

LR 232

Rural Health Care in Nebraska: A Look at Supply and Opportunity

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Expanding Facilities for Rural Rotations

Rural clinical rotations have become one of the most influential determinants of whether health professions students ultimately enter rural practice. National studies consistently show that learners who spend meaningful, well-supported time training in rural settings are significantly more likely to return after graduation (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2022; MacDowell et al., 2010). As nursing, medical, and allied health programs expand enrollment across the United States, the demand for rural rotation sites has accelerated, placing pressure on communities to develop structured training environments. Increasingly, the limiting factor is not the availability of clinical preceptors but the lack of dedicated, safe, and affordable student housing in rural communities.

Other states have responded through major investments in rural training hubs. Minnesota's AHEC system supports subsidized student housing in rural regions; Washington's WWAMI program integrates community-based rotations with provided housing; and Texas' Rural and Community Health Institute coordinates rotation sites supported by local lodging. These models share a core insight: students are far more willing to rotate in rural areas—and more likely to enjoy the experience—when the logistics of housing, transportation, and community integration are solved for them (HRSA, 2022). Rotations that are seamless and socially grounded make rural practice feel attainable rather than isolating.

Nebraska faces similar challenges. Despite strong rural hospital interest in hosting students, many communities lack the infrastructure required to make rotations feasible. Housing shortages, distance barriers, and inconsistent rotation support systems continue to limit placement capacity. It is within this context that the Community Hospital (McCook) ROOTS (Rural Opportunities Offering Tomorrows Success) Student Housing Project emerges as a potential replicable model for how to expand rural training capacity.

The Community Hospital ROOTS Project: A Purpose-Built Model for Rural Rotation Readiness

The Community Hospital ROOTS Student Housing Project in McCook is a 20,000-square-foot, purpose-built student housing facility designed specifically to support the placement and retention of health professions students in rural Nebraska. The building includes twelve fully furnished units—ten one-bedroom units and two two-bedroom units—with two ADA-compliant apartments, in-unit laundry in select units, shared kitchen and lounge spaces, study areas, smart-access systems, high-speed Wi-Fi, a fitness room, community gathering areas, and daily cleaning of common spaces. Its intentional placement in downtown McCook's Creative Arts District positions students within walking distance of local businesses, restaurants, and cultural amenities, maximizing social integration and giving learners an authentic sense of rural community life.

Financially, the project reflects a sustainable blended model. With an estimated total cost of approximately \$6 million, Community Hospital (McCook) has already secured more than \$1.3 million through grants and private donations, with the hospital committing to supporting the balance through its operating budget. This approach leverages external resources without overburdening the facility's core operations.

Operational planning has been equally rigorous. Project leaders conducted extensive site evaluations, coordinated zoning and variance approvals with the City of McCook, and engaged in early conversations with the University of Nebraska at Kearney and the University of Nebraska Medical Center regarding partnerships and educational alignment. Project planning has been organized around five core workstreams:

- (1) construction planning,
- (2) scheduling/logistics,
- (3) agreement development,
- (4) community engagement, and
- (5) promotion.

These structured planning elements helped anticipate challenges and avoid delays.

Long-term operations are being integrated into existing hospital staffing, including maintenance, environmental services, IT, human resources, and security, ensuring predictable cost structures and seamless support for students. The project is expected to improve student placement capacity, strengthen recruitment and retention efforts, and serve as a regional model for rural workforce strategy. Educational partners have already expressed interest in expanding rotations to McCook once the facility is operational.

Why the McCook Model Matters for Nebraska

The CH ROOTS project demonstrates a fully operationalized rotation readiness strategy, combining housing, community immersion, hospital support, and educational partnerships. It reflects multiple principles consistent with national best practices:

- **Attractive and secure housing** reduces the most significant barrier to rural rotations.
- **Purposeful community placement** (e.g., downtown location) improves student satisfaction and sense of belonging.
- **Mixed financing strategies** reduce fiscal risk and encourage community investment.
- **Operational integration** (using existing staff) keeps long-term costs manageable.

- **Active coordination with education institutions** ensures ongoing student placement and predictable use.
- **Workforce alignment** ties rotations directly to rural recruitment and retention goals.

Nationally, the trend is clear: rural hospitals that invest in student housing and structured rotation support become rotation destinations, not last-resort sites. Nebraska's geography, hospital distribution, and workforce needs align perfectly with this strategy. The McCook Model illustrates how our mid-sized rural communities can build the infrastructure necessary to anchor high-quality, sustainable training programs.

A Quick Look at Wayne State College:

Similarly, Wayne State College's **Career Scholars Cooperative Education Program** offers another powerful example of how infrastructure + community integration can support a pipeline of locally rooted talent. Through this program, students spend their first three years on campus while engaging in site visits and job shadowing; in their senior year, they live and work full-time (30–40 hours/week) in partner communities like Grand Island, Norfolk, or Columbus, earning both credit (18 hours) and pay while being mentored by local employers (WSC, 2024). With generous scholarship support—up to \$33,000 over four years, recently enhanced by a \$2.6 million donation—students can afford their education and build deep ties to their host community (Wayne State College, 2024; WSC News, 2024). The program's growth, including housing developments in Grand Island, aligns closely with McCook's model: blending residential support, real-world work, and community connection to increase local workforce retention (Wayne Stater, 2023).

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