

OHIO RURAL HEALTH CONFERENCE



Ohio Rural Health Conference

August 6–7, 2026 | OSU Wooster

DAY 1

8:30 AM – Welcome

*Dr. Beth Kluding, ORHA Board President, Chief Nursing Officer/ Chief Operating Officer,
Hocking Valley Community Hospital*

Dr. Andy Thomas, Chief Clinical Officer, The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center

9:00 AM – Opening Keynote | John Hanson

10:00 AM – State of Rural | Troy Brown, Chartis Group

11:00 AM – Breakout Sessions Begin

Session 1: Auditorium

Session 2: Fisher North

Session 3: Fisher 111

Session 4: Fisher 121

11:00 – 11:45 AM

Session 1

Compliance Reimagined: Turning RHC Regulations into Results

Kate Hill, The Compliance Team

Compliance is more than preparing for a survey—it is a strategic tool that strengthens patient care, improves operational performance, and supports long-term success. This session will explore how Rural Health Clinics can move beyond simply meeting regulatory requirements to using compliance as a foundation for quality improvement and organizational excellence. Participants will review current RHC regulations, learn from the most common deficiencies identified during accreditation surveys, and discover practical strategies to build a culture of continuous compliance. Attendees will leave with actionable tools to transform regulations into meaningful results that improve patient outcomes, reduce risk, and keep their clinics survey-ready every day.

Session 2

Beyond the Hospital Walls: How Rural Health Systems Can Lead Workplace Wellness

Robyn Feitshans, MS, Terri Flood, MHA Wayne HealthCare

Rural hospitals have a powerful opportunity to strengthen community health by partnering with local employers to deliver integrated workplace wellness services. This session highlights how Wayne HealthCare expanded its reach beyond traditional care settings through strategic corporate collaborations that improved access to preventive services and boosted employee well-being. Attendees will learn a practical five-step framework for building employer partnerships, tailoring wellness programs to diverse organizational cultures, and demonstrating measurable impact. The session also explores how these initiatives support long-term sustainability through leadership engagement, strategic marketing, and alignment with broader community health goals. Ideal for wellness professionals and rural health leaders, this session offers scalable strategies to enhance population health while expanding a hospital's community presence.

Session 3

Repaving a Path to Profitability

Nick Smith, Wipfli LLP

Rising staffing costs and expenses are putting pressure on hospital expenses. Pressure from insurers, rising accounts receivable and denials are weighing on cash and revenue. Eroding profit margins are forcing hospitals across the country to consider their financial health and make more aggressive changes to their operations to achieve financial sustainability. Through our financial improvement work with hospitals, Wipfli has identified key success factors, strategies, and tactics that hospitals have put in place to improve profitability in today's economic environment. We will unpack our findings across key areas including revenue cycle, reimbursement and cost report considerations, strategic and service line performance, and operational/staffing benchmarks and how optimization across these areas can impact profitability and financial sustainability.

Session 4

Rural Health, Real Impact: Evidence Based Communication Strategies

Emily Bennett, Shift-ology

Rural communities are facing a compounding healthcare crisis – hospital and service closures, workforce shortages, expanding care deserts, and widening mistrust that drives delayed care and poorer outcomes. In many regions, the challenge isn't only access; it's also whether people believe the system is listening, local and worthy of trust. This session makes the case that strategic communication is a foundational investment in rural health – not a “nice to have” – and shows how to apply communication science to restore confidence, strengthen health literacy and counter misinformation in ways that fit rural realities. Participants will explore the audience dynamics shaping rural engagement, including aging populations, economic vulnerability, self-reliance culture, generational differences in technology adoption and skepticism intensified by the COVID-19 era. The session translates evidence-based approaches into clear, usable tactics, including community-informed insights (listening, surveys, focus groups), risk and health communication principles, and message mapping using the 27/9/3 model to create concise, consistent messages across spokespeople without sounding scripted. Attendees will also learn how to activate trusted local voices – clinicians, community health workers, faith leaders, educators and local media – across both digital and offline channels to reach communities with limited broadband and varying health literacy.

11:45 AM – 2:00 PM

Lunch Keynote – **Liza Hillel, BA, MSN, CRN, Abbott**

Visit Vendors | Visit Research Posters

1:00 – 1:45 PM

Critical Access Hospital Meeting, Troy Brown, Chartis Group

2:00 – 2:45 PM

Session 1

RHC Behavioral Health Integration

Nicole Thorell, Wintergreen

Behavioral health needs continue to grow across rural communities, making integration into primary care more important than ever. This session provides practical strategies for developing sustainable behavioral health services within Rural Health Clinics by exploring staffing models, reimbursement opportunities, care management services, telehealth, workforce challenges, and operational best practices. Participants will gain actionable guidance to improve access to care, strengthen financial sustainability, and build a coordinated, whole-person approach to patient care.

Session 2

Handling Difficult Employee Conduct in Small Communities

Daphne Kackloudis, Scot Hinshaw, Rebecca Shope, Shumaker

How to deal with gossip and confidentiality, bullying complaints, social media problems, boundary issues with patients, nepotism and favoritism concerns and “everyone knows everyone” investigations.

Session 3

Promoting Safe Medication Practices with Generation Rx

Emily Drerup and Kelsy Schmuhl, The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy

Promoting Safe Medication Practices with Generation Rx- Generation Rx offers accessible, evidence-based educational materials and resources designed to teach safe medication practices across the lifespan. This session will introduce participants to the newly redesigned website, updated toolkits, and provide insight into how the activities and resources can be adaptable to use in different community settings. Attendees will explore key messages, sample activities, and learn practical implementation strategies.

Session 4

Extended Poster Time

3:00 – 3:45 PM

Session 1

Beyond the Visit: Improving Outcomes, Enhancing Lives and Increasing Revenue

Kristen Ogden, The Compliance Team

Chronic Care Management (CCM) is more than a billing code—it's a strategy for improving patient outcomes, strengthening care coordination, and supporting the long-term sustainability of rural health clinics. This session explores how CCM transforms care beyond the office visit through proactive, team-based approaches that reduce hospitalizations, improve patient engagement, and create sustainable revenue. Attendees will leave with practical implementation strategies, real-world examples, and actionable steps to build or strengthen a successful CCM program.

Session 2

Personalizing Nurses' HER Workflows Saves an Estimated 1,600 Hours Annually

Eric Gasser, Wooster Community Hospital Health System

How did a rural health system achieve an estimated reduction of 1,600 hours in charting time and nearly 2.8 million clicks annually? The CIO and a multidisciplinary team of IT staff, clinical analysts, and nurse representatives launched a FUN Time, or Freeing up Nurses Time, initiative after a KLAS Arch Collaborative survey revealed that a post-pandemic decline in nurses' software governance engagement contributed to documentation and charting challenges. The team encouraged nurses to submit suggestions for workflow improvements. The FUN Time initiative focused on personalizing the EHR, reducing redundant documentation, and streamlining workflows. Quick wins, such as adjusting access settings and leveraging the EHR's flexibility, fueled enthusiasm. The health system collaborated with its EHR vendor to implement more complex changes. This effort, which resulted in implementing 81 suggestions, significantly increased nurses' Net EHR Experience Score and reignited nursing governance engagement.

Session 3

Building Pediatric Readiness in Ohio: Strengthening Care Across Hospital and prehospital Systems

Kyle Smith, Ohio EMS for Children State Partnership Program

Pediatric care continues to be a challenge for many institutions—particularly in rural and resource-limited regions—where low pediatric volumes, staffing constraints, and limited training opportunities create barriers to readiness. Ensuring that emergency departments and EMS agencies are prepared to stabilize and care for ill or injured children is essential to improving outcomes and reducing preventable morbidity and mortality.

Session 4

Navigating Ohio and Federal Regulations for International Healthcare Staffing

Amber Sprengard, Donita Ross, Health Carousel

Ohio rural healthcare organizations face growing workforce shortages while navigating a complex and evolving regulatory environment. This session provides Ohio-specific guidance on the international recruitment of nurses and allied healthcare professionals, including state licensure requirements, federal immigration pathways, and compliance considerations. The discussion will also examine national advocacy efforts—such as the work of the American Association of International Healthcare Recruitment (AAIHR)—and the proposed Healthcare Workforce Resilience Act, which has been endorsed by the National Rural Health Association and the American Hospital Association. Attendees will learn how regulatory policy, legislative activity, and advocacy initiatives intersect to shape compliant and sustainable international staffing strategies for Ohio rural healthcare organizations.

4:00 PM – 4:45 PM

Session 1

RHC Best Practices Checklist – Operational Performance

Nicole Thorrell, Wintergreen

High-performing Rural Health Clinics don't succeed by chance—they rely on standardized workflows, efficient operations, and strong alignment between quality, finance, and patient care. This session walks participants through a comprehensive operational best practice checklist covering patient access, staffing, Annual Wellness Visit workflows, revenue cycle optimization, denial management, quality improvement, care management, workforce development, and performance monitoring. Attendees will leave with practical strategies and proven tools to improve efficiency, enhance patient outcomes, strengthen financial performance, and position their clinic for long-term success in a value-based healthcare environment.

Session 2

Strengthening Rural Health Through Targeted Technical Assistance

Leasa Novak, Rural Health Redesign Center

Description: Rural hospitals in Ohio face ongoing financial strain, workforce shortages, and evolving care delivery demands. This session introduces the Rural Health Redesign Center (RHRC) and its role in supporting rural providers through targeted technical assistance. The presentation focuses on the Rural Emergency Hospital (REH) designation, including eligibility requirements, key differences from CAH and PPS hospitals, and lessons emerging in year three of implementation. Participants will learn how RHRC supports REH planning and conversion through financial modeling, regulatory guidance, service redesign, and community engagement. The presentation will also include a brief description of the Appalachian Region Healthcare program, which supports transformation efforts in eligible rural Appalachian communities.

Session 3

Health Workforce Ohio

Rick Hodges, Ohio University, Deirdre Murphy Beluan, The Health Collaborative

Building Ohio's Health Workforce- An Update on Health Workforce Ohio and what it means for rural providers.

Session 4

From Confusion to Clarity: Type 2 Diabetes Doesn't Have to Be a Life Sentence

J. Kevin Whitt

Type 2 diabetes has become one of the most common and costly chronic conditions affecting rural communities, yet many people feel overwhelmed, discouraged, or resigned after diagnosis. This session breaks down what is actually happening in the body in plain language and explains why type 2 diabetes is often preventable, manageable, and in many cases reversible through lifestyle-based approaches.

Participants will learn how nutrition, insulin, and metabolic health interact, and why conventional advice often leaves people stuck rather than improving. The focus is not on blame or perfection, but on realistic, accessible steps individuals and communities can take to improve outcomes. Attendees will leave with a clearer understanding of diabetes and a practical framework they can apply personally or share within their communities.

5:30 PM – Networking Event

Networking Event at The Ugly Duck (Drinks + Hot Appetizers)

3331 Lincoln Way E, Wooster, OH 44691

DAY 2

9:00 – 9:45 AM

Session 1

RHC Billing and Coding Update 2026

Charles James, North American HMS

This session will review the many changes for Rural Health Clinics in 2026. We will discuss Care Management Services billing options, including Remote Patient Monitoring. Telehealth, Advanced Primary Care Management, add-on codes and their effect on RHC reimbursement. We will review new billing methods for Preventive Vaccines and CPTII/HCPCS coding codes

Session 2

Miles from Care: Maternal Health in Rural Ohio's Desert

Ashley Kovacs

Miles From Care: Maternal Health in Rural Ohio's Deserts: Maternal health in Ohio is at a critical inflection point, particularly for rural communities where access gaps, obstetric unit closures, and long travel times have shifted maternal risk beyond traditional labor and delivery settings. This session reframes maternal health as a rural systems issue, extending from pregnancy through the full postpartum year and into emergency departments, EMS, and community-based care. Drawing on state and national data, evidence-based frameworks and emerging partnerships, presenters will outline how Ohio can strengthen rural maternal readiness through coordinated strategy, workforce education, postpartum safety, and cross-sector collaboration. Attendees will leave with a clearer understanding of current maternal health challenges in rural Ohio and practical insights into how rural health leaders can play a meaningful role in improving outcomes for mothers and babies across Ohio.

Session 3

Closing the Distance: How Angel Flight East Expands Access to Lifesaving Care for Rural Patients

Jess Ames, Angel Flight East

Closing the Distance: How Angel Flight East Expands Access to Lifesaving Care for Rural Patients
Accessing specialty medical care is especially challenging for patients living in rural communities, where long travel distances, limited transportation options, and financial strain can delay or prevent treatment. Angel Flight East, a nonprofit organization providing free air transportation for patients who must travel far from home for care, plays a critical role in bridging this gap. This session will explore how volunteer pilots, community partners, and healthcare providers can work together to remove transportation barriers for rural patients across Ohio and the broader Mid-Atlantic region. Attendees will learn how Angel Flight East's mission-driven model works, what types of medical travel qualify, and how hospitals, clinics, and rural health professionals can easily refer patients in need. Through real patient stories and practical guidance, this presentation will highlight the profound impact that free medical flights can have on treatment adherence, continuity of care, and overall health outcomes. Participants will leave with actionable steps to connect their patients to no-cost flight support—ensuring that distance is never a barrier to healing.

Session 4

Rural Appalachian Pharmacy Service Learning: Building Up Rural Electives

Rebecca Lahrman, Christopher Hernandez and Jennifer Rodis, OSU College of Pharmacy

A pharmacy service-learning elective course was designed to prepare students for an immersive learning experience in rural work settings that exposed them to rural Appalachian history, culture, and social determinants of health (SDOH) considerations. A 7-week hybrid course began with readings and videos on how Appalachian history and culture has influenced healthcare and included a rural healthcare simulation for providers designed to bring awareness of SDOH in diabetes. This immersion in history and culture came together in a lecture that tied these topics together and highlighted bright spots identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission's community needs assessment. Students then completed their own community needs assessments for surrounding counties and identified SDOH that affect rural communities and local resources that help to mitigate associated barriers.

10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Federal and State Advocacy Presentation

Zil Joyce Dixon Romero, National Rural Health Association

Carly Salamone, President, Vantage Healthcare of Ohio

**Agenda subject to change*

Biographies



Jessica Ames is a mission-driven nonprofit executive committed to expanding access to healthcare through aviation. As Chief Operating Officer of Angel Flight East (AFE), she oversees organizational strategy, operations, and outreach, ensuring that AFE continues to provide free air transportation for patients in need of medical care. In this role, she leads cross-functional teams, strengthens partnerships, and drives innovation to scale the organization's impact across the Northeast.



Deirdre Murphy Beluan serves as the CEO of The Health Collaborative and has a strong record of leading complex organizations through transformation, financial turnaround, and strategic growth. Experience spans executive leadership roles at The Health Collaborative, Lumeris, United Way of Greater Cincinnati, Bon Secours Mercy Health, consistently building and scaling population health infrastructures, advancing value-based care models, and improving cost, quality, and network performance. Leadership includes major initiatives such as health information exchange restructuring, large-scale population health program expansion, COVID-response operations, and system-wide physician alignment strategies. Earlier roles in HR operations and government service further strengthen this broad background. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Indiana University and MBA and MHSA degrees from Xavier University,



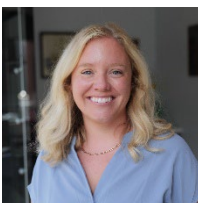
Emily Bennett has been with Shift•ology for 10+ years and currently serves as the senior account manager for the rural health and community practice areas, and oversees client services for the agency as a whole. She has worked closely with Mercy Health – Springfield, Family Health Services of Darke County (Greenville), Madison Health (London), Mental Health Recovery Board of Clark, Greene & Madison Counties (Springfield), Mental Health Services (Springfield) and Rocking Horse Community Health Center (Springfield) during her time as the company's expert communication strategist in the healthcare focus area. Emily graduated from The Ohio State University with a degree in strategic communication. In her side gig, Emily serves as the organic content editor for Dayton Mom Collective, Cincinnati Mom Collective and Louisville Mom Collective. She resides in Springfield with her husband and three children.



Troy Brown, Network Consultant: Rural Health Specialist, The Chartis Group facilitates network improvement projects utilizing a holistic balanced scorecard-like approach to improvement. By incorporating financial, market, quality, safety, outcomes, patient satisfaction and population health metrics into the network analysis, a clear understanding of the group strengths and opportunities becomes evident. Utilizing both public and hospital specific data, Mr. Brown's networks are able to obtain a clear set of benchmarks as to their *relative* position to their peers nationally and locally. Responding to the needs of the hospitals, improvement activities and best practice exchanges are put into place to monitor improvement throughout the life of the project.



Renée Burnham is a healthcare analyst at Chartis with expertise in evaluating industry dynamics to inform strategic decision-making and drive operational improvements. Her work focuses on healthcare markets and policy, delivering actionable insights that enable organizations to improve performance, foster innovation, and achieve sustainable growth across a diverse range of stakeholders. Renée has served as a National Baldrige Examiner, applying the Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Framework to assess organizational performance and identify best practices. She was a featured panelist for a Fierce Biotech webinar on payer-provider disruption and co-facilitated the workshop, *Finding Links Between Population Health and the Built Environment*, at the ACE Summit & Reverse Expo in Atlanta. Her expertise has also been featured by Nashville Public Radio, the *Houston Chronicle*, and other news organizations nationwide. Renée holds a Master of Business Administration from Lipscomb University and a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Middle Tennessee State University. She is a Project Management Professional (PMP).



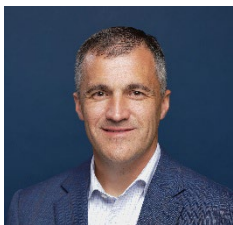
Emilee Drerup, MPH, serves as the Community Outreach Coordinator in the College of Pharmacy at The Ohio State University. In this role, she supports the Generation Rx medication safety program and coordinates outreach and engagement activities for the college. Prior to this role, Emilee worked with Ohio State University Extension as a Program Director and Family and Consumer Sciences educator and with Ohio Department of Health's State Office of Rural Health. She is two-time graduate of the Ohio State University with a B.S. in public health, minor in disability studies, and Master of Public Health degree and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Agriculture, Education, Communication, and Leadership. She is also a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES).



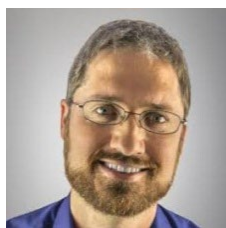
Robyn Feitshans, is a Wellness Coordinator at Wayne HealthCare, where she leads a range of community and employee wellness initiatives focused on chronic disease prevention, health education, and lifestyle management. Robyn has a bachelor's and master's degree in exercise science and a graduate certificate in public health. She is also a certified Health Coach. Robyn has obtained certifications in a variety of evidence-based programs such as Tai Chi for Arthritis, Geri-Fit®, and Stepping On. She plays an integral role in coordinating health screenings, corporate wellness partnerships, and the hospital's Community Health Needs Assessment. Robyn is passionate about improving health, well-being, and quality of life through community-based education. She enjoys engaging with individuals and groups to share real world, practical techniques that are easy to implement and can create meaningful, lasting improvements in personal health.



Terri Flood is a transformational and servant leader with more than 20 years of experience in healthcare marketing, strategic planning, and rural community health development. As Vice President of Marketing and Business Development at Wayne HealthCare, Terri provides executive oversight for marketing, communications, outreach, and partnership initiatives. Terri is a skilled brand strategist and storyteller, known for designing impactful campaigns that elevate organizational visibility, drive service line growth, and strengthen community engagement through data-informed and mission-driven approaches. Terri brings a deep understanding of rural healthcare challenges and opportunities, leading the implementation of evidence-based wellness initiatives aligned with population health priorities. In addition to her healthcare leadership, she has held executive roles on local, state and national nonprofit boards, championing equity, access, and the vitality of rural communities. Her cross-sector experience reinforces her ability to build strategic collaborations and drive meaningful impact both at the organizational and community level.



Eric Gasser, MBA, BS, RN, CHCIO, FACHE, serves as the Vice President of Information Systems/CIO of Wooster Community Hospital Health System in Wooster, Ohio, where he provides oversight and strategic leadership for the healthcare organization's information systems, telecommunications, and telehealth departments. At the start of his WCH career in 2006 as a clinical systems analyst, he led the organization in implementing computerized physician order entry (CPOE) and electronic physician documentation. Throughout his tenure at WCH, Eric has served as Supervisor of Applications and Director of Information Systems, and has held his current role since 2017. Demonstrating a steadfast commitment to Wooster Community Hospital, Gasser has dedicated 18 years of service to the rural healthcare provider located in northwestern Ohio. Eric is a CHIME Certified Healthcare CIO (CHCIO) with 20 years of healthcare information systems experience and 15 years of management experience in information systems.



John D. Hanson is a Leadership Keynote Speaker, Executive Coach, and Transformation Architect who helps organizations Intentionally build Cultures where People thrive, Leaders grow, and meaningful Impact extends far beyond the workplace. He has served organizations across healthcare, community health, developmental disabilities, manufacturing, skilled trades, and corporate America, equipping Leaders to strengthen employee engagement, elevate patient & customer experiences, and create cultures that people don't want to leave. A U.S. Army veteran who served 8 years, including a deployment to Iraq, John blends Resilience, Servant Leadership, and real-world business experience with an engaging, practical speaking style. He is the author of 4 books on Leadership, Customer Experience, and Personal Growth and has built a global network of more than 35,000 Leaders. John believes every organization has greater potential than it is currently experiencing. Through Intentional Leadership and a Culture by Design, he helps Leaders create lasting Win/Win Transformation that benefits their Teams, Patients, and Communities.



Christopher Hernandez, PharmD, BCACP, AAHIVP, is an Assistant Professor of Practice in the Division of Pharmacy Practice and Science at The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy. His clinical practice is at PrimaryOne Health, the largest federally qualified health center in central Ohio, where he provides care to a majority uninsured, Spanish-speaking population. At PrimaryOne Health, he operates with a high level of autonomy with more than eight disease states through collaborative practice agreements. He is also PrimaryOne Health's HIV specialist, working in a highly interprofessional team providing care to patients living with HIV under Ryan White funding. His teaching is mainly experiential teaching, where he will have students on rotation from their second, third, and final year of pharmacy school. During these rotations, students will experience a blend of topics, including clinical practice, practice management, and academia.



Kate Hill, RN, joined The Compliance Team in early 2012 to direct TCT's rural health clinic accreditation program and has fallen in love with Rural. She presently serves on the Board of NRHA. She feels fortunate to have been able to speak at numerous state and national meetings about RHC compliance countrywide which gave her the opportunity to learn firsthand the diverse regional issues clinics are facing. Kate also works with clinics in TCT's Swing Bed Certification program and is seeing that as a way to increase census in the CAH. Kate lives in suburban Philadelphia near her two daughters and three granddaughters. She is happy to share photos anytime.



Liza Hillel, BA, MSN, CRN, is committed to advancing cancer prevention and championing equitable healthcare access. Her passion for public health and advocacy was sparked during her time as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Island Kingdom of Tonga, where she provided health education and developed a strong desire to address health disparities. After Tonga, Liza spent 17 years as a nurse practitioner in the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology at Penn Medicine. There, she specialized in the early detection and treatment of gastrointestinal cancers, with a focus on implementing prevention strategies to improve patient outcomes. Now, as a Field Medical Scientific Liaison at Exact Sciences, Liza continues her mission to reduce the burden of colorectal cancer through education, research, advocacy and collaboration. She works closely with healthcare providers, identifies unmet needs, and supports initiatives that prioritize accessibility and inclusivity in healthcare.



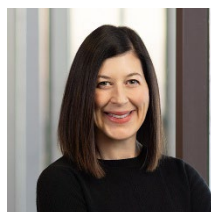
Scot Hinshaw, Partner, Shumaker has practiced for more than two decades, Scot focuses on employment and labor law and commercial litigation. His experience includes serving as lead counsel in jury trials, injunction hearings, and commercial arbitrations. He has litigated and appeared pro hac vice in numerous cases throughout the United States. Scot has also argued before the District of Columbia and Sixth Circuit federal courts of appeals and has served as head negotiator on behalf of employers across the table from the Service Employees International Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers. Additionally, he has successfully defended against numerous union grievances before labor arbitrators.



Richard "Rick" Hodges is Assistant Clinical Professor at Ohio University. He is also Director of the Ohio Alliance for Population Health, Executive Director of the Ohio University Health Collaborative, and Fellow at the George Voinovich School for Leadership and Public Service. Rick began his career as an elected local official and State Representative from rural Northwest Ohio. After leaving the legislature he worked in hospitals and private industry groups designing and managing population health programs for communities and employers in Toledo, Ohio, Tucson, Arizona and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. From 2014-2107 he served as Director of the Ohio Department of Health in the Kasich administration.



Charles James is President and CEO of North American Healthcare Management Services, founded in 1992. Charles, David James, and Charles James, Sr. started North American in 1992. Charles and David have overseen development of all RHC, RCM, and EHR processes for North American. Charles has a Bachelor of Science and an MBA from Saint Louis University. Along with David James, Charles founded The Rural Advantage ACO. The Rural Advantage is designed for RHC-FQHC participation. The ACO has participants in eleven states. Charles is a past-president of National Association of Rural Health Clinics (2012 – 2023), as well as the Illinois Rural Health Association. Charles provides educational sessions and webinars on billing and compliance to state and private organizations across the United States. North American currently provides comprehensive Revenue Cycle Management, RHC/FQHC startup and consulting, Cost Reporting, RHC/FQHC Billing, Provider Enrollment and many other services to physicians, hospitals, RHCs, and FQHCs across the country.



Daphne Kackloudis is a business partner who understands the high stakes of community health. She helps health care providers implement effective business and practice strategies by navigating the rapidly changing health care regulatory, legal, and public policy landscape. With decades of experience in and around state government and health care operations, Daphne brings a unique blend of strategic insight, operational experience, and policy knowledge to her work. She has held senior policy roles within the Ohio Departments of Medicaid and Job and Family Services, served in leadership roles in Federally Qualified Health Centers, and worked with a boutique health care consulting firm advising providers on the intricacies of state Medicaid programs. Daphne's background includes C-suite roles driving operations, strategy, public policy, legal, and compliance initiatives. Daphne believes that a strong understanding of local, state, and federal health care policy is essential to delivering forward-thinking counsel.



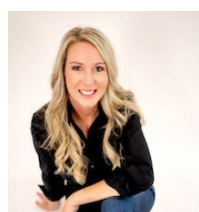
Ashley Kovacs, MSN, RNC-OB, C-EFM, C-ONQS is a clinical nurse in women's health at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, where she advocates for women and their unborn children. Her 23-year nursing career includes labor and delivery clinical nurse at Parkland Memorial Hospital, and Assistant Nurse Manager in labor and delivery at UT Southwestern Medical Center, both located in Dallas, Texas. Ashley earned her Master's degree in Nursing Leadership and Administration from Excelsior University in New York and her Bachelors Degree in Nursing from The Ohio State University. She is a member of the Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses, American Nurses Association, and the Ohio Rural Health Association. She holds three advanced certifications in High-Risk Obstetrics, Electronic Fetal Monitoring, and Obstetric and Neonatal Quality and Safety from the American Nurses Credentialing Center.



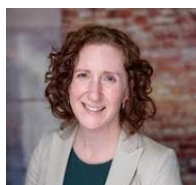
Rebecca Lahrman, PharmD, MS, BCACP, Assistant Professor – Clinical Dr. Lahrman is an assistant professor of clinical pharmacy in the Division of Pharmacy Practice and Science at The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy. Her current practice site is O'Bleness Family Medicine Residency Clinic, which is an ambulatory care practice site located in Athens Ohio near Ohio University. She works under a collaborative practice agreement for diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. In addition to seeing patients, she precepts with physician residents to help them navigate safe and effective medication use.



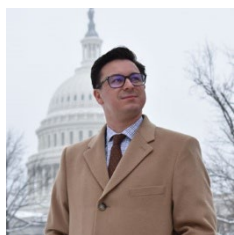
Leasa Novak, MS, LNHA, LPN, is a Regional Liaison with the Rural Health Redesign Center and brings more than 30 years of healthcare experience spanning patient care, nursing home administration, program development, quality improvement, and strategic communications. Early in her career, she provided home health services to rural Medicare beneficiaries and later consulted with post-acute providers across rural and Appalachian regions of Ohio. With a focus on stakeholder engagement, her work has improved quality measures, enhanced patient safety outcomes, advanced care coordination efforts, and supported person-centered care initiatives. She has also led award-winning outreach initiatives, including outreach to rural Medicare beneficiaries. Ms. Novak holds a Master of Science degree from the University of Texas at Dallas with a concentration in organizational behavior and executive coaching and has deep family roots in rural Appalachia.



Kristen Ogden, RN, is Director of Quality Improvement at The Compliance Team and a recognized rural health leader with expertise in Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH) and Chronic Care Management (CCM). Raised in a rural community, she is passionate about helping clinics strengthen care coordination, improve patient outcomes, and expand access to quality healthcare in underserved, Rural and Tribal communities. Kristen works closely with practices nationwide to advance quality improvement and value-based care initiatives.



Jennifer Rodis, PharmD, FAPhA, Associate Dean for Outreach and Engagement, Professor - Clinical is a Regular Clinical Track Faculty Member and serves as Associate Dean for Outreach and Engagement at COP. She created Partner for Promotion in 2005 and has served as director since its initiation. This nationally recognized program joins students and community-based pharmacy practitioners to develop and implement advanced patient care services. She has facilitated adoption of PFP at eight colleges of pharmacy across the U.S. since 2009. In addition to this experiential teaching, Dr. Rodis leads professional development threads through the Doctor of Pharmacy curriculum with a focus on leadership and professional identity formation.



Zil Joyce Dixon Romero, MPM, is the Senior State Government Affairs Manager at the National Rural Health Association. In this role, he analyzes state-level rural health trends, identifies model legislation, and implements strategic approaches to interact with state government officials and stakeholders. He previously participated in the Obama Foundation's 2023 LeadersUSA program and has interned on Capitol Hill for several Members of Congress. He is particularly passionate about expanding opportunities in rural communities, demonstrating how advocacy can translate from patient care to policy change, and advancing pragmatic solutions grounded in evidence-based best practices. He holds a Master of Policy Management from Georgetown University and completed his undergraduate studies at American University.



Donita Ross, MSN, RN, NE-BC, CGNC, CWRU Executive Fellow, is Assistant Chief Nursing Officer and Vice President, Health Carousel International, and a nationally recognized nurse leader and global advocate for ethical international nurse recruitment. She has supported and deployed thousands of internationally educated nurses from more than 125 countries, building scalable workforce pathways grounded in compassion, dignity, and long-term retention. Donita is widely respected for personally standing with nurses during moments of crisis, serving as both a clinical advocate and trusted guide throughout the migration and transition journey. A CGFNS/ICN Certified Global Nurse Consultant and published contributor to Nurse Leader, she is an active leader across major nursing and staffing organizations. Her work reflects a core belief that ethical recruitment is not merely compliance, but compassion in action.



Carly Salamone serves as the President of Vantage Healthcare of Ohio, a 13-hospital collaborative of independent, rural hospitals working collaboratively to maintain their independence. Prior to this role, Carly served as the Executive Administration and Government Relations Director at Fisher-Titus Medical Center, a rural, independent hospital in Norwalk, Ohio, and 12.5 years at the Hospital Council of Northwest Ohio, where she served as the Director of the Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB and the Senior Director of Community Health Improvement. A 2021 Toledo 20 Under 40 awardee, Carly has her Master of Public Health from the Northwest Ohio Consortium for Public Health, as well as a certificate in Public Policy from the Wharton School of Business, an Executive Certificate in Non-Profit Leadership from Duke University, and, most recently, a certificate in Risk Management from Butler University. Carly serves on several local organizational boards, including serving as the Board Chair for the Health Council of Northwest Ohio, the Advocacy Chair for the Ohio Rural Health Association, and the newest board member of the Northwest Ohio American Heart Association. Carly lives in Wood County with her husband, 2 young boys, and her 11- year-old pitbull, Payton. When not advocating for rural communities, you can find her coaching 3rd grade boys' soccer, on the sidelines of flag football and baseball games, and cheering for the Philadelphia Eagles.



Kelsey Schmuhi, PharmD, BCACP is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Pharmacy in the Division of Pharmacy Practice and Science and Director of Harm Reduction and Prevention Education at The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy. She received her Bachelor of Science in Pharmaceutical Sciences and Doctor of Pharmacy degrees from The Ohio State University before completing two years of postgraduate training with an emphasis on community and ambulatory care pharmacy, medication access, pharmacy education, and caring for patients with substance use disorders.



Rebecca Shope, Partner, Labor & Employment Service Line Lead, Shumaker, represents private and public entities in a variety of litigation, internal investigations, risk management, and traditional labor matters, such as collective bargaining and arbitrations. She frequently litigates non-competition and non-solicitation agreements and defends claims for enforcement on behalf of employers. Rebecca assists clients in employee and supervisory training across the United States and works with them on their diversity and



Kyle J. Smith, MA is the Healthcare Program Manager with a broad multi-sector background encompassing emergency management, public health, global security intelligence, and healthcare system improvement. Possesses operational experience across police, fire, and EMS environments, complemented by analytical expertise in risk assessment, intelligence interpretation, and strategic planning. Demonstrates a strong ability to synthesize complex data to inform organizational decision-making and guide system-level improvements. Passions of focus include disaster preparedness, behavioral health integration, and the identification of gaps in care, access, and readiness. Committed to fostering collaborative partnerships and leading initiatives that strengthen healthcare resilience, safety, and overall patient outcomes



Nick Smith leads Wipfli LLP's national Healthcare Capital Planning Consulting Practice. For 20 years Nick has traveled across the country, helping hospitals achieve stronger financial results through performance improvement and turnaround planning. His expertise crosses all aspects of the healthcare ecosystem including market planning and strategy, finance and reimbursement, operations, and facility planning. Nick also provides Technical Assistance to struggling rural hospitals as a Contractor to USDA and the National Rural Health Association.



Amber Sprengard is Vice President of Government Affairs and External Relations at Health Carousel, where she leads regulatory strategy and external engagement across federal legislation, administrative oversight, and international healthcare staffing policy. She manages relationships with international governments, regulators, and industry associations, and represents Health Carousel across organizations including AAIHR, NALTO, and CGFNS, playing a key role in the company's designation as a CGFNS Certified Ethical Recruiter. Prior to joining Health Carousel, Amber spent 11 years in municipal investment banking at RBC Capital Markets and previously served in senior political and government affairs roles in Ohio and at the national level. She is a graduate of Michigan State University's James Madison College and was named to the Cincinnati Business Courier's Forty Under 40 Class of 2012.



Nicole Thorell is a dedicated healthcare leader with a passion for rural health, where she's spent over a decade making a difference. With a Post-Master's Certificate as a Family Nurse Practitioner and a Master's in Nursing with a focus on Administration, Nicole has served in key leadership roles, including Chief Nursing Officer and Director of Risk and Quality at a Critical Access Hospital and Rural Health Clinic in Nebraska. Her hands-on experience spans multiple departments, where she's led efforts to improve patient care, ensure regulatory compliance, and manage resources effectively. What truly sets Nicole apart is her ability to bring real, meaningful change to the organizations she works with. She's known for reducing hospital readmissions, advancing patient safety, and fostering a strong, positive workplace culture. Certified as a Lean Six Sigma Green Belt, she approaches each challenge with a mindset of continuous improvement and innovation. Today, as a principal at Wintergreen, Nicole continues to help healthcare systems thrive, focusing on optimizing clinic operations, boosting provider efficiency, and improving outcomes for rural communities.



J. Kevin Whitt is a health educator and speaker who specializes in translating complex chronic disease topics — particularly type 2 diabetes — into clear, practical guidance people can use immediately. His work focuses on prevention, management, and metabolic health through lifestyle-based approaches grounded in physiology, nutrition, and personal responsibility. Kevin is known for helping audiences move from confusion and overwhelm to clarity and confidence about their health choices. He has presented to community groups, civic organizations, and regional audiences on chronic disease, prevention, and long-term health resilience. His passion is equipping everyday people — especially in underserved and rural communities — with understandable tools to take control of their health.



Ana Wiese, Data Associate, Chartis Group, works closely with rural hospital leadership teams to help them better understand and assess performance through the lens of the Chartis Rural Hospital Performance INDEX. Ana is actively involved in the development of sophisticated analytic-based assessments for The Chartis Center for Rural Health's network clients that provide greater visibility into dynamic factors impacting market share, patient volumes, population health, quality and the delivery of

Thank you!

The 2026 Ohio Rural Health Conference wouldn't be possible
without the generous support of our sponsors.

Presenting Sponsor



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

Platinum Sponsors



Abbott

STATE OFFICE
OF RURAL HEALTH



Gold Sponsors



Silver Sponsor



CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY
Clinical and Translational
Science Collaborative