



Health Care Challenges in Remote Areas: A Good Example

By Timothy Adams

When traveling westward on Nebraska's state Highway 91, a person gets a feeling of gradually increasing remoteness. Indeed, the city at its eastern terminus, Blair, which is located about 20 miles north of Omaha on the Missouri River, is easily the largest community on the entire route, with a population of about 7,000. This is farming country. The rural areas are mostly covered with grain fields, dotted by livestock pens, silos, barns and accompanying farmhouses. It is what most people think of when they think of the rural Midwest.

Blair likely has more population than all of the other towns located on Highway 91's 230-mile length put together. The route passes through only two other towns with at least 1,000 people. Albion, the second largest, has a population of about 1,600. Burwell, the third largest, reported a population of 1,210 on the 2010 census.

The change while heading west is gradual but nonetheless palpable. Farms give way to ranches, which are better suited for the lower rainfall amounts and weaker soil quality. Towns, and the accompanying services, get smaller, not to mention fewer and farther between. Once a person gets out here, maintaining enough gas and any other necessities is a must. It is easy to see why someone might refer to this as Nebraska's Outback.

Just off Highway 91, 15 miles from its western terminus, lies the village of Brewster. Population 17. This town well fits the description for being out in the middle of nowhere. Yet Brewster does have its distinctions. It is the county seat of Blaine County, making it the smallest county seat in Nebraska. What few county seats in the nation that are smaller than Brewster are unincorporated. By looking at a map, one can guess why

Brewster became the county seat. Dunning, the only larger town in the county, has about 100 people. It is in the southwest part of the county. Brewster is much closer to the center. The entire county has fewer than 500 people scattered around 715 square miles.

Living here has obvious advantages. Quiet. Peaceful. Everyone knows everyone else. Everyone gets along. They are always willing to help each other. Hardly any crime. Cheap real estate.

Challenges are equally obvious. Sparse goods and services. Few activities. The nearest gas station is 20 miles away. Grocery stores, hardware stores, movie theaters and pharmacies are even farther away. Trucks that sell food to the locals visit occasionally, helping somewhat to keep refrigerators stocked. For activities, residents often like to hunt, fish and garden, further augmenting the food supply. Brewster has a mechanic, thereby helping with car repairs and maintenance. But he does not have equipment to work on newer models.

Lacking job opportunities, the young people have moved away. The remaining population is consequently much older than in most places in the U.S. Besides being the county seat, Brewster mainly serves the nearby ranches. Because the cost of county services and schools must be spread over a small population, property taxes are unusually high. This has forced many ranches to close, placing additional strain on remaining residents who now face even higher taxes. Although Blaine County supports county employees and schools, other services such as road maintenance are often neglected.

Access to medical care is among Brewster's biggest challenges. Home Health Care used to visit to provide basic medical assistance, but it no longer serves Brewster. The nearest doctor is in Ainsworth, 43 miles to the north. Because a routine visit to a physician, eye doctor or dentist takes a significant part of a day, people in Brewster try to combine doctor visits with other chores, such as shopping.

Emergencies are even more difficult. The village has a local ambulance. But whenever the ambulance is needed, it takes 15 minutes for all the people who run the ambulance to arrive at the scene. Add another 45 minutes to get to the nearest hospital. That makes it one hour before the patient gets to substantive medical help. Bad weather can make emergencies even worse. One time a person there had a stroke. The ambulance had to follow a snow plow all the way to Ainsworth. It took 12 hours



just to get this person to a hospital. If the ambulance breaks down, it further complicates matters.

Access to medical care can be downright costly for extreme cases. One resident spends about all his Social Security income on medications. His primary care doctor is in Ord, 61 miles away. On top of that, he must get specialized treatment in North Platte (91 miles), Kearney (114 miles), Grand Island (131 miles) and Hastings (152 miles). Just traveling between those places is expensive. Round-trips between Brewster and each of those cities totals 1,098 miles. That comes to \$631.35 at the standard 57.5 mileage deduction rate. Sometimes he needs iron transfusions that require treatment for three days in a row. That further increases costs. Typically, he travels back and forth for each of those three days. The alternative would be to rent a motel room for the overnights.

Disasters cause their own problems. The Nebraska Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were both on hand during recent flooding. Residents do not like dealing with agency rules, but they have learned to accommodate them. At least nobody was injured in those floods.

Volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) sometimes provide help via life flight. This is particularly useful when

somebody needs emergency treatment not available in the cities that are within an hour's drive. The nearest trauma center is in Kearney. A medical emergency transport company claims the average out-of-pocket expense for this kind of service in Nebraska is \$176. This amount can fluctuate based on several factors, such as insurance, in- and out-of-network providers, the amount of care the patient needs in transit and distance. Such companies are reluctant to provide more detailed figures because of all the factors involved.

Long-term care provides challenges, too. The facilities in the area are struggling financially. Rules and regulations aggravate the problem. The residents in those facilities do not even get the best nutrition. Their food comes prepackaged. Worse yet, activities are lacking. People need a sense of purpose. These shortcomings leave residents with a choice between staying close to friends and loved ones and moving away to get better care.

Health insurance in Brewster is a mixed bag. Employees of the county get group health coverage. Most of the other residents are on Medicare. At least one resident gets VA benefits. But because of the extreme cost, anybody who must pay for their own health insurance often has to choose between having health care coverage and eating.

Preventive care, such as inoculations, is like other services. One needs to travel to places that have doctors to get it. Occasionally, a person can go to Broken Bow (57 miles) to get a screening for stroke. For \$149, they get checked for plaque, heart rhythm, abdominal aortic aneurism, peripheral arterial disease and osteoporosis risk.

All things considered, the people in Brewster are happy living there. As mentioned earlier, it has its advantages. The inconveniences are just part of the trade-off. Anybody who cannot handle the inconveniences should not live there.

Nonetheless, the people in Brewster, just as people in a myriad of small, remote towns in the United States, need access to

adequate health care. This is one issue that should be considered in health care policy.

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