The second biennial “The Clock is Ticking for Rural America: A Behavioral Health and Safety Conference” was held in Bloomington, Minnesota, July 11-13, 2005. Coordinated by AgriWellness, Inc. and sponsored by the National Association for Rural Mental Health, the National Rural Health Association, and the State Public Policy Group, the conference focused on the behavioral health needs of rural and agricultural populations. Plenary speakers and presenters in breakout sessions focused on themes related to this topic, including improving the behavioral health of the agricultural population and members of rural communities dependent on agriculture, the alarming lack of adequate health care and access to health insurance for persons involved in agriculture and other rural residents, and addressing the opportunities and special needs created by an increasingly diverse agricultural population.


Highlights of the three days included enlightening educational sessions, numerous opportunities to share research and thoughts and to network with people from other organizations that are involved in trying to provide help to rural people in need, and, most importantly, the chance to discuss ideas about how to bring about equality in the current health care and insurance systems. Many of the papers presented at this year’s conference were of a high quality. AgriWellness would like to see the best examples published in journals such as The Journal of Agricultural Safety and Health and Rural Mental Health.

During the Tuesday luncheon, two awards were given to recognize those who “bring hope and health to the agricultural population,” Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska (IMN) and Roger Williams (see individual articles elsewhere in this newsletter). Awards were also presented to three students who submitted papers. Tony Jung, a doctoral student at Iowa State University, received the first place award for his paper “Addressing Rural Adolescent Substance Abuse through Increased Youth Involvement in School-University-Community Prevention Partnerships.” James Link, a doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas, MN, received the second place award for “Providing Mental Health Services in the American Frontier.” Sara Lassig, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, received the third place award for her paper “Older Rural Women’s Health Care Decision-Making.” While none of the papers was ready for publication, the students were commended for their unique and timely topics, and they were encouraged to continue to work toward excellence in their projects.

The final session of the conference was a large group discussion to talk about where and how efforts should be focused in the future. Passion was evident in the voices of the participants as they discussed the needs and the lack of available care. The group members expressed a strong sense of responsibility to see that this work is carried forward. Arlie Sholes, Nebraska, emphatically stated, “Our role is to say, “We will not abandon farm producers.” The main topic was uninsurance and underinsurance among the agricultural and rural populations and the need for some type of universal care, subsidy or cost share to provide better access. Rhonda Strebel, Wisconsin, affirmed, “It boils down to a lack of health insurance. Decent insurance will help the economies of rural towns. Agribusinesses need to share in the cost of health insurance. The rural/farm population who can’t afford health care or insurance needs access to culturally acceptable behavioral health services when needed. We have to show that providing good health care is beneficial to everyone.”

Highlights of the three days included enlightening educational sessions, numerous opportunities to share research and thoughts and to network with people from other organizations that are involved in trying to provide help to rural people in need, and, most importantly, the chance to discuss ideas about how to bring about equality in the current health care and insurance systems. Many of the papers presented at this year’s conference were of a high quality. AgriWellness would like to see the best examples published in journals such as The Journal of Agricultural Safety and Health and Rural Mental Health.

During the Tuesday luncheon, two awards were given to recognize those who “bring hope and health to the agricultural population,” Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska (IMN) and Roger Williams (see individual articles elsewhere in this newsletter). Awards were also presented to three students who submitted papers. Tony Jung, a doctoral student at Iowa State University, received the first place award for his paper “Addressing Rural Adolescent Substance Abuse through Increased Youth Involvement in School-University-Community Prevention Partnerships.” James Link, a doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas, MN, received the second place award for “Providing Mental Health Services in the American Frontier.” Sara Lassig, a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, received the third place award for her paper “Older Rural Women’s Health Care Decision-Making.” While none of the papers was ready for publication, the students were commended for their unique and timely topics, and they were encouraged to continue to work toward excellence in their projects.

The final session of the conference was a large group discussion to talk about where and how efforts should be focused in the future. Passion was evident in the voices of the participants as they discussed the needs and the lack of available care. The group members expressed a strong sense of responsibility to see that this work is carried forward. Arlie Sholes, Nebraska, emphatically stated, “Our role is to say, “We will not abandon farm producers.” The main topic was uninsurance and underinsurance among the agricultural and rural populations and the need for some type of universal care, subsidy or cost share to provide better access. Rhonda Strebel, Wisconsin, affirmed, “It boils down to a lack of health insurance. Decent insurance will help the economies of rural towns. Agribusinesses need to share in the cost of health insurance. The rural/farm population who can’t afford health care or insurance needs access to culturally acceptable behavioral health services when needed. We have to show that providing good health care is beneficial to everyone.”
When Marilyn Mecham was growing up on the family farm near Newman Grove, Nebraska, she realized she had a strong working faith and a passion for mission and ministry, but she had no idea that she would some day be working to bring hope and health to Nebraska farm families. As Executive of Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska (IMN), along with her partners in ministry, Marilyn has been doing just that for the past six years.

IMN, a statewide ecumenical agency with offices located in Lincoln, NE, was formed in 1971 as a vehicle to bring together Nebraska churches for “worship, teaching, service and common witness to faith.” This purpose is shared by denominations as they work to fulfill their “ministry and mission.” IMN provides planning and program support. IMN programs continue as long as there are needs and financial support to move ahead.

IMN’s mission includes:

- celebrating the unity which God provides
- engaging matters of faith and practice
- empowering Christian service
- challenging Nebraska citizens to respond to the compassion and constraints of the Gospel

The Farm Crisis Response Council (FCRC) is one of the nine principal ministries supported by IMN. Formed in 1984 in response to the farm crisis of the ‘80s, the alliance of churches and agriculture-related organizations worked hard to construct a solid network of support for those affected by “financial pressure and legal and emotional stress” brought on by the crisis.

One of the FCRC’s primary services is the Nebraska Rural Response Hotline (1-800-464-0258). According to Marilyn, the best thing about it is its “sheer simplicity and incredible impact.” When a farmer or rancher calls, a staff person with experience in agriculture will answer, listen to the caller, assess the needs, and then provide useful information or refer the caller to other resources. Those resources could cover any issue from legal assistance to financial advice to personal concerns. “Most importantly,” says Marilyn, “the counselors can distribute vouchers for confidential sessions with a mental health care provider.”

Marilyn credits much of the hotline’s success to the fact that it is run by the church. Bureaucracy is less of an issue. There is a two-fold benefit to being church affiliated: 1) when callers hear that the service is provided by churches, “the walls come down.” People relate to and more willingly accept help from a service of the church over a government program; 2) faith communities provide a sense of trust and confidentiality. Marilyn sees another positive contributor to the hotline’s success; the ability to convey servant leadership, empowering those in need and helping them get to the next level.

Use of the Nebraska Rural Response Hotline continues to increase. Every year hotline staff answer more than 4,000 calls and distribute over $150,000 worth of vouchers. Marilyn gives several reasons for this growth. First, “it works and neighbors tell neighbors.” Second, the hotline has strong partners in Nebraska Health and Human Services and the Office of Rural Health, because it has proven to be “a viable program with a positive impact” on the target population and is a “way to provide services to a population that is underserved.” Third, it is a cost-effective program. Last year, the cost for receiving one call, mailing out one voucher, and processing one check was a mere 17 cents. By maximizing every dollar invested in the ministry, IMN is not only able to help more people, but they are also able to honor the Christian precept of good stewardship. Fourth, Marilyn emphasizes the importance of prairie pride. Growing up in Nebraska instills a sense of pride about who you are and where you come from. The structure of the hotline reinforces this. The confidentiality of the service and the choices given to callers about providers and available care allow them to keep their self-respect.

The articles in this newsletter were written by Cindy Peck, the AgriWellness intern. We thank her for her help.