

Healthcare

# Geriatric Mental Health Care in Rural Areas

A Focus on Inpatient Psychiatric Care

Meeting the needs of underserved demographic in an era of diminishing hospitals and geriatric specialists.

## Risk Factors Limiting Geriatric Mental Health Care Options

**Abstract:** Two key risk factors highlight the urgent need for inpatient geriatric mental health services.

- First, the aging population in rural areas is rising, yet these areas often lack accessible hospital options.
- Second, there is a decline in the number of healthcare professionals – such as geriatric-trained psychiatrists, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants – specializing in this field.

These challenges underscore the necessity for inpatient facilities designed specifically for older adults. This white paper examines the increasing demand for geriatric psychiatric care and the critical need for such services.

## Rural Areas and the Growing Geriatric Population

The global geriatric demographic is growing and will continue to increase through 2035, bringing substantial challenges for healthcare providers and systems. Rural areas, in particular, face difficulties, including limited access to specialized medical care. This gap is especially noticeable in mental health, where older adults may face worsened health issues due to long-standing or inadequately addressed mental health concerns.

Demographic trends show that individuals over 55 are more likely to stay in rural areas compared to younger populations, while rural areas experienced a significant decline between 2010 – 2020. This shift has resulted in a notable increase in the number of residents aged 65 and older in these regions, highlighting the need for a reassessment of healthcare resource distribution.

Rural areas often lack the necessary healthcare infrastructure, causing delays in diagnosis and treatment that jeopardize the well-being of older residents. Recent studies indicate a higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders among seniors in rural areas, a situation made worse by limited access to mental health services. Beyond mental health, many elderly individuals also have co-morbidities that require coordinated inpatient care.

## Workforce Shortages in Rural Areas

There is a significant shortage of geriatric mental health specialists in rural areas, a problem exacerbated by the overall decline in licensed medical professionals opting to work in these communities. The shortage of mental health providers has worsened since the pandemic and is expected to persist, with fewer psychiatrists receiving geriatric training and even fewer geriatric psychiatrists choosing to practice in rural America.

Integrated care, which combines physical and mental health services, is critical for providing comprehensive geriatric care to older adults. The growing adoption of telehealth and AI tools in rural areas is helping to address these challenges.

## Recommendations

Creating programs to incentivize healthcare providers to practice in rural areas has proven effective in other fields and could be particularly useful in recruiting nurse practitioners or physician assistants, whose earning potential may not be as limited in rural settings.

Financial incentives to sustain and strengthen mental health services, such as clinics and smaller psychiatric units, are essential to ensure appropriate care for patients at risk of harming themselves or others – those whose needs cannot be addressed in a general population unit.

## Recommendations(Con't)

Expanding telepsychiatry services is a key strategy to improve access to mental health care, while also educating licensed professionals to offer integrated and comprehensive geriatric care.

Additionally, promoting community-based initiatives to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues is vital.

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## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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