

Title: *“Sustainable Rural Communities: Innovative linking of healthcare, education, families and communities”*

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Abstract - Viewed as an ecosystem, vibrant and sustainable rural communities include a host of elements working together to self-sustain, heal, and grow. These elements include the health of a community, high-functioning and vibrant schools, a robust economy that creates opportunities and responsive community support systems. When this ecosystem is stressed, a community is less able to self-sustain, heal and grow. Rural counties in NY (and across the nation) have become increasingly stressed over the past two decades as they have lost jobs and people, and lost scale economies in their public institutions (hospitals and schools). This results in increased costs, reduced revenues, and greater family and community stress. This proposal builds on pre-existing and new partnerships between academics, health care professionals, and community leaders, and aims to assist and study four rural counties in Upstate NY. These counties are increasingly poor, have been slow to recover from the recession, are experiencing increased drug abuse, and economic challenge. With this project, we will link multiple academic disciplines, and coordinate and analyze a set of interventions to build sustainable communities and more vital economies in Upstate NY.

School-based health centers (SBHCs) offer dramatically enhanced access to healthcare, which in turn improves academic participation and promotes healthier lifestyles in rural communities. SBHCs have already shown effectiveness and positive outcomes in urban centers such as NYC and San Diego, but their cost-effectiveness and social impact remains relatively understudied--and as a result, underfunded--in rural regions. We argue that SBHCs, such as the 19 run by the Bassett Healthcare Network, have an immense potential to positively affect our young people growing up in rural NY. These centers shorten the geographic distance between students and their health care providers, promote a ‘culture of health’ and emphasize primary care. As a result of their immediate positive effects, they also work to prevent illness-related absences and create better learning environments. Our goal for this project is to better understand the how, why, and how much of these coordinated interventions to enhance the sustainability of communities in this four county region and beyond.