

***Iowa Farmer Today***

# Health program must be geared to rural areas

By Mandy Archer

Jan 18, 2026



Getting First Aid, CPR and AED training is more important than ever for rural community members.

Photo courtesy Adobe Stock

**L**iving in rural America comes with unique joys and pitfalls.

Though rural communities can have close-knit relationships, they are often impacted by the physical distance between friends and neighbors.

And with over more than hospital closures or care reductions over the past decade, rural citizens must prepare to receive medical treatment and testing elsewhere. That is where the American Heart Association's rural health initiatives fit in.

"Call to Action: Rural Health: A Presidential Advisory from the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association" was published in 2020 and outlines the growing divide in health outcomes between urban and rural populations.

According to the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association, key findings illuminate the need for a rural heart health focus:

- Heart disease rates are 40% higher in rural areas.
- Stroke mortality rates are 30% higher in rural areas.
- People living in rural areas have a 3-year shorter life expectancy.
- Rural women's maternal mortality rates are twice those of urban women.

Tim Nikolai, senior rural health director with the American Heart Association in the Midwest, spoke with the Great Plains Center for Season 5 of our podcast FarmSafe at [tinyurl.com/y2zhbuh4](https://tinyurl.com/y2zhbuh4). Nikolai cited reasons for these adverse rural health outcomes.

"A lot of it does boil down to access," he said.

He said there are limited physical exercise spaces, grocery stores are far away or non-existent, and of course, there is lack of primary, preventative and emergency care.

“And so, all of that kind of snowballs together, unfortunately, leading to some of those poorer health outcomes,” he said.

Nikolai pointed to work the AHA is doing to connect with libraries, churches and other community locations in rural areas. Residents can come to one of these locations to receive a blood pressure screening, and they would be prepared in the case of a heart emergency with a cardiac emergency response plan in place.

Plus, many libraries already use bookmobiles to make stops in rural areas which can be leveraged to support blood drives or CPR/AED training.

Local firefighters and EMS are known to take on some of this rural healthcare burden, but staffing is limited. In the case of cardiac emergency, the work should start before professionals arrive. This starts with individually joining the Nation of Lifesavers or getting CPR certified at a class near you.

According to the American Heart Association’s website, 350,000 people go into cardiac arrest each year outside of the hospital. Forty percent of all people suffering outside of a hospital receive the care they need in the form of CPR.

The first minutes of an attack are as serious as life or death. If you are trained to place an AED on someone within the first minute of cardiac arrest, there is a 90% chance they will live. CPR then doubles or even triples a person’s survival odds.

Finally, you must consider the individual factors for good heart health. These factors are called Life's Essential 8, and the AHA's work to bridge the gap between rural and urban care pulls directly from these essentials.

The Life's Essential 8 list states that eating healthy is the best way to do this. While rural communities may have limited access to fresh foods from supermarkets, there are creative ways to maintain a healthy diet. Some examples include monitoring food portions, purchasing frozen fruits and vegetables, and limiting foods with high sodium or added sugars.

The other seven are:

- Be more active,
- Quit tobacco,
- Get healthy sleep,
- Manage weight,
- Control cholesterol,
- Manage blood sugar, and
- Manage blood pressure.

Challenge yourself in the new year and during American Heart Month by brushing up on your understanding of heart health, learn CPR and prioritize your heart by starting to practice at least one of Life's Essential 8.

---

*Mandy Archer is the outreach specialist for the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health at the University of Iowa College of Public Health.*

