Background Information

Problem

The Rural Health News Service started with a question: How can we help the weekly and small daily newspapers in rural communities involve their readers in the conversation about a more sustainable health care system that includes meeting the needs of rural America? We needed a way to appeal to newspapers and rural residents that could meet the health interests of those communities, often different than those of urban America.

Path to a Solution

Launched as a pilot by the Nebraska Press Association in 2012 with support from The Commonwealth Fund, the Rural Health News Service (RHNS) was designed to involve rural Nebraskans in conversation and policy discussion around health care in their communities. We targeted weekly and small daily newspapers, which often have large readerships but no trained health care reporters on staff, leaving their audiences without a source of high quality, unbiased health care information.

In 2013, we expanded the pilot, still focusing on similar newspapers, populations and goals, and partnering with additional state press associations. This expanded the program to South Dakota and Colorado, with service in Nebraska continuing as well.

In 2014 and 2015, Illinois, California, Wyoming, North Dakota, and Ohio all joined the Rural Health News Service. There are four additional states who are also interested in RHNS.

Our Current Work

Distribution & Processes

We distribute two columns each month to participating press associations. They send them electronically to all of their newspapers for consideration. These columns are written by a professional health journalist, edited, reviewed by each press association, and vetted by each publisher and/or editor before they are run.

To date, we have 50-60% of Nebraska and South Dakota newspapers running our columns. Colorado is nearing 30% and Indiana is currently at 20%.

All affiliated press associations meet monthly to discuss what is happening in their state around health and health care. We identify 3-4 topics that readers need information about and discuss the newspaper coverage of these topics. We are currently trying to identify other funders to support the RHNS without altering our unbiased approach to these columns.

Evaluation Methods

Currently there is sparse evidence in the published literature on the effectiveness of a rurally-focused news service in reaching the historically unserved rural readership. We have invested

in an evaluation model for our initial states that provides data to prove that our columns made it to the local news organizations, many of which have an 80-90% readership level.

We are just beginning to identify ways to tally our newest states' usage. The challenge we now experience is that not all press associations have electronic clipping services, so we do a manual check to see who ran each column in each state.

RHNS at a Glance

Our Mission

To provide rural citizens access to unbiased health and health care information through a well-accepted information delivery model.

Our Process

1. We deliver high quality content, as biweekly columns, through state press associations to local newspapers.
2. The average local newspaper readership in each of the partner states is 90% or more.
3. Some of our four states' larger daily newspapers are also running a few of our columns.

What We Have Done

1. Contract with an unbiased, seasoned health care reporter not connected to any commercial interest.
2. Distribute our columns to every partner state press association as a vetted column.
3. Track distribution and run rates of all newspapers in each of our initial partner states.
4. Review comments or questions sent to our writer and answer them directly or in a future column.
5. Add 3 or more states in 2015 to our model. We have at least 4 more states interested
6. Work with our state press associations to identify health and health care issues
7. Aggressively begin the search for other funding partners to support this model in 2015 and beyond.