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Rural Healthcare and PPP: How the Program is Helping Providers Serve their Communities

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Rural communities across America offer a certain appeal – access to prime outdoor recreation, tight-knit relationships and a slower pace. These communities also face their own unique set of challenges, and often find creative ways to overcome them.

A smaller town means a smaller population, and businesses and organizations rely heavily on recruitment to bring the best, most-qualified professionals to their area. That's only half the battle, though, as retention is key to economic survival.

This challenge is no more prevalent than it is in the healthcare sphere, where rural hospitals and clinics depend on talented, qualified medical professionals that are willing to relocate to their community. Losing these workers due to an economic downturn – such as the one our country is facing due to the effects of COVID-19 – can be catastrophic.

“It’s certainly a challenge recruiting people to a small town because we are so remote,” said Margie Molitor, CEO of Hot Springs County Memorial Hospital in Thermopolis, Wyo. “And, though we’re thankful this hasn’t happened yet, if our community is severely impacted by COVID-19, we’ll need those professionals here to take care of everyone.”

In addition to the hospital, Molitor’s organization includes three rural health clinics in Worland, Basin and Thermopolis and employs roughly 160 people. Molitor says by adhering to CDC guidelines, her institution experienced a 60 percent reduction in revenue in April.

“To be clear, eliminating elective surgeries and changing our operations in an effort to preserve PPE (personal protective equipment such as masks) was absolutely the right thing to

do for our country,” Molitor explained. “But, it definitely had an impact, and we were faced with the possibility of furloughing employees, as salary and benefits account for about 50 percent of our expenses. If we had to furlough folks, we may very well have lost them for good.”

Molitor says the institution – a dual-status 501(c)(3) organization – worked with Pinnacle Bank to learn about the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and prepare an application. When the second round of funding became available, Molitor says their application was submitted the same day.

“Pinnacle Bank was wonderful to work with, and they were with us every step of the way. We were also incredibly lucky to have the SBA Wyoming team as a resource throughout this process,” Molitor said. “The PPP allowed us to maintain payroll and keep our people here. We’re the second-largest employer in Hot Springs County and naturally that makes us an economic driver. Furloughs almost certainly would’ve caused a ripple effect throughout the community.”

Lending institutions across the state have taken the charge to administer the program and guide businesses and organizations from start to finish.

“The hospital here is a large employer, so of course we wanted to help them and their employees. We’ve done more than \$47 million worth of PPP loans in our community, and every business is important in a town this size,” said Minnie Miller, Market President (Thermopolis), Pinnacle Bank Wyoming. “And, working with a rural hospital came with a different set of guidelines, but SBA staff were able to provide us with that information as soon as it was available. That enabled us to get their PPP application processed very quickly, and we’re proud to have played our part in helping that many people.”

As of today, there is still more than \$100 billion in assistance available for Wyoming’s rural businesses, health care providers, farmers, ranchers, nonprofits, and faith-based groups. These funds are critical to retaining employees, aiding payments on essential bills, and reducing economic injury.

“By making nonprofit hospitals eligible for forgivable loans, leveraged through the power of private vendors, SBA is providing the capital and certainty health organizations need to retain employees and continue services,” said Dan Nordberg, SBA Director of Rural Affairs and Region Eight Administrator.

Molitor says outpatient surgeries have resumed and the clinics are now seeing patients in accordance with CDC social distancing guidelines.

“We’re now getting back to the ‘new normal,’ and we’re in a much better place than we’d be if we had to furlough employees,” Molitor said. “Our physicians and surgery staff are prepared to mobilize if we do get busy with COVID-19 patients, and we continue to work closely with the county’s health department.”

For additional resources on programs and resources in your community, visit www.sba.gov/paycheckprotection.

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