

Eliminate the Cost of “Life-Flights”

NUR 1451 Capstone: Professional Nursing

Ashley Campbell, RN

History

- The immense use and cost of emergent patient transportation has become more apparent than ever before for residents in McKean County – this led to the investigation of this issue.
- The state of Pennsylvania consists of 48 rural counties and 19 urban counties. These 48 rural counties include 12.7 million residents, making up 27% of the state’s population.
- Pennsylvania's population is approximately 12,388,100 people; 12.2% of this population lives below the poverty line, and 6.8% (685,320 individuals) currently live uninsured.
- 15.9% of the state's population is insured under Medicare, while 16.8% are insured under Medicaid.
- There are 17 air ambulance services offered throughout PA.
- There is an average of 3,030 emergency air-ambulance transfers, “life-flights” required per year.

Supporting Organizations

- Organizations whose missions support advocating for patients related to Emergency Care and the healthcare environment include the ENA and the NLN.
- The Emergency Nurses Association’s mission involves collaborating with healthcare professionals around the world in order to promote advanced solutions geared towards problems with emergency medicine.
- The National League for Nursing promotes access to care by, “Advocating for policies that promote the health and education of the public to meet the challenges of a diverse and ever-changing, market-driven health care environment,”(NLN, 2021).



Political Issue

- The average cost charged to a patient for requiring a emergency air-ambulance transfer is \$17,729.
- Many individuals requiring emergency air-ambulance transfers are uninsured, or have to pay “out of network” fees for their flights, leaving patients with thousands of dollars in debt, or even denied transportation via emergency air-ambulance
- Even though Medicare and Medicaid try to avoid “balance billing,” there is no rule prohibiting the balance from being sent to the patient.
- Medicare pays 50% of the base rate, and 50% of the mileage rate when being transported from rural areas; an average base rate for Medicare is \$17,729- therefore, the patient could still be billed at least \$8,864.50.
- For the 16.8% of the state's population registered under Medicaid, the patient is responsible for paying 20% of the bill, which averages to be \$4,000.

Impact on People in Rural NW Pennsylvania

- With more rural facilities consolidating and closing service units, there will be an increase in the number of patients requiring transfer to larger, surrounding hospitals/healthcare systems in order to receive the healthcare needed.
- Many patients are incapable of negotiating prices of emergency transportation or denying it when in a medical crisis. The cost of the subsequent bills for these services can be thousands of dollars.
- Individuals who are uninsured, or who do not have an insurance plan that an air-ambulance company accepts, can be denied transportation, ultimately negatively impacting the health of the patient who desperately need the care required..

Impact on Students and Professional Nurses

- The priority of the profession of nursing is to advocate for our patients.
- Patients faced with critical healthcare conditions should be able to focus on healing and not have to worry about accessing the healthcare they require.
- Adding on the cost of an air-ambulance can cause additional stress to patients, which can cause more harm to their health status.
- As nursing advocates, we should prevent this stress and to advocate for access to appropriate levels of care not available in rural communities. If that access to care requires air-transport because of the patient’s condition, nursing should support the safest and most competent means of transport available, without cost as a consideration.

My Proposal to Improve the Situation

- I am proposing the need to enact legislation to subsidize the cost of emergency air ambulance transportation for residents in rural Pennsylvania. I understand that a total bill of \$53,607,750 can be an expensive burden on the state, but this total will be moderately paid through Medicare and Medicaid, which will cover at least 50% of the total cost, lowering the cost to \$26,853,375.

Legislator

Martin T. Causer, Majority Policy Chairman: Represents the 67th Legislative District in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.



Representative Causer had worked in the EMS department of McKean county for twenty years, and understands the difficulties and hardships rural counties in Pennsylvania experience within their EMS departments. He is very supportive of funding for both ground and air EMS. In 2017, he made an amendment toward legislation which increased funding for EMS, which was House Bill 699. He explained the need for a gradual increase with Medicare reimbursement; which has increased from \$200 to \$2,700. Even though this was not the largest increase in funds, Representative Causer explained that these challenges rural healthcare facilities face will require incremental change, and that these changes will take time. He stated that he will continue to advocate for health of residents of PA and that he supports funding the EMS system.

References

- ¹ Brown, E. C. F., McDonald, A., & Nguyen, N. T. (2020). What States Can Do to Address Out-Of-Network Air Ambulance Bills. *Journal of Law, Medicine, & Ethics*, 48(3), 462–473. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073110520958869>
- ² National League for Nursing. Access. <http://www.nln.org/centers-for-nursing-education/advocacy-public-policy/legislative-issues/access>
- ³ Pamela M. Choi, James Fraser, Kayla B. Briggs, Charlene Dekonenko, Pablo Aguayo, David Juang, “Air transportation over-utilization in pediatric trauma patients”, *Journal of Pediatric Surgery*, 10.1016/j.jpedsurg.2020.08.033, (2020).
- ⁴ Published: Oct 15, 2020. (2020, November 2). *Election 2020: State Health Care Snapshots*. KFF. <https://www.kff.org/statedata/election-state-fact-sheets/pennsylvania/#:~:text=In%20Pennsylvania%2C%20there%20were%20685%2C320,rate%20for%20the%20U.S.%20overall.>
- ⁵ *Rural/Urban PA*. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania. [https://www.rural.palegislature.us/rural_urban.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Center's%20definition,lived%20in%20a%20rural%20county.&text=\(Note%3A%20Underlined%20counties%20are%20rural.\)](https://www.rural.palegislature.us/rural_urban.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Center's%20definition,lived%20in%20a%20rural%20county.&text=(Note%3A%20Underlined%20counties%20are%20rural.))
- ⁶ *Understanding Air Ambulance Insurance Coverage*. NAIC. (2020, August 27).