hospital Association*Corey Feist, JD, *Chief Executive Officer and Co-founder, Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation*Stefanie Simmons, MD, FACEP, *Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation*

Challenging work conditions and job-related stress are key drivers of burnout and poor mental health for health care workers. This workshop will help hospital executives and trustees assess where their organization stands and develop practical solutions to increase engagement and well-being across the workforce. Attendees will explore key interrelated metrics for tracking and reporting on well-being, learn strategies for building systemic programs that support team resilience, and examine practical approaches to trust-building across their organizations.



Governance

**Building a Customized Board Development Plan**

Grand Oaks CDH

Jason Amrich, FACHE, *Chief Executive Officer, Gunnison Valley Health, Gunnison, Colo.*Mark Kaufman, MD, FACP, *Chair, Board of Trustees, Gunnison Valley Health, Gunnison, Colo.*Todd Linden, FACHE, *President, Linden Consulting*Barbara Lorsbach, *President, governWell*

Effective governance committees are a catalyst for strong hospital board performance and long-term organizational success. This interactive workshop explores the essential role these committees play in driving continuous board development. Participants will learn practical strategies for advancing governance excellence, including how to use self-assessments, orientation programs, and targeted education to strengthen board structure and performance. Through peer sharing and small group dialogue, attendees will explore diverse approaches to building and sustaining an engaged board culture. The session offers a roadmap and actionable tools to help participants design a customized board development plan tailored to their organization's unique needs.

**7:00 AM – 5:30 PM REGISTRATION**

Ballroom Level

**7:00 AM – 8:30 AM BREAKFAST IN THE SPONSOR HALL**

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC

**8:30 AM – 10:00 AM GENERAL SESSION****HARNESSING HEADWINDS: NAVIGATING CHANGE AND ADVERSITY**

Grand Oaks Ballroom J-S

**Conference Welcome***Rick Pollack, President and Chief Executive Officer, American Hospital Association***Opening Remarks***Marc L. Boom, MD, President and Chief Executive Officer, Houston Methodist, Houston; Chair-Elect, Board of Trustees, American Hospital Association***AHA Rural Hospital Excellence in Innovation Award**

The award recognizes rural hospitals that are redefining health care through visionary innovation. By implementing transformative programs and applying cutting-edge technologies, these hospitals have addressed the unique challenges of their rural communities. A culture of innovation and a commitment to patient-centered care have led to measurable improvements and set a new standard for scalable rural health solutions.

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**Harnessing Headwinds: Navigating Change and Adversity***Nicole Malachowski, First Woman Thunderbird Pilot, Combat Veteran, Fighter Squadron Commander, White House Fellow and Adviser*

Leaders at every level face a common challenge: the need to navigate failure, organizational change and the unknown. Like headwinds to a pilot, these perceived barriers can force a change in direction, cost momentum and take away options. They can feel confusing, disorienting and uncomfortable, leaving individuals and organizations uncertain about the best path forward.

Drawing on her groundbreaking career as the first woman Thunderbird pilot and her personal journey of resilience, Nicole Malachowski brings the metaphor of headwinds to life. She shows how challenges that seem to hold us back can, with the right mindset, be transformed into sources of strength and growth. By reframing adversity as opportunity, leaders and teams can adapt more quickly, respond with creativity and emerge stronger. Attendees will learn how to face uncertainty with confidence, guide their teams through turbulence and harness the very forces working against them to move forward with greater purpose and resilience.

**10:00 AM – 10:15 AM REFRESHMENT BREAK**

Grand Foyer

**10:15 AM – 11:15 AM CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

Workforce

**7 Minutes to Innovation: Strengthening the Rural Health Care Workforce**

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

**MODERATOR:** Elisa Arespacochaga, *Group Vice President, Clinical Affairs and Workforce, American Hospital Association***PRESENTERS:***Mickey Foster, Chief Executive Officer, FirstHealth of the Carolinas, Pinehurst, N.C.**Daniel Hoody, MD, MSc, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Physician, Sanford Health, Bemidji, Minn.**Rhonda Kazik, DNP, RN, CENP, FAAN, Essentia Health, Duluth, Minn.**Lindsay Morse, MSN/NED, RN, ACM, Vice President, Care Management, University of Vermont Health Network, Burlington, Vt.**James P. Ulrich, Jr., MHA, FACHE, FHFMA, Chief Executive Officer, York General, York, Neb.*

Join us for a fast-paced session spotlighting rural hospital leaders and their innovative strategies for addressing workforce challenges. In seven minutes or less, each speaker will share bold approaches to recruiting and retaining staff, building local pipelines and reimagining care team roles to fit the realities of rural hospitals. This session highlights practical solutions for sustaining the workforce, from leveraging technology and partnerships to fostering

resilience and retention. Walk away with actionable insights and fresh ideas to strengthen staffing and support your teams in rural health care settings.



Financial Excellence

### From Risk to Resilience: Bold Moves That Work in Rural Health Care

Grand Oaks G

Darryn McGarvey, *Managing Principal of Industry, CLA*

Irene Richardson, *Chief Executive Officer, Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County, Rock Springs, Wyo.*

Rachelle Schultz, Ed.D., *President and Chief Executive Officer, Winona Health, Winona, Minn.*

Carl Vaagenes, *Chief Executive Officer, Alomere Health, Alexandria, Minn.*

Rural hospitals operate under constant pressure, where every strategic move carries high stakes. This session features rural hospital leaders who share firsthand insights into the bold decisions that reshaped their organizations. Attendees will hear real-world examples of innovative payment models, operational redesign and game-changing affiliations to learn what delivered results, what fell short and what can be applied in their communities. The discussion will offer practical guidance and a decision-making framework built on data, experience and lessons learned.



Governance

### Beyond the Boardroom: Driving Impact Through Philanthropy

Cibolo Canyon 1-4

Alice Ayres, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Association for Healthcare Philanthropy*

Donna Budak, *Division Vice President of Philanthropy, CommonSpirit Health, St. Luke's Foundation, Houston*

Join this interactive session designed to help board members strengthen their role as philanthropic leaders within their organizations. Attendees will explore the connection between board engagement and fundraising performance, informed by data and real-world examples from high-performing health care organizations. The session will outline the key responsibilities of board members as strategic advisors, ambassadors and champions of philanthropy, while creating space for personal reflection and peer exchange. Participants will learn practical strategies for donor engagement, storytelling and advocacy that build support without requiring a direct financial ask. Each attendee will leave with a personalized action plan to enhance their board leadership and support long-term sustainability and innovation at their organization.



Transforming Care Delivery

### AI to Enhance Clinical Workflows in the Rural Hospital Setting

Grand Oaks ABI

Chris DeRienzo, MD, *Senior Vice President, Chief Physician Executive, American Hospital Association*

Brad Reimer, *Chief Information Officer, Sanford Health, Sioux Falls, S.D.*

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping clinical workflows — but rural hospitals face unique governance, ethical and workforce challenges in its implementation. This session will explore how rural systems are leveraging AI — especially ambient AI — to support early recognition, documentation integrity, patient outcomes and workforce extension while navigating consent, trust and equity concerns. The panelists will discuss lessons learned from pilot programs and evaluation frameworks, and the need for transparent guardrails to ensure AI aligns with safety goals.

## 11:15 AM – 11:30 AM REFRESHMENT BREAK

Grand Foyer

## 11:30 AM – 12:30 PM CONCURRENT SESSIONS



Innovation

### The Rural Community Hospital of the Future: Tapping into the Power of AI

Cibolo Canyon 1-4

Steve Berkowitz, MD, *Founder and President, SMB Health Consulting*

Artificial intelligence is advancing rapidly, presenting both opportunities and challenges for rural and community hospitals. This session will explore how these hospitals — distinct from larger institutions — can strategically adopt AI tools to improve care delivery, enhance operations and support clinical teams. Attendees will learn how to navigate the pace of AI innovation, develop an implementation strategy that preserves the human connection in care and apply AI-enabled solutions in areas such as documentation, clinical decision-making, operational efficiency and workforce well-being. The session will also highlight how AI can strengthen the community medical home and improve care management across the continuum.



Governance



Workforce

**One Culture, Two Hospitals: Building a Flexible and Connected Rural Workforce**

Grand Oaks G

*Velma Cooper, Rural Chief Nursing Officer, Benson Hospital, Benson, Ariz.; Northern Cochise Community Hospital, Willcox, Ariz.*

*Gary Kartchner, Chief Executive Officer, Benson Hospital, Benson, Ariz.; Northern Cochise Community Hospital, Willcox, Ariz.*

In rural health care, cultivating a strong culture and flexible workforce is essential to navigating limited resources and evolving community needs. This session explores how two independent critical access hospitals aligned under a single rural leadership structure while preserving their unique identities and community ties. Attendees will learn how leaders built a unified culture that empowered staff, increased adaptability and supported sustainable operations across both facilities. Presenters will share practical strategies for improving staff engagement and retention through right-sized role design, leadership transparency and intentional collaboration. Through real-world case examples and leadership insights, participants will gain a framework for fostering workforce cohesion across departments or facilities while strengthening local connections and improving organizational resilience.



Transforming Care Delivery

**Advancing Rural Care: Practical Strategies for Quality, Safety and Performance Improvement** Grand Oaks CDH

*Amy Lee, MJ, MBHA, FACMPE, President and Chief Operating Officer, Nantucket Cottage Hospital, Mass General Brigham, Nantucket, Mass.*

Delivering safe, high-quality care in rural hospitals requires more than clinical expertise — it demands adaptability, innovation and strong collaboration across small teams. This session offers practical strategies to advance quality, patient safety and performance improvement in resource-limited settings. Attendees will explore how rural hospitals are building effective safety and quality programs by leveraging telehealth, flexible staffing, shared services and team-driven improvement initiatives. Participants will learn how to apply creative problem-solving to address persistent rural challenges such as limited specialty access, workforce shortages and outdated infrastructure. The session will also highlight how digital tools can support documentation, triage and care coordination while reducing preventable harm.



Transforming Care Delivery

**Strengthening Care in Tribal, Remote and Frontier Communities: Scalable Strategies from the Field**

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

**MODERATOR:** Jen Porter, Senior Vice President, Field Engagement, American Hospital Association

**PANELISTS:**

Loretta Christensen, MD, MSJ, FACS, Chief Medical Officer, Indian Health Service

Darrell LaRoche, Acting Deputy Director, Indian Health Service

Esther Muna, Chief Executive Officer, Commonwealth Health Center, Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands

Hospitals and health systems serving Tribal, remote and frontier communities face unique challenges in sustaining access to care and essential services. This panel brings together leaders and experts who have developed innovative solutions to overcome barriers through partnerships, technology adoption, clinical innovation and capital planning. Panelists will share real-world practices that address workforce shortages, infrastructure gaps and geographic isolation, while highlighting approaches that other rural organizations can adapt. Attendees will gain practical insights into scalable strategies and lessons learned from the field that support stronger, more resilient health care delivery in some of the nation's most underserved communities.



Transforming Care Delivery

**Integrating Environmental Factors into Rural Population Health Strategies**

Grand Oaks ABI

*Andrew Hooper, Chairman of the Board, Summit Pacific Medical Center, Elma, Wash.*

*Andrew Jager, Senior Director, Population Health, American Hospital Association*

*Krystal Moyers, Administrative Director, Community Partnerships and Communications, Augusta Health, Fishersville, Va.*

Environmental conditions such as extreme weather, air and water quality, and geographic isolation increasingly influence the health of rural communities. This session explores how rural hospitals are incorporating environmental factors into their community health strategies to better serve diverse and dispersed populations. Drawing from the AHA's Community Health and Environmental (CHE) initiative, participants will learn tactical approaches to assessment, partnership building and strategic planning.

Leaders from rural health systems will share how they are aligning environmental priorities with community health needs assessments, board-level planning and sustainable operations. Attendees will leave with actionable insights and an opportunity to contribute to the CHE initiative's national toolkit, designed to help hospitals advance resilience and population health in rural settings.

## 12:30 PM – 1:45 PM NETWORKING LUNCH IN THE SPONSOR HALL

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC

## 1:45 PM – 3:00 PM GENERAL SESSION

Grand Oaks Ballroom J-S

Introductory comments by Tina Freese Decker, MHA, MSIE, FACHE, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Corewell Health, Grand Rapids, Mich.*; *Chair, Board of Trustees, American Hospital Association* and Giselle Lugones, *Vice Chairman, Executive Managing Director, Healthcare, Life Sciences and Education, Howden US Specialty*

**Rural Health Care in Crisis: Where Do We Go From Here?**

Jamie Orlikoff, *President, Orlikoff & Associates, Inc.*, *National Advisor on Governance and Leadership to the American Hospital Association, and health care governance expert*

Paul Gauguin's 1897-98 painting, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" poses fundamental questions about the human experience — our origins, our identity and our future. These questions are not only philosophical but also deeply relevant to the current state of rural health care in America, where rural hospitals are experiencing an urgent and growing crisis. Many facilities have already closed their doors, and hundreds more — possibly over 700 — are at risk of closure. These closures are driven by a range of financial and other challenges, both new and old. Recent policy changes, such as those introduced by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, will radically reshape the landscape for rural health care providers and present unprecedented challenges. This presentation will address the crisis facing rural hospitals across America, their effects on the ability of rural hospitals to survive and serve their communities, and the many leadership challenges and approaches in this period of profound uncertainty.

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## 3:00 PM – 3:30 PM REFRESHMENT BREAK IN THE SPONSOR HALL

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC

## 3:30 PM – 4:30 PM CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Grand Oaks CDH



Innovation

**Advancing Innovation in Rural Health: Insights from the 2026 AHA Award Winner and Finalists**

**MODERATOR:** Susan Doherty, MA, LNHA, *Vice President, Field Engagement, Rural Health and Regional Executive Team, American Hospital Association*

Discover how leading rural hospitals are transforming care through innovation. In this session, the 2026 AHA Rural Hospital Excellence in Innovation Award Winner and Finalists share how they aligned strategic goals with community health needs to implement and sustain high-impact programs. Attendees will learn how hospital leadership and governance structures support a culture of innovation, including strategies to involve clinicians, patients and families in developing new solutions. The session will explore how these hospitals use technologies, partnerships and process improvements to enhance clinical and operational outcomes, and how they track success through measures such as patient experience, health outcomes and cost efficiencies. Participants will leave with insights and actionable approaches to drive innovation in their own communities.



Workforce

**Forging Collaborative Lifelines After a Mass Violence Incident in Rural and Tribal Communities**

Grand Oaks G

Michael Schmidt, *Professor of Microbiology and Immunology, MUSC, Charleston, S.C.*; *National Mass Violence Center*

Anne Seymour, *Associate Academic Program Director, MUSC, Charleston, S.C.*; *National Mass Violence Center*

Mass violence incidents can have devastating and lasting impacts, particularly in rural and Tribal areas where limited resources and stretched recovery networks make a coordinated response essential.

Attendees will learn how hospitals and community partners can plan and collaborate before and after a crisis to expand access to behavioral health, victim and survivor services and trauma-informed care. Presenters will discuss the roles of federal, state and regional programs, including Crime Victim Compensation (CVC), and outline strategies for deploying mobile outreach teams, using telehealth to reach isolated populations and coordinating care through cross-sector partnerships.

By the end of the session, participants will be better prepared to strengthen preparedness, response and recovery efforts for their communities through effective collaboration among health care organizations, victim service providers and government agencies.



Financial Excellence

## Evaluating Rural Affiliations, Mergers & Joint Ventures for Long-Term Impact

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

**MODERATOR:** Chad Golder, *General Counsel, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Clint Seger, MD, *Chief Executive Officer, Billings Clinic, Billings, Mont.*

Scott Christensen, FACHE, *Chief Executive Officer, King's Daughters Medical Center, Brookhaven, Miss.*

In this panel discussion, rural hospital leaders will explore how organizations can evaluate potential affiliations, mergers and joint ventures to support long-term financial stability. Panelists will discuss how boards and executives can assess alignment with mission, culture and strategic goals while navigating the financial, operational and governance considerations that shape successful partnerships. Drawing on insights from the field, the conversation will address what effective partnerships look like and how rural hospitals can position themselves for sustained strength and growth.



Patient Centricity

## Transforming Rural Access Through Digital Solutions

Cibolo Canyon 1-4

**MODERATOR:** Suzanna Hoppszallern, *Senior Editor, Data and Research, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Rob Fershtman, *Senior Director of Corporate Partnerships, U.S. Career Institute*

William Jones, MPH, MSN, RN, CAVRN, NE-BC, *Nurse Manager, University of Alabama Hospital, Birmingham, Ala.*

Paul Malito, *Director of Nursing Services, eMedicine, UAB Hospital, Birmingham, Ala.*

Eric Richardson, PhD, MPH, PHR, SHRM-CP, *Chair and Professor, Department of Healthcare Leadership & Management, Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), Charleston, S.C.*

As rural hospitals grapple with closures and workforce shortages, digital solutions have become indispensable. This panel explores how multi-modal virtual care — including Tele-ICU, virtual nursing and virtual sitter services — is reshaping access, safety and clinician retention in rural communities. Presenters will discuss how rural health systems can cultivate AI readiness through targeted upskilling and strategic deployment of tools such as ambient documentation and predictive staffing. Special emphasis will be placed on technologies that are scalable, cost-effective and tailored to the unique needs of rural settings. This session offers a blueprint for sustainable, compassionate innovation anchored in local identity, clinical autonomy and proximity-centered care. Attendees will gain actionable insights to inform internal strategy, foster cross-sector collaboration and move their organizations forward on the AI adoption roadmap.

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Workforce

## Rural Hospital Workforce Wellness and Retention Strategies

Grand Oaks ABI

**MODERATOR:** Chris DeRienzo, MD, *Senior Vice President, Chief Physician Executive, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

SiuPo (Soba) Becker, MD, *Chief Medical Officer, Howden*

Sandy Bledsoe, RN, MA, *Vice President, Healthcare Claims & Risk, Howden*

Ralph Lawson, CPA, FHFMA, *Board Member, Boca Raton Regional Hospital, Boca Raton, Fla.; Board Member, Baptist Health South Florida, Coral Gables, Fla.*

Rural hospitals continue to face persistent workforce pressures, from rising burnout among care teams to the financial strain of maintaining consistent staffing levels. This session explores actionable strategies to build a healthier, more stable workforce. Speakers will share approaches to reduce burnout by expanding access to medical and behavioral health support, as well as financial and operational strategies that help rural hospitals sustain appropriate staffing amid limited resources. They will also highlight how conflict resolution and risk management training can strengthen adaptive and de-escalation skills, improve daily interactions and help teams navigate challenging situations with confidence. Attendees will gain practical insights to support retention, improve daily operations and reinforce a strong workforce foundation across their rural organizations.

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**5:00 PM – 6:30 PM NETWORKING RECEPTION IN THE SPONSOR HALL**

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC

Join us in the Sponsor Hall to connect, collaborate and engage with your peers over refreshments and hors d'oeuvres. The networking reception provides a unique opportunity to forge new connections and strengthen existing ones. Whether you're looking to share insights, seek advice or explore potential partnerships, the Sponsor Hall is the place to be. Connect with our Sponsors who share your passion for advancing rural health care and exchange ideas that can drive positive change in your community.

**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10****7:00 AM – 3:00 PM REGISTRATION**

Ballroom Level

**7:00 AM – 8:15 AM BREAKFAST IN THE SPONSOR HALL**

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC

**8:15 AM – 9:15 AM CONCURRENT SESSIONS**

Governance

**Interactive Governance Clinic**

Grand Oaks CDH

Jamie Orlikoff, *President, Orlikoff & Associates, Inc., National Advisor on Governance and Leadership to the American Hospital Association, and health care governance expert*

Bring your thorniest governance issues to one of the nation's preeminent health care governance experts in this perennial favorite interactive session. You'll gain practical solutions and proactive ideas for improving governance performance. This session will be very interactive and no issue is off the table, so come prepared to talk, to question and be challenged!



Transforming Care Delivery

**Reimagining Maternal and Infant Health: Data-Driven Solutions for Maternity Care Deserts**

Grand Oaks G

Yasmene McDaniel, MHA, *Chief Executive Officer, HCA Houston Healthcare Southeast, Pasadena, Texas*

Amelia Vietri, *Senior Vice President, LocumTenens.com*

Michael Warren, MD, MPH, FAAP, *Chief Medical and Health Officer, March of Dimes*

Rural communities continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of the maternal and infant health crisis in the United States, with growing numbers of counties classified as maternity care deserts. This session will move beyond the statistics to explore data-driven strategies and promising innovations that hospitals and health systems are using to close critical gaps in quality and access to care. Through a multidisciplinary discussion, attendees will examine how leaders are leveraging telehealth, remote monitoring, hybrid workforce models and mobile care units to expand prenatal and perinatal services in high-need areas. Panelists will explore the role of culturally competent, community-based care and the impact of policy advocacy in reshaping access. Attendees will gain insights from real-world case studies and leave with practical strategies to evaluate and enhance their own maternity care delivery models. Ultimately, this session will help participants design or scale programs that improve outcomes, reduce disparities and strengthen both clinical and financial performance within their health systems — regardless of geography.



Transforming Care Delivery

**Age-Friendly Care in Rural Hospitals: Transforming the Aging Experience with Practical, Sustainable Approaches**

Grand Oaks ABI

**MODERATOR:** Autumn Branch, *Program Manager, Funded Partnerships, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Brittnay Bourgeois, RN, MHA, CPHQ, *Chief Quality Officer, St. James Parish Hospital, Lutcher, La.*

Terri Flood, MHA, *Vice President of Marketing & Business Development, Wayne Healthcare, Greenville, Ohio*

Adam Koontz, *Senior Director, Patient Support Services, Novant Health, Winston Salem, N.C.*

Rural hospitals are at the forefront of caring for an aging population. Yet they often face significant resource and staffing constraints when delivering high-quality, coordinated care for older adults. This session explores how rural hospitals are successfully adopting the Age-Friendly Health Systems 4Ms framework — What Matters, Medication, Mentation, and Mobility — to create safer, more responsive care environments.

Attendees will learn from real-world experiences of rural hospitals that have conducted in-depth assessments to identify care gaps, designed targeted implementation plans and achieved early results. The session will highlight

how age-friendly initiatives can be embedded across departments, improve patient outcomes, and clarify team roles while aligning with regulatory expectations such as CMS advanced care planning and emergency department standards. Participants will leave with a clear understanding of how to begin or advance age-friendly efforts in their own rural hospitals, including insights into overcoming workforce limitations, measuring impact and sustaining change over time.



Financial Excellence

### Rural Revival: Innovative, Cost-Smart Strategies to Expand Access and Improve Outcomes Cibolo Canyon 5-6

**MODERATOR:** Suzanna Hoppszallern, *Senior Editor, Data and Research, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Stephanie Greer, *President, Cannon Memorial Hospital, Newland, N.C.*

Sasha Hill, *Director, Carilion Clinic, Roanoke, Va.*

Amar Kendale, *Co-Founder and President, Homeward Health*

Jeffrey Strickler, DHA, RN, *Chief Executive Officer, UNC Chatham Hospital, Siler City, N.C.*

Chuck Sawyers, *Vice President of Finance, Carilion Clinic, Roanoke, Va.*

Living in rural America shouldn't mean limited access to care. This panel explores transformative care models that improve patient outcomes, empower front-line providers and strengthen the rural health ecosystem. Through two compelling case studies from critical access hospitals, discover how smart financial strategies — like Method II billing, infrastructure upgrades, rural health clinic conversions and systemwide collaboration — can reverse course and drive sustainable change. Learn how local partnerships expanded access to maternity care, behavioral health and specialty services while elevating the patient experience. Leave with a proven playbook for rural health transformation designed to enhance care delivery, ensure financial viability and deepen community impact.

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Transforming Care Delivery

### Infection Prevention Escape Room: An Interactive Learning Environment for Rural Safety Culture

Bluebonnet/Dogwood

This session offers an immersive, interactive learning environment where participants step into an infection prevention escape room designed for rural hospital teams. Through hands-on simulation, attendees will practice early sepsis recognition, assess environmental safety and strengthen team communication.

Participants will rotate through problem-solving scenarios and explore how this experiential model can be adapted as a training tool to improve safety culture and staff engagement in rural care settings. Facilitators will share lessons learned from rural pilots and provide guidance on tailoring the experience for different team sizes, clinical roles and resource levels. Attendees will leave with a replicable training model that supports culture change, enhances clinical readiness and reinforces high-reliability teamwork. Stop by anytime between 8:15 AM and 9:15 AM.

### 9:15 AM – 9:30 AM REFRESHMENT BREAK

Grand Foyer

### 9:30 AM – 10:30 AM GENERAL SESSION: AHA TOWN HALL: WASHINGTON UPDATE

Grand Oaks Ballroom J-S

**MODERATOR:** Lisa Kidder Hrobsky, *Senior Vice President, Federal Relations, Advocacy, and Political Affairs, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Travis Robey, *Vice President, Political Affairs, American Hospital Association*

Shannon Wu, PhD, *Director, Payment Policy, American Hospital Association*

Join the AHA for a discussion on the latest activity taking place on Capitol Hill. This session will focus on the health care policies Congress is currently considering, the Trump administration's priorities and the current political landscape. It will also provide insights into AHA's advocacy priorities, helping rural health care leaders navigate the challenges and opportunities ahead.

### 10:30 AM – 10:45 AM REFRESHMENT BREAK

Grand Foyer

## 10:45 AM – 11:45 AM CONCURRENT SESSIONS



Financial Excellence

**Navigating the Changing 340B Landscape for Rural Hospitals**

Grand Oaks CDH

Bharath Krishnamurthy, *Director, Pharmaceutical Policy, American Hospital Association*  
 Aimee Kuhlman, *Vice President, Advocacy and Grassroots, American Hospital Association*

Rural hospitals rely on the 340B program to expand access to care and support patients in underserved communities. As legislative, legal and regulatory developments continue to reshape the program, hospital leaders need to understand the implications for their organizations. This session will provide an update on the latest policy changes from Washington, D.C., and explore what they mean for rural hospitals in 2026 and beyond. Attendees will learn how to identify the most pressing legislative issues, assess the impact of regulatory updates and develop strategies to navigate challenges while protecting program benefits for patients.



Transforming Care Delivery

**Rescuing Rural Birth: Innovation and Investment in Maternal Safety**

Cibolo Canyon 1-4

**MODERATOR:** Ben Wise, *Senior Manager, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

William R. Murdock, *President and Chief Executive Officer, McDonough District Hospital, Macomb, Ill.*  
 Kristin Preihs, *Senior Director of Clinical Quality & Funded Partnerships, American Hospital Association*  
 Michael Wood, DPT, *Chief Executive Officer, Mena Regional Health System, Mena, Ark.*

Rural hospitals are facing growing challenges as maternity deserts expand and labor and delivery units close. This session will share how hospital leaders are using partnerships, grant funding and simulation-based safety programs to strengthen maternal health services. Attendees will learn how to identify funding opportunities that support service line expansion, apply safety and simulation practices to improve outcomes and adapt proven strategies to sustain or reintroduce maternal care in their own communities.



Financial Excellence

**Rebuilding Rural Health Care Teams: Strategic Approaches to Workforce Growth**

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

**MODERATOR:** Elisa Arespacochagae, *Group Vice President, Clinical Affairs and Workforce, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Luke Beirl, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Tamarack Health, Hayward, Wis.*  
 Lenny Castiglione, *Chief Executive Officer, OB Hospitalist Group*  
 Michael Cureton, MHA, FACHE, *Chief Executive Officer, Sutter Davis Hospital, Sutter Health, Davis, Calif.*  
 JohnRich Levine, DNP, DPA, DBA, CSSM, NEA-BC, *Chief Nursing Officer, Reeves Regional Health, Pecos, Texas*  
 Lori Rodefeld, *Deputy Director - RRPD Technical Assistance Center, UNC Health, Chapel Hill, N.C.*

Rural hospitals face ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining talent, from physicians and nurses to front-line staff and specialists. This panel features leaders who have implemented innovative strategies to strengthen their workforce despite limited resources. Learn how one hospital created a high-retention, high-engagement workplace culture that earned national recognition as a best place to work. Explore how perioperative care was strategically leveraged to expand surgical access, drive workforce growth, boost staff engagement and stimulate local economic vitality. Discover how critical access hospitals expanded graduate medical education and secured funding for new residency programs, creating pathways for physicians to train and remain in rural communities. These strategies are designed to be adaptable across a range of rural health care settings, offering both inspiration and practical guidance for leaders seeking to enhance organizational culture and workforce stability.

SPONSORED BY:

Maternal Health  
Access Solutions

POWERED BY OB Hospitalist Group



Innovation

**Pitching AI to Improve Outbound Referrals**

Grand Oaks ABI

Laura Kreofsky, *Director, Rural Health Resiliency, Microsoft Elevate*  
 Chris Spearman, *Chief Strategy Officer, Scale Health*

Experience a live Rural Health AI Lab (RHAIL) Challenge as three innovator startups showcase AI tools designed to solve a pressing issue for rural hospitals: the outbound patient referral process. Panelist judges from rural hospitals will share real-time feedback to help the innovators and attendees understand how these solutions could work in rural settings.

You will learn how rural hospitals are evaluating early-market AI tools, what to consider when partnering with technology vendors in a rapidly evolving space and how to assess implementation readiness. This session provides

practical insight into emerging AI strategies for referral management and features real-world perspectives from rural leaders who are exploring and adopting these solutions.

The RHAIL Challenge is part of the Microsoft Rural Health Resiliency program supporting rural providers in advancing innovation, strengthening cybersecurity and leveraging cost savings.

SPONSORED BY:



Financial Excellence

### Building Rural Readiness for Emergencies and Disruptions

Grand Oaks G

Mike Schiller, *Executive Director, Association for Health Care Resource and Materials Management (AHRMM)*

Rural hospitals carry major emergency response responsibilities while managing limited supplies, aging systems and lean staffing. As disruptions and climate-driven events increase, stronger materials management and preparedness practices are essential to maintaining safe and reliable care.

This session features experts who will share practical ways rural hospitals can modernize supply processes and strengthen readiness using guidance from the CLEAR Field Guide initiative. Attendees will learn how supply chain and preparedness teams can use shared frameworks to reduce risk, improve visibility across vendors and coordinate more effectively during emergencies. Speakers will translate key concepts into actionable steps that enhance inventory management, sourcing and operational readiness, with lessons drawn from recent events. The session also highlights low-cost strategies rural hospitals can adopt quickly to improve response capacity and build stronger partnerships that support preparedness across departments and communities.

10:45 AM – 12:45 PM

### INFECTION PREVENTION ESCAPE ROOM: AN INTERACTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR RURAL SAFETY CULTURE

Bluebonnet/Dogwood



Transforming Care Delivery

This session offers an immersive, interactive learning environment where participants step into an infection prevention escape room designed for rural hospital teams. Through hands-on simulation, attendees will practice early sepsis recognition, assess environmental safety and strengthen team communication.

Participants will rotate through problem-solving scenarios and explore how this experiential model can be adapted as a training tool to improve safety culture and staff engagement in rural care settings. Facilitators will share lessons learned from rural pilots and provide guidance on tailoring the experience for different team sizes, clinical roles and resource levels. Attendees will leave with a replicable training model that supports culture change, enhances clinical readiness and reinforces high-reliability teamwork. Stop by anytime between 10:45 AM and 12:45 PM.

11:45 AM – 1:00 PM

### NETWORKING LUNCH IN THE SPONSOR HALL WITH CONVERSATION STARTER TABLES

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC



Join a Conversation Starter table for meaningful discussions with other conference attendees. Each table will feature a designated host to guide conversations on critical rural health topics, such as mental health support in rural settings, leadership strategies for rural hospitals and leveraging technology in resource-limited areas. Grab your lunch, choose a table with a topic that interests you, and join the conversation to exchange ideas, share experiences and gain practical insights from fellow attendees dedicated to rural health care. This is a great opportunity to connect and collaborate with others addressing similar challenges in rural communities.

1:00 PM – 2:15 PM

### GENERAL SESSION: LEADING RURAL HEALTH CARE THROUGH DISRUPTION AND TRANSFORMATION

Grand Oaks Ballroom J-S

Introductory comments by M. Michelle Hood, FACHE, *Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, American Hospital Association*

#### Fireside Chat: Leading Rural Health Care Through Disruption and Transformation

**MODERATOR:** M. Michelle Hood, FACHE, *Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, American Hospital Association*

Bill Gassen, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Sanford Health, Sioux Falls, S.D.; Chair-Elect Designate, Board of Trustees, American Hospital Association*

In this candid conversation, a rural health leader reflects on the realities of leading rural hospitals through disruption and driving meaningful transformation. The discussion will explore how to manage change effectively, engage teams through uncertainty and make strategic decisions that strengthen care delivery and community trust in times of rapid evolution.

## Strengthening Rural Health: Insights from the CDC

**MODERATOR:** Susan Doherty, MA, LNHA, Vice President, Field Engagement, Rural Health and Regional Executive Team, American Hospital Association

**Amy Kolwaite, PhD, ARNP, MPH, Captain, US Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

Hear about the CDC's new Healthcare Systems Strengthening, Resilience and Training Branch and its mission to address the unique challenges faced by rural health. Learn about the Branch's priorities, innovative strategies, and partnerships to address health disparities, access care and resilience in rural communities. Attendees will gain valuable insights into how this initiative is poised to transform rural health services and how health care leaders can collaborate to drive meaningful change.

## Panel Discussion: Navigating Change to Build a Stronger Future for Rural Health Care

**MODERATOR:** Susan Doherty, MA, LNHA, Vice President, Field Engagement, Rural Health and Regional Executive Team, American Hospital Association

**PANELISTS:**

Brent Burkey, MD, President and Chief Executive Officer, Fisher-Titus Medical Center, Norwalk, Ohio

Jameson C. Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Kootenai Health, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

Lynda Stanley, FACHE, President and Chief Executive Officer, Dosher Memorial Hospital, Southport, N.C.

Hear from leaders of rural hospitals as they share how they are navigating ongoing change to strengthen care delivery, workforce capacity and financial resilience. This panel discussion highlights strategic decisions and leadership approaches for redesigning services, deepening community partnerships and adapting to evolving patient and community needs. Attendees will gain actionable insights from their peers facing similar challenges and working to shape the future of rural health care.

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## 2:15 PM – 2:30 PM REFRESHMENT BREAK

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## 2:30 PM – 3:30 PM CONCURRENT SESSIONS



Workforce

### Professional Growth and Retention Strategies for Medical Assistants

Grand Oaks CDH

Jamie Napier, MSN, MHA, CSSBB, CPHQ, CRHCP, RN, Director of Primary Care Practices, Schneck Medical Center, Seymour, Ind.

Ashley Stith, MSN, RN, RNC-OB, Physician Practice Manager, Schneck Pediatrics, Internal Medicine, Nephrology, Physician Practice Education, Schneck Medical Center, Seymour, Ind.

Susan Zabor, MSN, RN, FACHE, CSSBB, Vice President of Clinical and Provider Management, Chief Quality Officer, Schneck Medical Center, Seymour, Ind.

High turnover and limited preparation among medical assistants (MAs) can disrupt care, strain staff and affect patient safety — especially in rural settings with smaller labor pools. This session shares a practical approach to improving MA retention through structured onboarding, mentorship and career development.

Attendees will learn how to identify drivers of MA turnover, assess risk within their organizations and implement onboarding and training programs tied to certification pathways. The session will highlight how one rural hospital reduced turnover by more than 60% through targeted efforts to support MA growth and stability. Participants will leave with strategies to improve workforce retention, engage leadership and strengthen care continuity in outpatient settings.



Financial Excellence

### Reversing the Trend: Strategies for Rural Hospital Stabilization and Closure Retraction

Grand Oaks G

**MODERATOR:** Alyssa Meller, Chief Operating Officer, National Rural Health Resource Center

**PANELISTS:**

Larry Bailey, Chief Operating Officer, Critical Access, IU Health, Bloomington, Ind.

Brian Roland, Chief Executive Officer and Administrative Director, Elkview General Hospital, Hobart, Okla.

Rural hospitals continue to face mounting financial, workforce and service-line pressures that place many communities at risk of losing essential access points. Yet across the country, leaders are demonstrating that decline is not inevitable. Through strategic planning, strengthened partnerships and targeted operational improvements, rural hospitals are finding ways to stabilize performance, maintain critical services and, in some cases, reverse the trajectory toward closure.

This session will explore high-level strategies for navigating periods of disruption, responding when nearby facilities close or reduce services and coordinating with community partners to sustain access to care. Discussion will focus on practical approaches for assessing community needs, aligning regional resources, redesigning services and

building the collaborative leadership required to support long-term hospital and community stability. Attendees will leave with insights and frameworks to help protect access, reinforce rural health infrastructure and strengthen the resilience of the communities they serve.



Financial Excellence

### From Hospital to Community: Using the Baldrige Framework to Lead Rural Health and Economic Transformation

Grand Oaks ABI

Benjamin Anderson, MHCDS, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Hutchinson Regional Healthcare System, Hutchinson, Kan.*

Karen Kiel-Rosser, *Vice President and Quality Improvement Officer, Mary Greeley Medical Center, Ames, Iowa*

Stephanie Norling, *President and Chief Executive Officer, C.O.R.E.*

Rural hospitals are uniquely positioned to drive rural health and economic transformation. As trusted institutions and major employers, they can lead efforts that improve health outcomes and strengthen local economies. Yet many leaders struggle to move from understanding the challenges — such as chronic disease, workforce shortages and economic instability — to building sustainable, system-level solutions.

This session introduces a proven framework to help rural hospitals lead cross-sector, data-informed initiatives that align health care priorities with broader community goals. Using the Communities of Excellence model, based on Baldrige Performance Excellence Principles, speakers will share how hospitals are building partnerships across sectors, addressing root causes of poor health and guiding long-term transformation. Participants will gain tools to launch or scale community-focused strategies, engage nontraditional partners and align efforts around shared goals.



Financial Excellence

### Reimagining Rural Partnerships: Unlocking Value Through Strategic Collaboration

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

**MODERATOR:** Susan Doherty, MA, LNHA, *Vice President, Field Engagement, Rural Health and Regional Executive Team, American Hospital Association*

**PANELISTS:**

Robert Copple, FACHE, *Former Hospital President, Ascension Via Christi Hospital, Manhattan, Kan.*

Donna McGregor, FACHE, FHFMA, *President, Rochester Regional Health St. Lawrence Region, Potsdam, New York*

Josh Neff, *Chief Executive Officer, CommonSpirit Mercy Hospital, Durango, Colo.*

Rural hospitals are increasingly turning to innovative partnerships to sustain access, expand services and ensure long-term viability. This panel explores collaborative models such as joint ventures, affiliations and full integration with larger health systems. Panelists will share how they overcame barriers to build trust, addressed governance and community concerns, and aligned partnerships with organizational values and local needs. Importantly, the discussion will also highlight cases where rural hospitals, after thoroughly assessing potential mergers or affiliations, made the strategic decision to remain independent, choosing to "go it alone" to preserve autonomy to best serve their community. Attendees will gain insights into how to evaluate diverse partnership options, understand which models offer the greatest potential for sustainability and apply proven strategies that enhance quality, expand access and strengthen local health care delivery.

## LEISURE TIME – ON YOUR OWN

### 4:00 PM – 8:30 PM OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

#### San Antonio Riverwalk Excursion | \$30

Stroll, shop and dine along the winding path of the San Antonio River Walk for a uniquely Texas experience. Experience vintage and historical sites and learn their history while discovering new attractions, authentic boutiques and exceptional restaurants. A shuttle bus will provide transportation to and from the JW Marriott.

**SCHEDULE:**

- 4:00 PM: Shuttle departs from the JW Marriott
- 4:30 PM: Arrive at the San Antonio Riverwalk
- 8:00 PM: Shuttle departs from the San Antonio Riverwalk
- 8:30 PM: Arrive back at the JW Marriott

**7:00 AM – 10:00 AM REGISTRATION**

Ballroom Level

**7:00 AM – 8:00 AM CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST**

Nelson Wolff Exhibit Ballroom BC

**8:00 AM – 9:00 AM CONCURRENT SESSIONS**



Innovation

### **The Rural Cybersecurity Triple Threat: AI, Attacks and Cost Pressures**

Cibolo Canyon 1-4

Scott Gee, *Deputy National Advisor for Cybersecurity and Risk, American Hospital Association*

John Riggi, *National Advisor for Cybersecurity and Risk, American Hospital Association*

Cyberattacks against hospitals and health systems have surged in recent years, with nation-state and criminal adversaries targeting organizations at record levels. These attacks often involve the theft of vast amounts of patient data and medical research. Most concerning are high-impact ransomware incidents that have shut down critical systems, delayed care and created direct risks to patient safety.

Join American Hospital Association's John Riggi, national advisor for cybersecurity and risk and former FBI executive, and Scott Gee, deputy national advisor and veteran of the U.S. Secret Service, as they share national and international perspectives on emerging cyberthreats, including those fueled by geopolitical tensions, third-party providers and supply chain vulnerabilities.

Together, the panel will examine the role of physical security and artificial intelligence in both defending against and enabling attacks. They will also provide practical strategies and policy insights to help hospitals and health systems strengthen preparedness, respond effectively and recover from cyber incidents.



Governance

### **From Strength to Strategy: A Rural Hospital's Proactive Path to Partnership**

Cibolo Canyon 5-6

Chris Benson, *Managing Director, Juniper Advisory*

Robert Heckert, *Member, Board of Trustees, CHRISTUS Southern New Mexico, Alamogordo, N.M.; CSNM Senior Advisor, Sacramento Mountains Foundation*

Lillian Montoya, *Senior Vice President, CHRISTUS Health New Mexico; President and Chief Executive Officer, CHRISTUS St. Vincent Regional Medical Center, Santa Fe, N.M.*

Reuben Murray, *Chief Executive Officer, CHRISTUS Southern New Mexico, Alamogordo, N.M.*

In a time when many rural hospitals pursue partnerships only as a last resort, this session highlights a rare example of proactive alignment. A high-performing and financially stable rural hospital proactively chose to pursue a partnership, not out of necessity, but from a position of strength. Attendees will examine the board's strategic reasoning, the governance structures that preserved local voice and the vision that guided a forward-looking affiliation process. The session will highlight the value of early partnership, showing how rural hospitals can secure stronger outcomes, more favorable terms and meaningful reinvestment by exploring alignment opportunities before financial pressure takes hold. Through this case study, participants will see how innovation, governance and timing can mean the difference between reactive survival and proactive transformation. You'll leave with practical strategies for leading your own organization through affiliation on your own terms.



Financial Excellence

### **Transforming Rural Behavioral Health Access Through Community Collaboration**

Grand Oaks G

Shane Coleman, MD, *Clinical Division Director of Behavioral Health and Psychiatry, St. Charles Health System, Bend, Ore.*

Stephen Merz, FACHE, *Chief Operating Officer, Sheppard Pratt Solutions, Baltimore*

Stephanie Snider, PhD, MPH, *Director, Sheppard Pratt Solutions, Baltimore*

Join this session to hear how a rural community transformed access to mental health and substance use disorder services through collaborative partnerships. Presenters will share strategies that strengthened acute care behavioral health services, expanded crisis and outpatient care and improved financial performance through a certified behavioral health clinic framework. Attendees will learn how to apply governance and planning approaches that engage hospital and community partners, implement data-driven processes to increase access and use financial and operational tools to sustain behavioral health services. The session will also highlight how this model can reduce emergency department reliance, expand mobile crisis response and build outpatient capacity to meet the needs of rural communities.

Transforming  
Care Delivery**Community-Driven Care: Addressing Public Health Needs in Rural Native Communities**

Grand Oaks CDH

Jennifer Wahkinney, *Chief Nurse Executive, Indian Health Service, Lawton, Okla.*Rebecca Geiger, PharmD, MHA, BCACP, AAHIVP, *IHS Oklahoma City Area HIV/HCV/STI Coordinator, Indian Health Service, Lawrence, Kan.*Tiana George, *Assistant Chief Nurse Executive, Indian Health Service, Lawton, Okla.*

Rural hospitals and health systems serving Native communities must often look beyond traditional care delivery models to address urgent public health needs. This session highlights how one Indian Health Service facility partnered with local organizations to respond to a public health crisis through collaboration, cultural understanding and community engagement. Presenters will explore how assumptions about care and culture can limit effectiveness — and how building equitable, trust-based partnerships can improve outcomes. Attendees will learn how to identify community assets and gaps, destigmatize care and co-design solutions that reflect the values and needs of the populations they serve.

**9:00 AM – 9:15 AM REFRESHMENT BREAK**

Grand Foyer

**9:15 AM – 10:15 AM CONCURRENT SESSIONS**Transforming  
Care Delivery**Achieving High Reliability and Just Culture in Rural Health Care: A Practical Roadmap for Boards and Leaders**

Grand Oaks G

Bernie Adams, *Chief Quality Officer, North Country Healthcare, Whitefield, N.H.*Darrell Bodnar, *Chief Information Officer, North Country Healthcare, Whitefield, N.H.*Tiffany Haynes, *Chief Nursing Officer, North Country Healthcare, Whitefield, N.H.*

Governance

This session offers a practical roadmap for rural health care leaders and board members to build high-reliability organizations and foster a just culture of safety. Drawing on the experience of a fully independent rural health system, speakers will outline how Lean Six Sigma principles, strategic goal alignment and systemwide engagement can produce measurable improvements in patient safety and quality — without requiring significant financial investment. Participants will learn how a disciplined approach to cascading goals, data transparency, board engagement and staff training led to dramatic reductions in harm and sustained quality gains. Attendees will leave equipped with actionable tools and templates — including process maps, KPI dashboards and board-level reporting structures — to strengthen safety culture, increase accountability and drive continuous improvement across their organizations.



Governance

**Reimagining Rural Board Leadership: Practical Steps to Sharpen Governance and Strategy** Grand Oaks CDHSiri Nelson, *President and Chief Executive Officer, Marshall Medical Center, Placerville, Calif.*Kara Witalis, *Principal Owner, Witalis, LLC*

In today's complex health care environment, effective governance is a strategic necessity — especially for rural and independent health systems. This session explores how one rural hospital reimagined its board structure, operations, and focus to elevate performance and meet the challenges of tomorrow. Presenters will walk through practical changes that enhanced board engagement, streamlined meetings, clarified roles and strengthened alignment between the board and executive leadership. Participants will gain actionable strategies — such as restructuring committees, revamping meeting materials and aligning governance modes — that can be implemented without additional burden. Whether your board needs a refresh or a full transformation, this session offers a practical roadmap for achieving greater focus, trust and strategic leadership.

Financial  
Excellence**Building Sustainable Radiology Models in Rural Health Care**

Cibolo Canyon 1-4

Anand P. Lalaji, MD, *Chief Executive Officer, The Radiology Group*

Rural hospitals are rethinking how radiology services are delivered to ensure consistent access, clinical quality and financial sustainability in a constrained workforce environment. This session highlights practical, scalable models rural organizations are using to strengthen radiology coverage through technology-enabled workflows, strategic partnerships and smarter use of limited clinical resources.

Attendees will learn how rural health systems are applying teleradiology, standardizing imaging operations and leveraging flexible staffing and coverage models to improve reliability while reducing burnout and operational risk. The discussion will equip leaders with actionable insight into designing radiology strategies that can adapt to changing demand, support care teams and sustain diagnostic services over the long term.

SPONSORED BY:





## Partner-Driven Approach to Rural Health Viability with EHR as a Service

Grand Oaks ABI

**MODERATOR:** Christopher Policano, *Vice President of Sales, MEDITECH*

**PANELIST:**

Vern Lougheed, *Director of Information Technology, Northfield Hospital + Clinics, Northfield, Minn.*

Rural hospitals face mounting financial pressure, limited IT capacity and growing cybersecurity and regulatory demands that threaten long-term viability. In this environment, technology strategies must do more than maintain systems; they must actively support sustainability and independence. This session explores how a partner-driven EHR as a Service model can help rural organizations reduce operational burden while strengthening their ability to serve their communities.

Panelists will share how rural hospitals have transitioned from on-premise EHR environments to service-based models that shift responsibility for updates, security and maintenance to vendor partners. The discussion will cover how leaders evaluate the business case, manage implementation and structure effective partnerships. Attendees will learn how reallocating internal resources can support strategic IT priorities that enhance patient care, improve resilience and reinforce long-term organizational viability.

SPONSORED BY: **MEDITECH**

### 10:30 AM – 11:30 AM **GENERAL SESSION**

Grand Oaks Ballroom J-S

Featuring introductory comments by Susan Doherty, MA, LNHA, *Vice President, Field Engagement, Rural Health and Regional Executive Team, American Hospital Association*

#### **Finding Purpose Through Service: Leaving a Lasting Impact**

Justin Wren, *Humanitarian, Author, Mixed Martial Arts Fighter, Mental Health Advocate, and Non-Profit CEO/Founder*

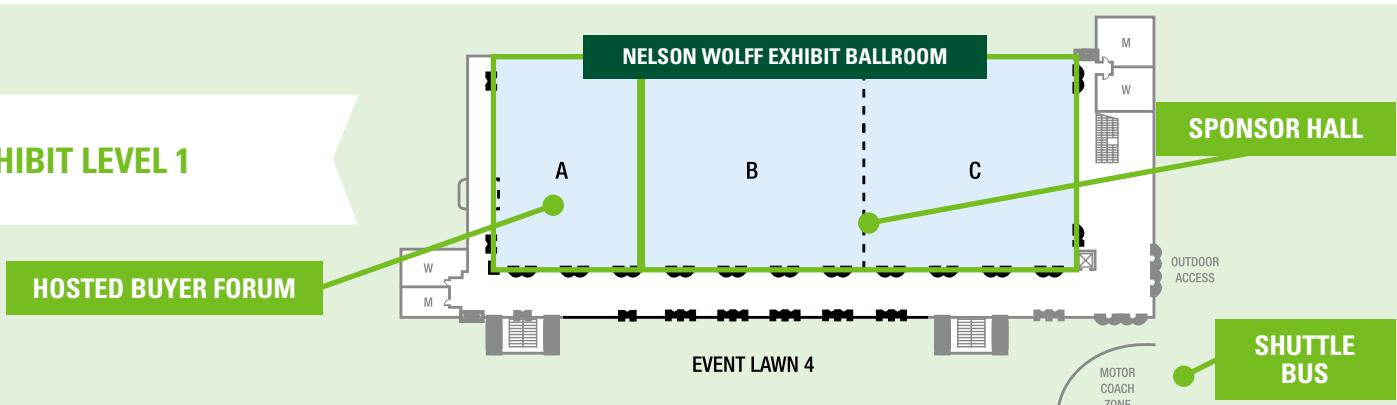
After hitting rock bottom, Justin Wren found a calling that transformed his life and the lives of others. His journey began with the Pygmies, a marginalized community that became the heart of his mission to serve selflessly and create sustainable change.

In this powerful session, Justin explores how service can be a catalyst for personal healing, purpose and hope. Attendees will learn how one act of compassion can spark a ripple effect — impacting individuals, communities and even the person doing the serving.

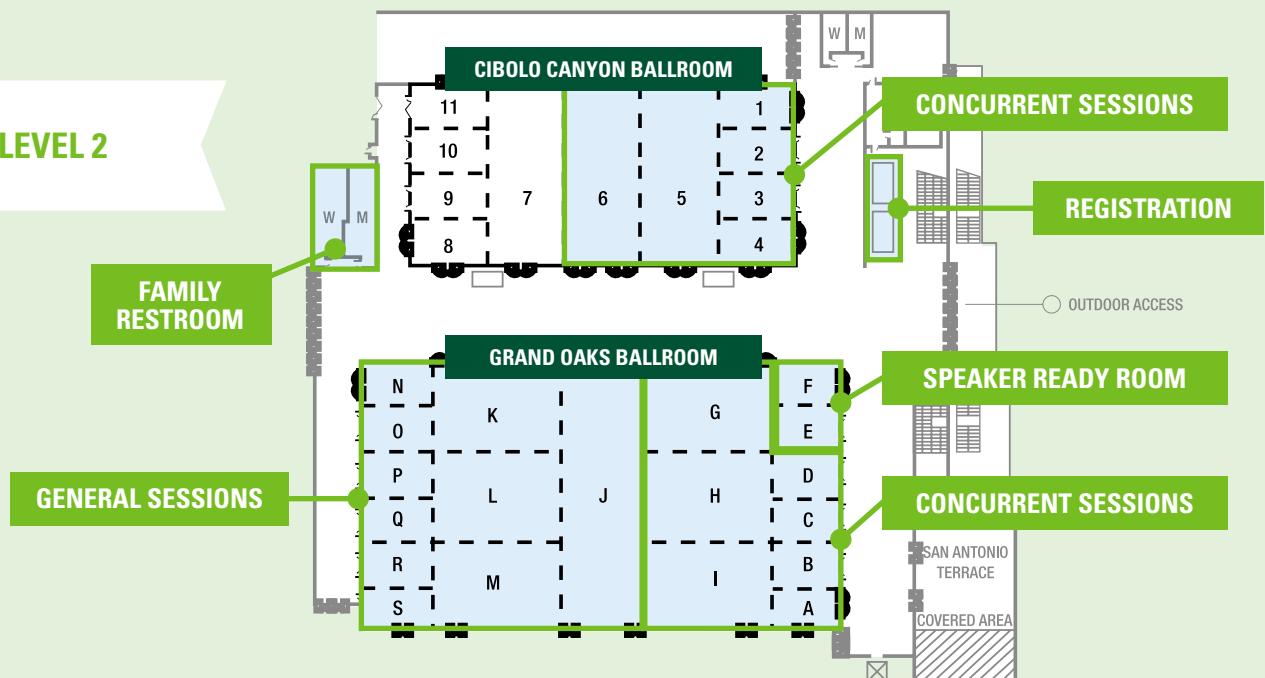
Through Justin's story, participants will be inspired to become "hope dealers" in their own lives — people who lead with kindness, live with intention and leave a meaningful imprint on the world.

# HOTEL MAP

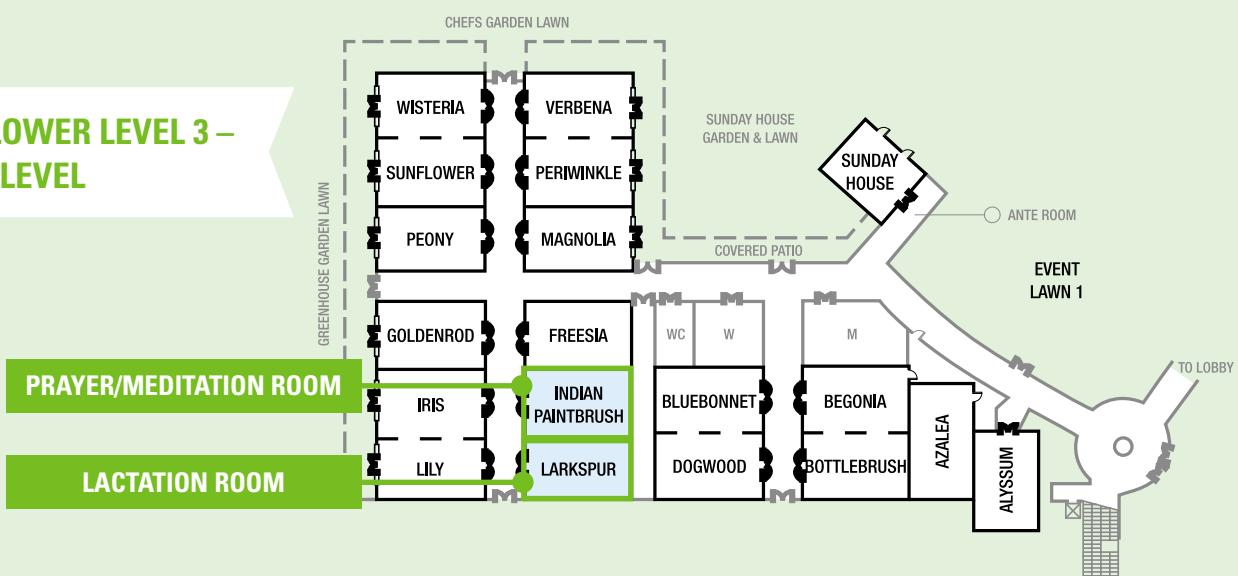
## EXHIBIT LEVEL 1



## BALLROOM LEVEL 2



## WILDFLOWER LEVEL 3 – LOBBY LEVEL





American Hospital  
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Advancing Health in America

# MARK YOUR CALENDARS

Make plans to join your fellow hospital and health system leaders.



## AHA Annual Membership Meeting

April 19-21, 2026 • Washington, DC

Join CEOs, senior executives and trustees to be a part of the discussions on the advocacy, regulatory, and legislative issues that impact our work.

[annualmeeting.aha.org](http://annualmeeting.aha.org)

## Healthier Together Conference

May 12-14, 2026 • Dallas, TX

Data-driven strategies and innovative approaches to expand care access, strengthen community partnerships and reduce disparities in health outcomes are the focus of this new conference.

[healthiertogether.aha.org](http://healthiertogether.aha.org)

## AHA Leadership Summit

July 12-14, 2026 • Denver, CO

Where senior hospital executives and thought leaders share transformational strategies and innovative approaches that will drive health care into the future.

[leadershipsummit.aha.org](http://leadershipsummit.aha.org)

## Rural Health Care Leadership Conference

January 31-February 3, 2027 • Orlando, FL

The premier event for rural leaders who want to exchange ideas and learn best practices for a more sustainable future.

[ruralconference.aha.org](http://ruralconference.aha.org)