

# Investing in Rural Mental Health

## An Approach to Increasing Access to Mental Health Professionals and Services

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### Issue Statement

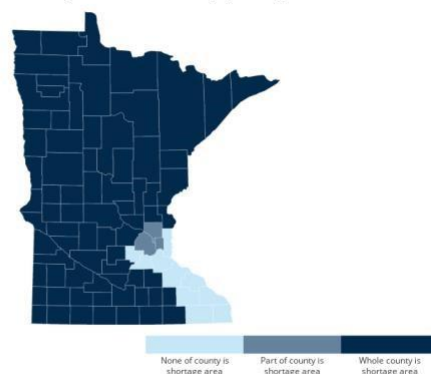
Farmers and rural residents in greater Minnesota are often overlooked relating to mental health services. Minnesota needs to focus on an approach to increase accessible mental health services in rural communities. The model for delivering mental health services has often been a one-size-fits-all approach without understanding the unique barriers, cultures, and strengths rural communities offer.

### The Need in Minnesota

There is a shortage of mental health providers in rural regions of Minnesota. In rural areas of the state there are 1,960 people for each mental health provider compared to 340 people per provider in urban areas ([Steiner, 2021](#)). Availability is not the only barrier rural farmers face when seeking help for mental health conditions. Common barriers identified by rural adults are cost, accessibility, embarrassment, and stigma ([American Farm Bureau](#)). In many cases rural farmers are required to travel long distances to receive mental health services ([NRHA, 2023](#)). Telehealth is a promising solution in some cases but a lack of broadband coverage in some rural areas can be a barrier.

Gary Wertish, president of the Minnesota Farmers Union stated, “farming is a stressful occupation. Always has been. Always will be. Farmers are proud people. There are too many times that they think things that are out of their control are their fault...They don’t want to ask for help. It’s a struggle” ([Steiner, 2021](#)). The [stressors experienced by farmers](#) include financial concerns, fear of losing the farm, uncertainty of the future and state of the economy. [Suicide is twice as common](#) among farmers as other occupations.

Health Professional Shortage Areas: Mental Health, by County, 2022 - Minnesota



Source: [data.HRSA.gov](#), November 2022.

### Current Policy Approaches and Efforts

- [Minnesota Rural Mental Health Professional Loan Forgiveness](#) - The state currently offers student loan repayment for mental health professionals who commit to practicing in an underserved area, although funds are limited.

Access a previous policy brief on [Access to Mental Health Services in Rural Minnesota here](#)

- [Minnesota Agricultural Mental Health Specialists](#) - There are only two mental health specialists working with farmers throughout Minnesota: Ted Matthews and Monica McConkey. Specifically, they work to offer support with coping and managing stress for people who work in rural communities. They address the importance of mental health in helping the achievement of goals and recognize that mental health issues that affect personal well-being.
- The following services address crisis needs only:
  - [Minnesota Farm & Rural Helpline](#) - Connects callers to financial help, mental health counselors, legal assistance, and more. Calls are confidential, but counselors may ask for a first name and phone number in case of a dropped call.
  - [Mobile Crisis Teams](#)- Resource for individuals needing short-term counseling or emergency services provided by Department of Human Services.
  - [Minnesota Farm Advocates](#)- Provides one-to-one assistance and counseling to farmers who face crisis due to natural disaster or financial problems. Specific advocate services include financial planning, legal services, and social and human services.

## Policy Position Statement

Minnesota needs to focus on an approach to increase access to mental health services in rural communities to overcome barriers of stigma, isolation, and distrust.

There is a shortage of mental health professionals in rural communities. Due to the shortage of mental health professionals, farmers and rural residents are not getting an adequate level of care compared to nonrural areas. In addition, many farmers and rural residents travel long distances to receive mental health services. Farmers are experiencing multiple stressors including financial concerns, fear of losing the farm, and uncertainties about the future of the economy.

For these reasons, we recommend the following:

- Increasing incentives for mental health professionals in rural areas by providing loan forgiveness.
- Expansion of telehealth options to overcome isolation and long distances needing to be traveled through supporting broadband expansion projects in rural Minnesota.
- Supporting H.F 586 / S.F 1747 appropriating money to the Center for Rural Behavioral Health for a grant to establish a community behavioral health center and training clinic.

Link to Digital Copy of this Policy Brief

