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Pennsylvania's landscape is diverse, ranging from rolling fields to big cities, with suburbia and small towns between the two. For 25 years I have called rural Pennsylvania home, working as a nurse practitioner for nearly 10 years in Punxsutawney. My neighbors and I would not trade the countryside for anything.

However, rural communities like ours face a special challenge when it comes to health care access. It was clearly illustrated a few years ago, when hundreds of families faced the prospect of losing their local provider.

I worked alongside a family physician for four years in Punxsutawney in a hospital-based practice. But when a local physician decided to close her practice and relocate in 2011, there were no other practices waiting in the wings to accept all of his patients. Many providers in town were not taking new patients. The nearest town of 6,000 people or more is an hour-long round trip. The nearest town of 40,000 people is a three hour round trip.

I knew that many of her patients would be unable to make the trip, and they would simply go without the regular care they needed. I chose to open my own practice and welcome all of her patients.

Each day my practice provides health care for at least 20 patients, ranging in age from 10 through 90. We provide primary care, health management and education for a host of different folks. Our mentality is not just to diagnose the problem and treat the issue with medicine alone, but rather to educate patients on how to adapt their lifestyle and improve overall wellbeing.

As a primary care nurse practitioner, it is my duty to best advise my patients on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. In Punxsutawney, our practice works closely with various medical specialists to ensure the best outcome for our patients.

The holistic nature of the nurse practitioner field drew me to this career. In a way that is special among health care professionals, our training emphasizes a comprehensive approach to health care. NPs look at the whole person, rather than just the illness. Although all health care providers aim to have healthy patients, we approach this goal in different and complementary ways.

In Pennsylvania, nurse practitioners are required by law to have collaborative agreements with physicians. This often burdens practitioners and patients. These agreements mandate that NPs have business contracts with two physicians in order to see patients. Many NPs must pay large fees to the physicians in order to secure these mandatory contracts.

Many of my colleagues in rural areas of the state struggle to obtain the necessary contracts from physicians because of distance challenges. With relatively few rural physicians in the first place, there

are few nearby to sign the contract. Of the physicians who are in the area, many are prohibited from signing by the health system that employs them. The mandate creates a bottleneck for accessible health care for patients in rural Pennsylvania communities.

For 25 years health care in rural Pennsylvania has been my livelihood, and for the next 25 years I intend to provide the highest quality care to my patients. Eliminating barriers to care for patients and providers will open doors for a healthier Pennsylvania.