

Episode Title: The 40 Percent Problem: Heart Health in Rural America

Topic: Preventing Heart Disease in Rural Communities

Summary: In this episode, Jenn Patterson sits down with Tim Nikolai, Senior Rural Health Director for the American Heart Association's Midwest region, to discuss why rural communities face higher risks of heart disease and stroke and what can be done to change that. Tim shares how limited access to health care, healthy foods, and physical activity contributes to these disparities, while also highlighting the inspiring ways rural communities are stepping up—through partnerships with libraries, churches, schools, and local organizations—to promote heart health. The conversation explores practical strategies like the American Heart Association's "Life's Essential 8," the importance of prevention, and how small, everyday choices can make a big difference, especially for farmers and rural residents. Tim also outlines opportunities for local partnerships and offers a hopeful vision for building a culture of health where the healthy choice is the easy choice in rural America.

Expert: Tim Nikolai

Episode Quote:

"One of the things I've appreciated is, even if the seat they're sitting in doesn't scream health, how many people are passionate and interested in helping connect the dots in their community to move the needle and improve community health"

– Tim Nikolai, Senior Rural Health Director for the Midwest American Heart Association

Transcript

E Ritchie

Welcome to the *FarmSafe* Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

E Ritchie

For this episode, we're turning our attention to the heart of rural America—and the unique health challenges faced by the people who live and work there. Our guest today is Tim Nikolai, Senior Rural Health Director for the American Heart Association in the Midwest, where he works across 13 states to build partnerships and improve access to heart-healthy resources in rural communities. In this conversation, Tim helps us understand why rural residents face a higher risk of heart disease and stroke, how access and environment play a critical role, and what innovative, community-driven solutions are making a real difference. Most importantly, he shares practical insights on prevention and the small, everyday choices that can lead to longer, healthier lives.

J Patterson

If you could just start by telling me a little bit about yourself and what you're doing with the AHA.

T Nikolai

Yeah. Thanks for having me. I'm Tim Nikolai. I'm the Senior Rural Health Director with the American Heart Association in the Midwest region, which is a total of 13 states. It's still a relatively new position, I'll say. About three and a half years I've been in this role since we created it. And really, it's about building connections and relationships with organizations and people that are committed to improving rural health. So, it's been a great, great opportunity thus far.

J Patterson

And can you tell us a little bit about why you're focusing on rural population?

T Nikolai

Yeah, at the American Heart Association, we're really invested in obviously heart disease and stroke generally. But then we have specific focuses on populations that are more at risk for cardiovascular disease. And unfortunately, the numbers continue to play out that residents of rural communities are significantly more likely, about 40 % more likely, to experience heart disease and also significantly more likely to experience a stroke.

J Patterson

Do we know why that is?

T Nikolai

I think there's a lot of systemic challenges that rural residents face in terms of access. A lot of it does boil down to access. There are often less opportunities for physical activity in a traditional sense. There are less opportunities in many communities to get healthy, affordable foods, because the nearest grocery store may be some distance away. There's less access to medical care in many communities, whether that's primary or preventative care, as well as emergency care may be further away. All of that snowballs together, unfortunately, leading to some of those poorer health outcomes. There's some challenges, to be sure. But one of the things I've appreciated too is how many people, even if their seat they're sitting in doesn't scream health, how many people are passionate and interested in helping connect the dots in their community to move the needle and improve community health.

J Patterson

Can you tell me a little bit about what that's beginning to look like?

T Nikolai

Yeah, you know, I think one of the groups, for instance, that we've worked a lot with at the Heart Association is libraries. Many small communities don't necessarily have a medical clinic. They may not have a grocery store, but many of them have a library in the relatively nearby vicinity anyway. And it's a space, historically where the community can gather for any number of initiatives and programs and events. And so, we've been working to transform that into a space where there's conversations around health, helping people check their blood pressure, for instance, when they come to the library and get some basic education around what that means. That's one example um of how people are stepping up to find a solution.

J Patterson

Okay, having spoken about that, in a perfect world, what would solutions look like to you?

T Nikolai

Solutions we talk about a culture of health as one where the healthy choice is the easy choice. And so, we try to educate on that in a, individual level so that people faced with "what do I eat today?", how can we help make a healthy choice easier for them? And when people are faced with, do I get exercise? Even when it's a Midwest winter, we try to provide simple information on what that can look like. But much of that we know does go back to systemic and environmental barriers ah that there needs to be a grocery store and some sort of access to healthy food for me to be able to make that purchasing decision. There needs to be places for me to get physical activity for me to be able to make that decision. We need to have spaces where we're not exposed to secondhand smoke if we're going to, you know, avoid tobacco use in any form or shape. And so, all of those things lead to some of the policy work we do at the Heart Association as well.

J Patterson

So, do you have any words of wisdom about making heart healthy choices on the farm in particular?

T Nikolai

Yeah, our research has identified eight critical components of a heart healthy lifestyle and their life's essential eight. Your listeners can get more information at heart.org backslash life's eight. But it's things like, watching what you're eating in terms of a diet, um avoiding tobacco use, getting a good night's sleep, that's a challenge for many people these days. And so then within each of those, ah of course, there's strategies about um concepts and resources around, well, how do we do that? We know we're supposed to eat healthy, but

what does that mean? And so, some of that is educating individuals on portion control, because the portions were presented at the grocery store or at the restaurant are not the portion size we should be consuming, generally speaking, in many cases. So, what does that look like? How can we get produce and what is seasonally available ah throughout the Midwest winter is again a challenge in many cases. So, it's little bits of information and education like that, that life's heart.org/life's eight will point your listeners to a lot of additional tools and tips that they can hopefully take home and implement.

J Patterson

Can you tell us a little bit more about the partnerships you're looking for and what those partnerships might look like and how people can get hold of you?

T Nikolai

Yeah. So, you know, we're looking for using libraries as an example. Anybody that is committed to um trying to change their community's uh so that is libraries, local public health departments, ah individual churches in many cases have become great partners in a lot of rural communities. We've been helping a number of churches implement cardiac emergency response plans so that if somebody should experience a sudden cardiac arrest within their four walls, that person has the best chance of surviving because the church is prepared for that and those response plans can be implemented and adopted within just about any organization we've prioritized schools for that, but certainly any business farm implement store grain elevators, all of those would be fantastic places where we can help accelerate safety. Because we know that many of the rural communities, the EMS agencies, they're working so hard, but they're facing staffing challenges and there's just long distances involved. And so, the more we can assure a quick, effective local response, the better somebody's odds of survival are gonna be.

J Patterson

Is there anything else that you would like to share with us about what you're working on?

T Nikolai

I did not grow up on a farm. My mom did when she was younger and I know how hard her family worked. And I think in those moments, it can be hard to remember to take care of yourself. And we've come so far with some of the research the Heart Association has done to help restore health with new technologies and research, surgeries and treatments, and that's fantastic and we hope to keep advancing that. But it is so much better and so much easier to prevent those things in the first place. And so really, making sure to take the time to get that good night's sleep, to take a little bit of extra time potentially and try to eat something a little bit healthier, get some physical activity, even outside of the farm work you might be doing. Those small steps, keeping an eye on your blood pressure and alerting your medical care team if you have questions or concerns about that. All of those things are going to ensure longer, healthier lives for you and your family and thus the community as a whole.

J Patterson

Well, finally, let me ask you, how did you get interested in this? How did you wind up where you are?

T Nikolai

Yeah, so I've been with the American Heart Association for some time, about 17 years. And when this role was created, I jumped at the chance to carry our mission to communities that hadn't had as great of opportunity to utilize our tools and resources and science. And so that's been tremendously gratifying to be able to connect with and support organizations and individuals who are passionate about health. Every time I get an email from a library saying so-and-so came in and they were able to check their blood pressure and now they've started uh anti-hypertensive medication because they were able to have a better, clearer conversation with their doctor. That certainly makes the work all the more worthwhile.

E Ritchie

Today's conversation with Tim Nikolai highlights both the challenges and the opportunities facing rural communities when it comes to heart health. While access to care, healthy food, and physical activity can be harder to come by, we also heard something encouraging:

meaningful change doesn't always start in a hospital. It can start in places we already trust—like libraries, churches, schools, and local gathering spaces.

Tim reminded us that prevention matters, and that small, everyday choices—getting enough sleep, paying attention to blood pressure, moving our bodies, and making healthier food choices when we can—add up over time. In rural communities especially, looking out for your own health helps protect your family, your neighbors, and the whole community. We're grateful to Tim for sharing his insight and for the work the American Heart Association is doing to support rural health across the Midwest.

E Ritchie

As a takeaway from today's episode, we invite you to do one simple thing this week: check in on your heart health or help someone else do the same. This could include checking your blood pressure at a local library or pharmacy, visiting heart.org/lifes8 to learn about the American Heart Association's Life's Essential 8, or even starting a conversation with a friend, family member, or community group about heart health resources where you live. Under the resources for this episode, we have included the link to the American Heart Association's Life's Essential 8.

And if you're part of a rural organization—like a library, church, school, cooperative, or local business—we encourage you to look at your space and ask one simple question: could this be a place that supports heart health? That might mean hosting a blood pressure screening, sharing heart-healthy resources, or learning about emergency response planning. Small changes in familiar community spaces can have a significant impact, especially in rural areas.

E Ritchie

Listen in on the *FarmSafe* podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, gpcah.org, or email us.

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Episode Resources

- [Meeting People Where They Are: Improving Health in Collaboration with the Places Where Rural Communities Gather](#), American Heart Association
- [Outpace CVD: A Grant Opportunity for Rural Midwest Health Care Organizations](#), American Heart Association
- [American Heart Month 2026: American Heart Association Toolkit](#), American Heart Association
- [American Heart Association Resources](#)

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