

■ Prescribing Remedies for Georgia's Medical Provider Shortage

By Tim Sweeney, Director of Health Policy

Health insurance coverage is important to ensure Georgians get affordable access to health care services in their community and give communities access to financial resources to maintain local health systems. Yet access to actual treatment can be elusive in many parts of the state and too many Georgians today lack health insurance. Ongoing efforts to extend health insurance coverage to more of the 1 million Georgians who are now uninsured make it even more important to fix that imbalance in local supply of health care practitioners.

Access to hospitals, clinics and health care practitioners varies dramatically across the state. Nearly two-thirds of Georgia's 159 counties are below the statewide average for the number of nurses, physician assistants, primary care physicians and total doctors per 100,000 residents.

Provider shortages plague rural communities more than their non-rural counterparts. Rural counties account for 80 percent of the 105 counties with practitioner-to-resident ratios that fall short of the statewide average in each category. Toombs is the only rural county that meets the statewide average in each category. Several fast-growing counties fall short of statewide averages in each category, while counties that offer much of Georgia's medical training enjoy the highest practitioner-to-resident ratios.

Solving these shortages requires strategic and significant state policy action, such as:

- Maintain and boost state incentives for practitioners to locate in rural and other underserved areas
- Examine role for non-physician providers to help boost capacity in Georgia's underserved communities
- Increase state and federal health care investment by expanding Medicaid coverage to more uninsured Georgians and by boosting Medicaid payments to providers to increase practitioner capacity to care for Medicaid patients and increase overall system capacity

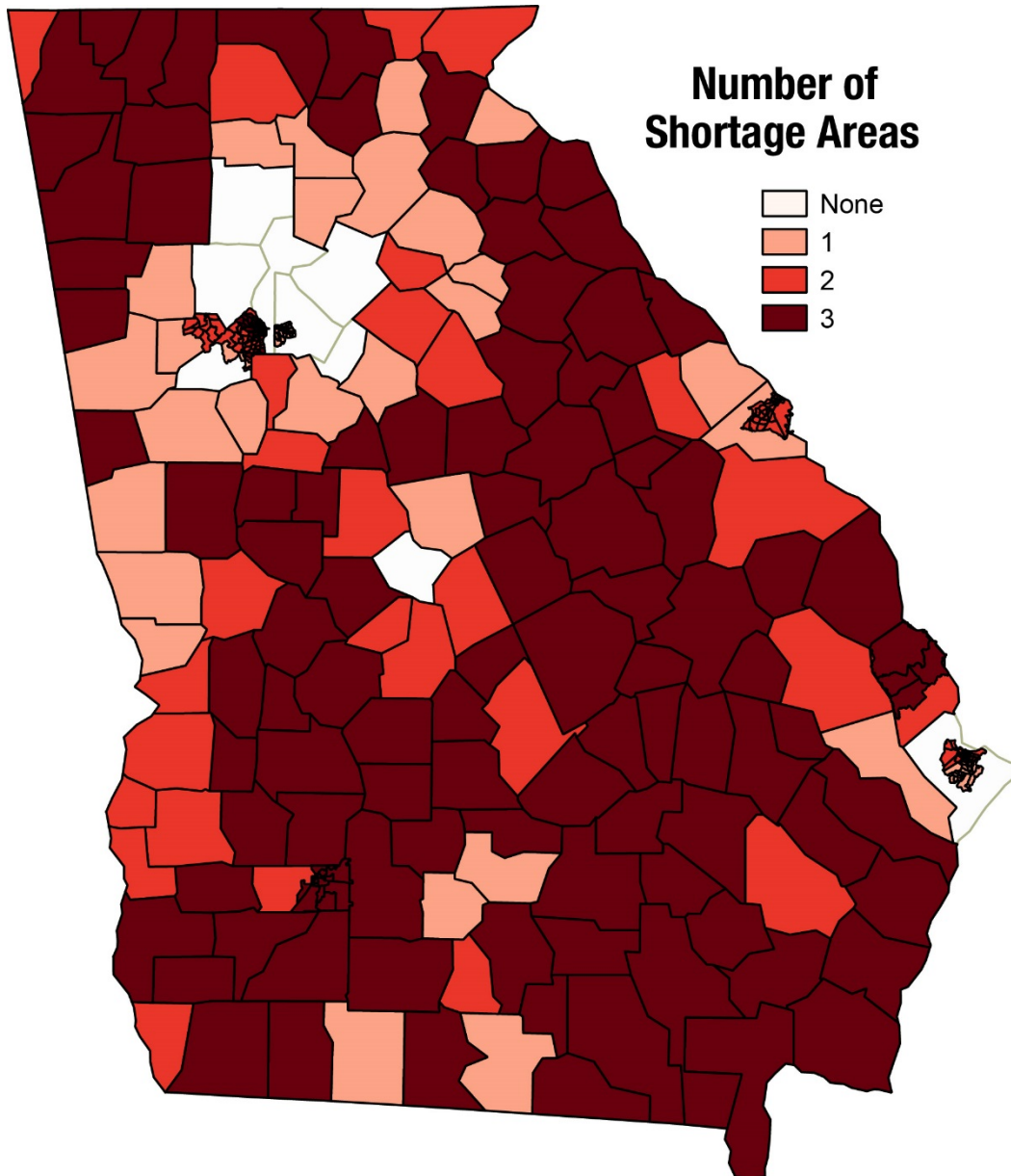
Expanding access to health coverage is a critical first step to increase access to health care services underserved Georgians and to boost investment in the state's health care system. Georgia's existing provider shortages are no reason to continue to delay efforts to extend health coverage to more Georgians, even if solving the problem requires additional effort. Instead, early evidence and rules of supply and demand suggest increasing coverage will *help* address many system capacity issues delivering critical new financial resources to hospitals and other providers to treat patients. State leaders across the country know firsthand how new state and federal investment can help to grow a health care system and one of Georgia's leading health care economists predicts tens of thousands of new health care jobs if Georgia brings in major new federal funding to cover more people.

Most Georgia Communities Short on Medical Professionals

This map shows Georgia communities where the population's need for health care outstrips the local supply of doctors, nurses and other health care professionals. It identifies communities, population groups and medical facilities with the greatest needs for more health care resources, including practitioners or health care services. Health Professional Shortage Areas are designations by the U.S. Health Resources Services Administration.

Georgia's Health Professional Shortage Areas

The shaded counties and census tracts represent communities underserved by primary care, dental and/or mental health services.



Source: Based on data from the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services