

# primary care IN PERIL

## Coloradans' primary care access threatened, paper concludes

Primary care – the cornerstone of medical care – is in a precarious position in Colorado, according to a comprehensive research paper.

Of Colorado's 64 counties, 57 have been designated as primary care shortage areas by federal officials. But it could get much worse, according to the research by Colorado Strategies, which specializes in economic and policy analysis. The firm is led by Henry Sobanet, former director of the Colorado Office of State Planning and Budgeting.

"A confluence of demographic, geographic, regulatory, and economic factors is affecting and will continue to affect the supply of primary care physicians in Colorado and the United States," the paper states.

- The state's population is dramatically aging – in 15 years, the share of Colorado's population age 65 and over will nearly double – and seniors consume health care at much higher rates.
- Colorado physicians are aging too, with about a third over 55 years old. "Thus, many physicians will be retiring while demand for health care will be rising."
- Rising medical school costs and comparatively low compensation for primary care has created a disincentive for students to pursue careers in that field, limiting the supply of new primary care physicians.

The paper cautions that "policy makers should take care not to exacerbate the situation via regulations or increased costs to physicians or medical students. Future policy opportunities should be scrutinized for any impact on the

financial viability or supply of primary care physicians and services."

For example, the research notes:

- "Government reimbursement rates for both Medicare and Medicaid are frequently below the cost of service."
- Practice expenses, such as higher liability costs, could limit the availability of primary care services, especially obstetrical care in rural areas.

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The paper predicts that the number of family physicians – key providers of primary care – relative to the population over 55 could plummet by 38% between 2008 and 2020, prompting significant access-to-care issues.

In rural Colorado – which accounts for three quarters of the state's land mass – "the shortage of health professionals is dire," the paper concludes. Of Colorado's 47 rural counties, six had no fulltime primary care physicians, eight had only one primary care physician and one had none at all, the paper notes, citing 2007 data. "Of particular note, many communities in the southeast portion of Colorado are over an hour's drive from a hospital that provides OB service," it adds.

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Watch a video and read the full research paper at [PrimaryCareInPeril.org](http://PrimaryCareInPeril.org)