



Strategies for Improving Rural Access to Primary Care

How a whole health approach can help health organizations bolster initiatives in underserved communities

Whole health goes deeper than just physical health; it also takes into consideration environmental factors and social determinants of health (SDOH), such as access to fresh, healthy foods and transportation and financial barriers that may make it difficult for people to keep appointments or acquire medications.

In short, whole health considers someone's socioeconomic situation and their relationship with their community, caretakers, and healthcare providers. The sum of these parts creates an environment that impacts a person's ability to manage and improve their health.

Why does whole health matter?

Taking a broader perspective when it comes to a member journey can influence member behavior and ultimately improve population health. A whole health approach is personalized: Health plans and providers have more visibility into the factors affecting a person's health outside of their physical symptoms alone and can provide tailored care. Accounting for a wider array of factors promotes more positive clinical and financial outcomes.

One [survey of veterans](#) in a Whole Health System of Care evidenced that the model helped members experience better perceptions of care providers; higher engagement with healthcare and self-management; and improvements in well-being, including stress management, physical and mental health, and pain. Other populations, particularly those in traditionally underserved areas such as rural communities, can also benefit from a whole health approach.





THE IMPORTANCE OF WHOLE HEALTH IN RURAL SETTINGS

Approximately [one-fifth of the American population](#) is located in a rural area. It is important that physicians take a proactive approach to care in rural communities because failing to address worsening conditions can be both costly and deadly.

[Census data reveals](#) that residents in rural communities tend to be less affluent, older, and have more health concerns, when compared to urban residents. According to a study in [Health Affairs](#), higher mortality in rural areas is tied to socioeconomic status, access to care, and lack of health insurance. Rural areas also have [a higher rate of chronic illness](#) than urban populations. Numerous SDOH factors in rural communities (such as poverty, housing instability, food insecurity, health literacy, and low education and employment levels) contribute to individuals' inability to manage such illnesses. Providing relief and health equity to rural communities will require whole health interventions that take SDOH factors into account.



Approximately 1 in 5 Americans live in a rural area.

THE CHALLENGE FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

A major issue facing healthcare providers in rural areas is that the relatively low population density means risks and costs are distributed among fewer people. The result is a lack of [rural providers](#) and [medical facilities](#) — causing access issues for even basic quality care.

When healthcare resources are scarce, it has a cascading negative effect on community health. If a rural member has to travel many miles to visit a provider or a healthcare facility, they're more likely to delay care. If they cannot afford medications or easily obtain them, they may not take them. By the time treatment does occur, their condition will likely be more complex or serious — affecting their overall quality of life, costing them more to manage, and leading to poorer health outcomes and even irreversible damage to their health.

Because rural community members are often disengaged from or lack sufficient access to preventive care, they're more likely to suffer from worsening ailments and eventually require invasive, costly, and sometimes dangerous interventions.

Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) in these areas can play an important role in encouraging more proactive care.

For example, an [FQHC in South Carolina](#) that serves rural communities paired members with dedicated teams to focus on health goals. Between 2016 and 2018, the FQHC more than doubled the number of colorectal cancer screenings and increased screenings for cervical cancer by nearly 10%. Whole health measures such as these in areas that have traditionally lacked preventive care can go a long way toward promoting improved rural population health.



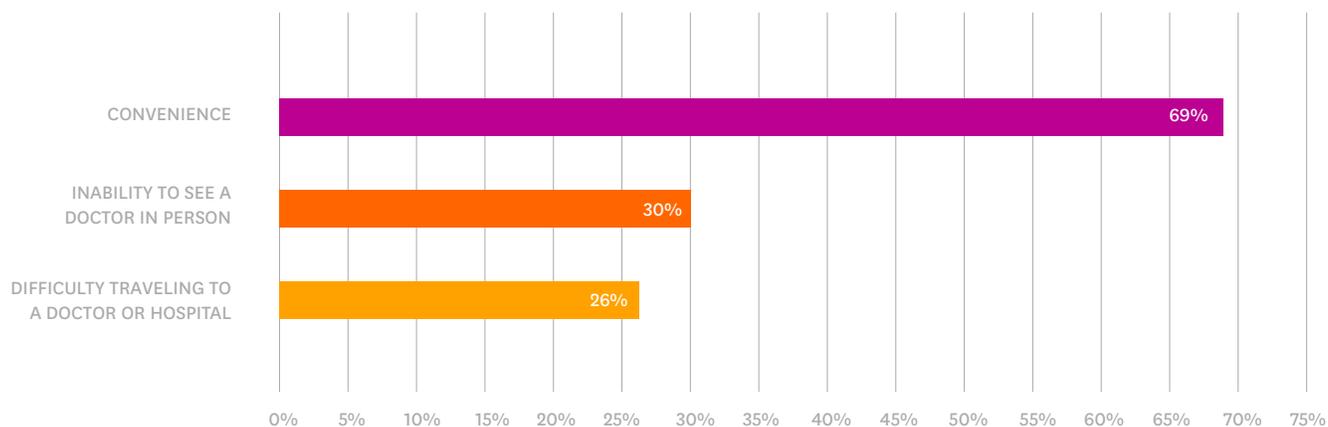
5 STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE WHOLE HEALTH IN RURAL SETTINGS

Managing the needs of rural populations poses a major challenge for medical systems. Yet it's a challenge they must address to improve rural access to care and better manage chronic conditions to keep communities healthy.

1. Utilize a nurse advice line.

Telehealth services were expanding prior to COVID-19, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has implemented new provisions and payment models to make the technology even more widely available and accessible during the crisis. It's likely that after the pandemic, telehealth will remain an important, convenient method of receiving care.

The most common reasons rural Americans give for using telehealth:



It's important to consider, however, that not everyone in rural communities has a reliable internet connection at home. A telephonic connection is critical for the large segment of the rural population who can't connect with providers via video-telehealth or online member portals.

Nurse advice line services are one example of accessible technology that allows members direct contact with medical professionals — usually registered nurses — via telephone to receive help navigating their health concerns. Nurses can help members decide whether emergency care is necessary or members can treat their health concerns with simple, intermediate steps at home. Nurses can also help secure transportation, coordinate medication needs over the advice line, or escalate the call to a physician. This type of resource can be invaluable to members without easy access to care or those who need additional support to better understand their health issues.

According to Pew Research, only around **63%** of rural Americans are connected to broadband internet at home.



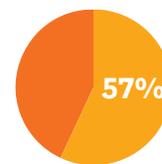
For instance, say a mother calls in because her child has a high fever, and she isn't sure whether the child should be seen immediately. The nurse on the phone can ask a series of questions to determine the severity of the situation and make recommendations for the best course of action. If the child does not need immediate care, the nurse can provide the mother with medical facts and clear instructions to follow until the child can see the pediatrician. Considering that high fevers and ear infections are among the most common reasons for pediatric ER visits, this represents a major opportunity for savings.

Nurse advice lines can also provide guidance for members suffering from mental health problems. If the situation warrants it, nurses on the line can immediately connect members to crisis line services. For less severe scenarios, nurses can help members locate and schedule appointments with behavioral health specialists.

When rural members have easier access to educational and actionable advice, they'll feel more confident and empowered to make the appropriate decisions regarding their care and treatment.

In addition, nurse advice lines often include multilingual and live translation options, further expanding access to care. This cultural and language sensitivity can help callers feel more at ease, speak in their native language, and more easily provide information and understand advice. Any follow-up materials should also be available in multiple languages so members can continue to gather a full understanding and efficiently build their knowledge after the call.

One study of over 130,000 advice line calls shows the impact of nurse advice lines on healthcare decisions and expenditures.



compliant with nurse advice lines



average lower expenditure if they follow the advice

2. Implement digital monitoring solutions.

Paired with telehealth, remote monitoring technology can solve some of the logistical challenges associated with providing basic primary care and mental health services to rural populations.

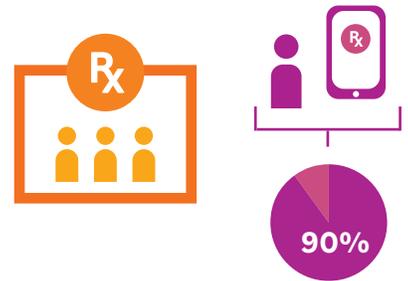
Remote member monitoring solutions take many forms, from wearable devices to simple text messages. Tools can share device- or member-reported biometric data to alert care providers in real time of dangerous readings, prompting timely intervention. Instead of members waiting for their regular appointments to receive care or medication adjustments, experts can intervene at the exact moment members need it.

Consider the case of one [health system in South Dakota](#) that sought to help rural members manage gestational diabetes. Avoiding complications in pregnancy with women who develop gestational diabetes typically requires frequent visits to providers, but women in rural areas may find it difficult to keep up with these appointments if the provider is far away.

The South Dakota health system implemented telehealth monitoring, education, and intervention for women with this condition and saw both financial and clinical results. As a result of remote glucose screenings and video visits, the health system saved members 60,000 miles in driving and about 234 days of work.

Digital monitoring solutions not only help catch developments such as weight gain, rising blood pressure, or abnormal blood glucose levels before they get out of control — they can also encourage members to more actively engage in their own health. The result is more successful preventive care and better health outcomes.

One-fourth of adults in rural America have used telehealth to get prescriptions and manage chronic conditions. Of them, 90% have reported satisfaction.



3. Promote an expanded role of pharmacists.

According to one study, rural members are 1.7 times more likely to report healthcare avoidance than those in metropolitan areas. Pharmacists tend to be much more accessible and can play many important roles in rural communities to benefit public health.

For instance, pharmacists can serve as important educators, sharing information about preventive health, medications, and side effects. They can help members reduce the risk of harmful drug interactions, recommend more affordable generic medications, or recommend over-the-counter medicines for non-serious symptoms. If needed, they can also consult with doctors to adjust or switch medications.



Beyond education and medication adjustment, they can check blood pressure, heart rate, and other biometrics in small in-house clinics and diagnose well-known complaints such as the flu, the common cold, and rashes. For rural members who live far from healthcare facilities, this can be a much more convenient option for care.

4. Support providers who cover multiple areas of health.

Rural health physicians are already in the right position to become champions of whole health. They're connected to their communities, already experts in caring for underserved populations with chronic conditions, and are familiar with the challenges posed by SDOH factors. They're also frequently trained to provide a full spectrum of care, such as pediatrics and gynecology, rather than one specialty alone.



This wider scope of care is the center of a whole health model. For example, consider the larger role a vision provider can play in keeping a member healthy. By examining the front and back of the eye with special instruments and lenses, optometrists get a full view of connective tissues, blood vessels, and nerves in a noninvasive way. The eye is the [only part of the body](#) where doctors can get this kind of view without surgery.

Beyond preventing and treating vision loss, standard eye exams can [provide early detection of health conditions](#). Signs of diabetes often come to light during eye exams, for example. It's also possible for optometrists to discover other conditions such as high blood pressure and cholesterol, thyroid disorders, and even some cancers.

Of people diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, about **1 in 5** have eye problems at the time of diagnosis.

Routine dental exams also play an important role in preventing conditions elsewhere in the body. For example, researchers have found that [inflammation caused by periodontitis](#) can contribute to the spread of bacteria from the mouth to other areas. This can have negative effects, such as playing a part in the onset of pancreatic cancer. The importance of routine dental care expands beyond oral health. It's important for overall wellness, as dentists can diagnose periodontitis early or help prevent it overall.

5. Improve health literacy and education.

Consider that [36%](#) of American adults have health literacy levels classified as basic or below basic. Low health literacy makes it hard for people to understand healthcare information and make appropriate care decisions, which leads to poorer health outcomes overall. The [impact of low health literacy](#) could mean members don't have the skills to make health-related decisions, which could affect how well they adhere to treatment, including medication. These individuals are also more likely to use and return to the ER for care.

Health plans and providers know that if they want to encourage people to be proactive about their health and take steps to better manage their conditions, the information needs to be clear and easy to follow — even for those with basic or below-basic healthy literacy levels.

The first step is to think of the member experience in every piece of communication. Come at it from the reader's point of view: Is it easy to see what next steps to take and how? If you had only a few minutes to read the information, would you be able to digest it quickly enough to act upon it right away?

Using plain, descriptive language can be helpful. For example, define conditions in terms that anyone will recognize instead of using medical terminology — such as high blood pressure instead of hypertension. Visual aids can also be helpful. If you're educating someone about how to use an at-home health monitoring device, for instance, a pamphlet that includes clear diagrams and photos can help them easily understand the instructions. Ultimately, clarity is key. Make the information you want your members to know as easy as possible to understand and in their native or preferred language.



ACHIEVING BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

When it comes to bettering the health of rural communities, healthcare organizations and health plans can take a whole health approach with the above strategies in mind. Not only can they increase members' access to care, but they can also support better, more proactive care for each member as a whole.

KEY INSIGHTS



Telephonic resources such as Envolve's [24/7 Nurse Advice Line](#) can help members understand when and where to seek care — and triage members to specialists when they need more specific care.



Digital monitoring solutions can proactively engage members — keeping members, caregivers, providers, and health plans better informed of members' health, even from a distance.



As a [pharmacy benefit manager](#), our resources and communication tools connect members, pharmacists, and physicians, allowing for more efficient and proactive treatment plans and improving health outcomes. Pharmacists have the opportunity to reach further into rural communities, helping with common problems and suggesting resources for further care.



Additionally, [medication adherence](#) programs allow for proactive intervention. Our data shows if a member isn't filling their prescriptions, outreach strategies such as [motivational interviewing](#) can help find the root cause. Perhaps the member doesn't have a way to get to the pharmacy to refill the prescription and would benefit from home delivery, or maybe they can't afford the medication and need assistance prioritizing and paying for their medications. With [nearly 50% of individuals](#) with chronic health issues not taking their medications as prescribed, nonadherence is prevalent, wasteful, and problematic to achieving whole health.

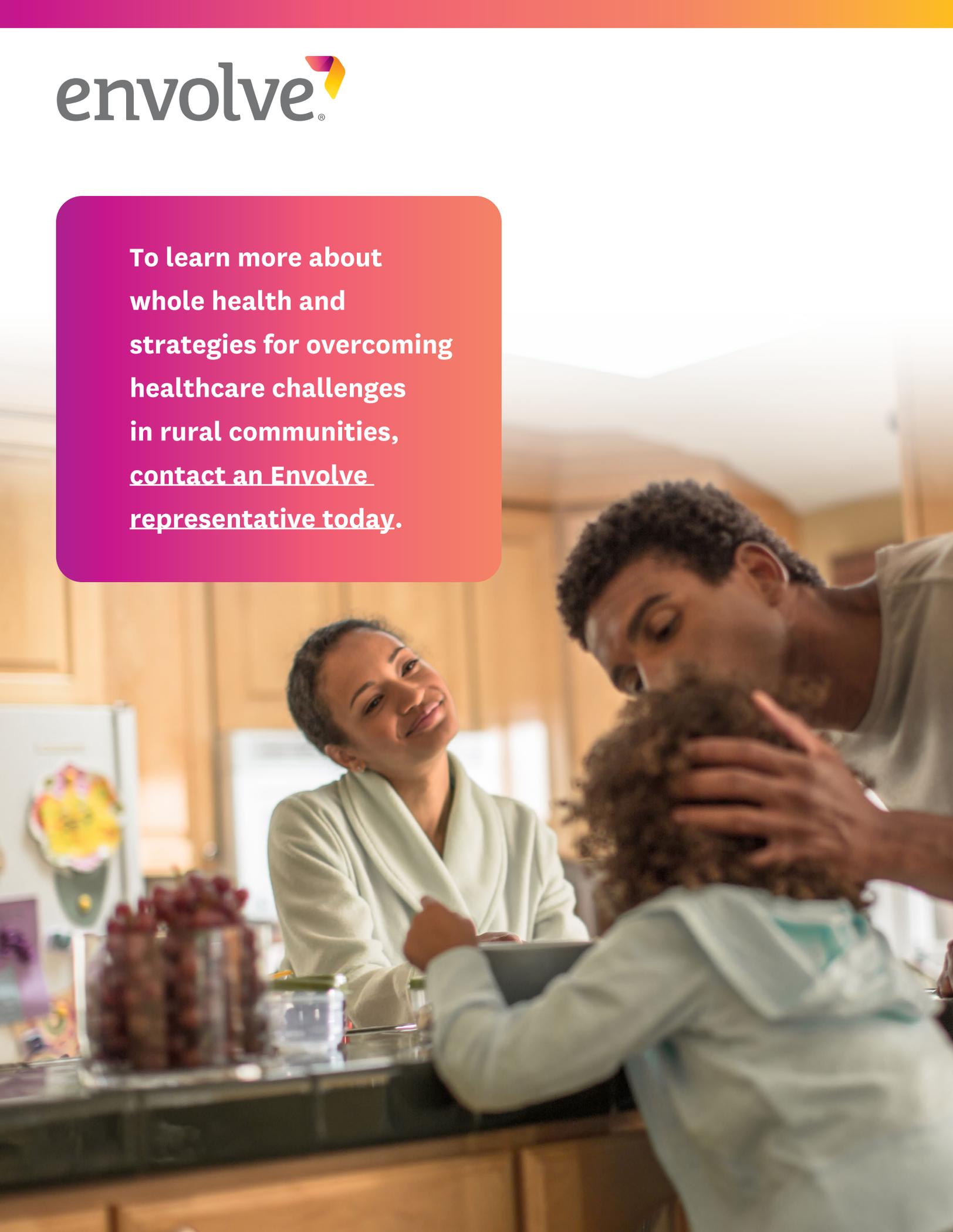


Supplemental health benefits, such as [dental](#) and [vision](#), and support for providers who cover multiple areas of health can help members become aware of health problems in other areas sooner and enable more proactive care, promoting better overall well-being.

Each of the above areas also plays an important role in improving members' health literacy and giving them information that is easy to understand and act upon for a more proactive approach to whole health. Nurses can share resources through advice lines, digital monitoring solutions can make members feel more engaged and empowered to have an active role in managing their own health, pharmacists can share helpful information about drug interactions and other health concerns, and dental and vision providers are in a unique position to detect underlying health conditions early.



To learn more about
whole health and
strategies for overcoming
healthcare challenges
in rural communities,
[contact an Envolve
representative today.](#)





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