

## **Rural Minds to Bring Message to State Session**

### *Personal Tragedy Leads to National Discussion on Mental Health*

There's a mental health emergency in rural America: People living in rural communities have much higher rates of depression and suicide than people living in urban areas. Though hidden away in the shadow for years, if not generations, this challenge is finally being brought into the light, and has led to public discourse about the unspoken impact of mental health issues.

The National Grange is partnering with Rural Minds – a nonprofit organization confronting the mental health challenges faced by rural Americans – to develop a Rural Suicide Awareness and Prevention program. The goal for this educational program is to create a grassroots, person-to-person approach that provides people who live in rural communities with mental health and suicide prevention information.

The Pennsylvania State Grange will welcome Rural Minds founder Jeff Winton to the 151<sup>st</sup> State Grange Session. Winton's program on Thursday evening, October 19, will be open to the public and free of charge.

### **Personal Tragedy Initiates Call to Action**

Jeff Winton was raised on his family's dairy farm in rural upstate New York. Growing up, he discovered that many of the families in his small, 500-person town had a relative or friend living with some form of untreated mental illness—depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, schizophrenia. But their struggle was met with silence. There were few or no resources in the community for treating them or conversations about helping them. The stigma attached to mental illness was palpable.

In 2012, the suicide of his beloved 28-year-old nephew was a wake-up call for Jeff. In the eulogy he delivered, Jeff shared his family's continuing struggle with mental illness. After the service, many local families shared their own experiences and thanked Jeff for finally giving them the permission to talk openly and freely. He realized that so much more needed to be done.

Since then, Jeff has focused a majority of his professional career aligning his expertise in the biopharmaceutical industry with his passion for helping rural families. He founded Rural Minds, a nonprofit organization to serve as the informed voice for mental health in rural America, and to provide mental health information and resources.

### **A Sobering Portrait**

A glance at the mental illness statistics in rural America is sobering. Rural Americans have higher rates of depression and suicide than urbanites, but are less likely to seek mental healthcare services. The suicide rate in rural populations is 18.3 to 20.5 per 100,000, which is much higher than the 10.9 per 100,000 rate in urban populations.

According to the CDC, suicide rates have increased by 45% in non-metro areas from 2000 through 2020. Rural residents have a 1.5 times higher rate of emergency room visits for nonfatal self-harm than urban residents.

The challenges facing rural communities in the United States are daunting:

- Rural areas have fewer primary care providers per resident than urban areas and the workforce is growing at a slower rate
- 65% of rural counties lack a psychiatrist
- 81% of rural counties lack a psychiatric nurse practitioner
- 47% of rural counties lack a psychologist
- Nearly 37 million rural Americans—more than half of rural residents—live in mental healthcare shortage areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing issues of isolation and unemployment, had a significant impact on mental health in rural American communities, with 53% of rural adults and 71% of younger rural adults between the ages of 18-34 reporting that the pandemic had affected their mental health.

### **Unique Rural Lifestyle Challenges to Mental Health**

In addition to a lack of mental healthcare resources, rural Americans must deal with lifestyle barriers particular to them, which can impede their ability to access the help that they need.

As of 2020, 46 million U.S. residents, which comprises only 14% of the entire U.S. population, live in rural areas. In addition to increased isolation, residents of rural communities also face greater obstacles to accessing goods and services, endure longer commutes, and generally struggle with economic hardship.

As of April 2020, mere months into the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rates hit levels unseen since The Great Depression, peaking at 13.6% in rural areas. In 2019, 15.3% of rural citizens lived in poverty. With unemployment and poverty come a lack of health insurance, rendering mental healthcare inaccessible.

Compounding the issue, internet service providers underserve rural communities. In addition to decreased access to telehealth services, rural residents without broadband internet lack access to information, online schooling, ecommerce, and work-from-home options.

### **Overcoming Stigma**

Given the small, close-knit nature of rural communities, residents worry about whether they can maintain confidentiality of care. They fear word getting out that they are receiving treatment, believing that family, friends and community members will judge them as weak or incompetent.

Stigma looms large over the issue of mental health, especially in rural communities, and can be a major impediment to people reaching out for help. Many view mental illness as a weakness, or a character flaw, instead of seeing it for what it is: a legitimate, treatable medical condition.

“In the days following Brooks’ passing, my family was urged by friends and neighbors to avoid mentioning suicide. They suggested that we say that he died of natural causes. My mother, the matriarch of our family, insisted on addressing the issue head-on, hoping to prevent it from happening again,” said Winton.

Winton believes raising awareness liberates people living in the shadow of stigma to not only seek help, but also to step forward and speak publicly about their stories. Shifting the perception of mental illness, and ultimately ending the stigma surrounding its discussion, is his mission, and the mission of Rural Minds.

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Overcoming this silent epidemic, putting an end to the unwarranted stigma that enables it, is my mission. It is the very reason that I began this work.

JEFF WINTON



## **Ending Stigma, Changing Rural Minds**

Jeff Winton, Founder of Rural Minds

Thursday, October 19 7:30 PM

*Following Quilts of Valor Presentation*

Open to the public