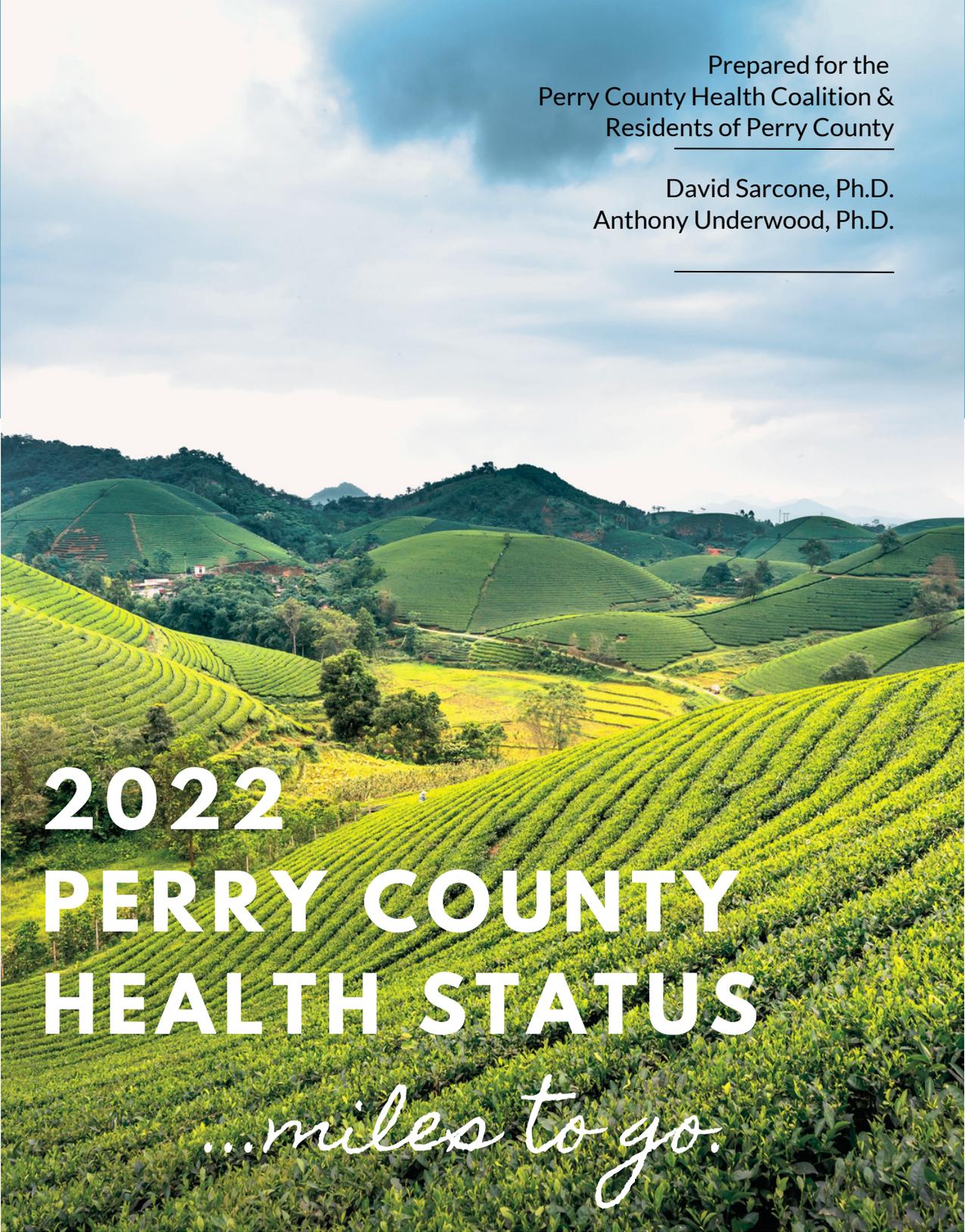


Prepared for the
Perry County Health Coalition &
Residents of Perry County

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2022
PERRY COUNTY
HEALTH STATUS

...miles to go.

A CALL TO ACTION



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KEY FINDINGS

RESEARCH METHODS

Residents of Perry County have struggled for decades with extreme shortages of basic health services. Many residents go without care until a major health issue causes them to seek emergency services. Poor health outcomes are a direct result of residents' inability to access available healthcare providers.

This report is based on a 2022 health assessment of major health challenges and opportunities, written by David Sarcone and Anthony Underwood.¹ The findings are drawn from quantitative analyses examining data from the County Health Rankings, American Community Survey, American Medical Association, and the 2018 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. These results are complemented by three focus groups with county residents and three focus groups with healthcare providers serving the county. Professional staff from the Pennsylvania Health Access Network (PHAN) assisted in completing the focus groups in 2021 and 2022.

The findings document that access to health services in Perry County has remained stagnant or worsened in the past 10 years, creating an urgent call to action with the five recommendations below.



INCREASE ACCESS TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES

Challenges: Perry County currently faces an extreme shortage of mental health providers. There is 1 mental health provider for every 2,720 Perry County residents, which is in contrast to the state average of 1 provider for every 420 Pennsylvanians.² Penn State Health and UPMC prioritize behavioral health access issues and needs as the first or second most pressing issue in their recent health assessments.^{3 4} In focus groups, Perry County residents listed behavioral health as the second most needed service in the county.

Solutions:

- Work swiftly to expand and fund telehealth, case management services, and in-home and mobile therapy to address rural access barriers.⁵
- Integrate physical and behavioral health for early intervention services.⁶
- Amplify access to services through schools by expanding school-based therapy options.
- Work strategically with existing providers to promote sharing of resources and offer recruitment incentives to attract and retain new providers.



PLANNING FOR ACTION

2

INCREASE ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE SERVICES

Challenges: Perry County has an extreme shortage of primary care providers. There is 1 primary care provider for every 3,860 Perry County residents, which is in contrast to the state average of 1 provider for every 1,220 Pennsylvanians.⁷ Focus group participants report that access to primary care providers is the most needed service in the county.

Solutions:

- Work strategically to expand the number of primary care providers in existing practices—including health system providers, health center providers, and independent practices.
- Develop new practices that expand access to health services for patients who are under- and uninsured, through investments in federally qualified health centers.
- Develop new health partnerships that connect patients to providers and close care gaps, for example, through the expansion of telemedicine, community health workers, and paramedicine partnerships with EMS providers.

3

INCREASE ACCESS TO ORAL HEALTH SERVICES

Challenges: The alarming shortage of dentists in Perry County has grown worse over the past 5 years, as dentists have retired. There is just 1 dentist for every 4,620 Perry County residents, in contrast to 1 for every 1,410 Pennsylvanians statewide.⁸ What does this look like? Currently, there are only 8 dentists working at 8 practices in Perry County. Access to dental services during evening appointments has eroded by half since 2014 (from a total of 28 evening appointment hours to just 14 hours today).

Solutions: The need is clear: invest in evidence-based, community approaches to addressing oral health shortages. The Rural Health Information Hub's Oral Health in Rural Communities tool is a strong resource for this.⁹

- Support existing dental practices with their expansion planning.
- Integrate dental services within and alongside existing primary care services.
- Cultivate workforce incentives and partnerships with dental schools to assist with the expansion of oral health providers.
- Foster school-based oral health screenings and services.
- Collaborate with community health centers in considering mobile dental health services.

FINDING SOLUTIONS



4

INVEST TO IMPROVE HEALTH LITERACY

Challenges: Only 12 percent of adults are proficient in health literacy, with adults over the age of 65 having the lowest health literacy scores.¹⁰ Limited health literacy results in medication errors and failed care for chronic health conditions. Improved access to all essential health services and integrated education efforts will directly improve health literacy.

Solutions:

- Launch a shared health communications campaign and strategy with the major health systems and community providers in Perry County. Apply best practices in health literacy and education (e.g., ruralhealthinfo.org).
- Involve Perry County residents in guiding health education and promotion campaigns.
- Develop specific educational strategies to reduce mental health stigma.

5

STRENGTHEN THE COALITION

Challenges: The stagnant progress of access to health services in Perry County stems from the rural nature of an aging community with limited health infrastructure. Since the coalition was formed in 2013, critical progress was made in bringing new healthcare providers into the county yet simultaneously older providers retired. Unless vigorous recruitment efforts continue, remote counties like Perry will continue to be hardest hit by the nation's shortage of primary care, oral health, and mental health providers. Without strategic investment, the situation may worsen.

Solutions: The Perry County Health Coalition is an essential group to drive collective progress. The coalition merits more support from the major health systems to increase its operational capacities, toward achieving the four major goals above. Coalition strengthening involves the following steps.

- Broaden and energize coalition membership.
- Increase coalition backbone support and staffing.
- Increase coalition visibility and marketing.
- Increase access to shared resources through the coalition.

PERRY COUNTY HEALTH COALITION

The Perry County Health Coalition strives to improve access to and availability of health services for all Perry County residents.

Located in Central Pennsylvania, the coalition was formed in 2013, in response to growing concerns about the health of community residents. Comprised of 30 organizational members, the coalition brings together representatives from county government, local and regional health care providers, human service organizations, funders and area school systems to address health challenges. These efforts are supported by the Perry County Commissioners and area funders, including the Partnership for Better Health and the United Way of the Capital Region.

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