

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council
Meeting Minutes December 10, 2020**

1. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton called the meeting to order at 10:03 am.

2. Roll Call

Member Agencies Present:

Illinois Department of Agriculture, Robert Barren
Illinois Department of Aging, Amy Lulich
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Agnes Masnik, Sal Garza,
and Wendy Bell
Illinois Housing Development Authority, Ben Fenton
Illinois Department of Human Services, Francisco Alvarado
Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Rachel Torbert
Illinois Community College Board, Lavon Nelson
Illinois Department of Transportation, Holly Bieneman
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Christine Davis
Illinois Farm Bureau, Brenda Matherly
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, Anne Silvis
Southern Illinois University, Laura Kessel
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Christopher Merrett & Sandy Wittig
Illinois Finance Authority, Charles Myart
Rural Partners, Molly Hammond

Not Present:

Illinois Department of Employment Security, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois
Department of Public Health

Citizen Members Present:

Heather Hampton-Knodle
Sameer Vohra
Sonja Reece
Norm Walzer

Guests:

Doug Wilson
Karen Jenkins
Mary Reynolds

Lt. Governor's Office Staff Members Present:

Juliana Stratton, Lt. Governor
Charles Watkins, Chief of Staff
Akanksha Balekai, Dunn Fellow
Bobby Mannis, Policy Director for the Office of the Lt. Governor

Quorum determined. *All individuals were present via phone/videoconferencing

Lt. Governor Stratton inquired if there were any corrections or additions to the agenda for today's meeting. Francisco Alvarado made a motion to accept the agenda. Sonja Reece seconded the motion. Motion passed.

3. Approval of Meeting Minutes from September 10, 2020.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced that a draft of the minutes from the September 2020 meeting had been provided to council members prior to today's meeting.

Sonja Reece made a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Amy Lulich. Motion passed. Minutes were approved.

4. Lt. Governor Stratton Remarks

Lt. Governor Stratton provided a brief update on the 2020 GRAC Annual Report. She announced the report was completed and submitted. In addition, a version has been shared with the Department of Central Management Services to add graphics. The hope is to have a completed report to share in the coming weeks. She thanked all the committee members and especially Chris Merrett and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs.

Lt. Governor Stratton thanked the council members that shared information about the Business Interruption Grant (BIG) informational sessions. She recognized that the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) has worked to help small and medium-sized businesses in rural communities.

5. New Business

The Lt. Governor introduced Dr. Kari Wolf, Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Southern Illinois University (SIU) School of Medicine. The Lt. Governor stated that while telehealth has been an avenue to receive healthcare, its value has increased during the ongoing pandemic. She noted that according to the CDC study, during the first quarter of 2020, telehealth visits increased by 50 percent, compared to same period of 2019. Telehealth offers a safe, convenient way for people to speak to their doctors, access mental health services, and attend physical therapy appointments along with other services.

She added that for those with a disability or other circumstances that makes accessing in-person care challenging, telehealth can prove to be a transformative option. It can also expand care to rural areas with fewer providers. Although telehealth expansion is somewhat limited by broadband internet, Governor Pritzker and herself have made broadband access a priority. She noted that DCEO is investing \$420 million dollars in broadband expansion.

Lt. Governor Stratton thanked Laura Kessel for connecting the council with Dr. Wolf.

The Lt. Governor asked Dr. Wolf to proceed with her presentation. Dr. Wolf stated that she has been providing telehealth services for 19 years in 3 different states. She discussed the challenges of telehealth including both to the providers receiving payment for services delivered and also the challenges associated with providing care in geographically remote areas. She noted that prior to the pandemic Illinois was limited in what services could be provided because of payment restrictions. She also noted that broadband can be a challenge for rural areas.

Telehealth provides access to individuals who would have to drive hours to visit a doctor, to cancer patients not well enough to travel, to persons with development disabilities for which travel is inconvenient or not possible. She noted that during the pandemic restrictions have been loosened which has allowed Illinois to provide additional services. She noted that SIU has served 92 counties in Illinois. She stated that there are permanent changes needed to allow telehealth to continue. Laura Kessel announced she would share these recommendations with the members of the council.

The Lt. Governor thanked Dr. Wolf for her presentation. She asked if there were any questions.

Amy Lulich asked if Dr. Wolf had been advocating with the federal government for restrictions to be changed.

Dr. Wolf responded that she has. She noted there are a number of ways to interact with patients that still meet privacy standards stipulated by HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act).

Lt. Governor Stratton asked if there were changes that her office could help with to bridge the gap, to please let her office know. She asked Dr. Wolf if there were any perceived barriers to people accepting telehealth as a viable alternative to in-person health care.

Dr. Wolf stated definitely prior to the pandemic that there was some skepticism. Since COVID, however, people are more willing to give it a try. Although, she noted that there are challenges interacting with patients who have dementia. She mentioned in some areas outside Illinois, telehealth has become accessible by communities setting up telehealth pods where there is stable internet with some privacy, such as at the local library.

The Lt. Governor thinks the telehealth pods are an excellent idea. She asked her office to follow up on expanding this concept.

Sonja Reece asked is there are things the council can do to lobby congressional delegations in CMS? The Lt. Governor asked what can we do to assist at the federal level?

Dr. Wolf stated that the lack of smart phones was challenging since video is required to telehealth insurance reimbursement.

The Lt. Governor thanked Dr. Wolf again for the informative presentation.

Laura Kessel stated another benefit of telehealth is for caregivers. In the past, these caregivers would have to take a day off to travel with the patient. With telehealth, perhaps only an hour off is needed. This can make a big difference and lessen the economic burden of being a caregiver.

Committee Updates

Lt. Governor Stratton asked that updates be provided on efforts to develop telehealth, rural education, and economic infrastructures throughout the state.

Healthcare

Laura Kessel, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine.

Laura provided an update of the upcoming Town Hall Meetings focusing on telehealth in rural areas. She asked that GRAC members help her identify people who could participate in these Town Hall meetings.

She announced the Rural Partners will be hosting webinars including some on healthcare issues. If interested, please let Laura know.

The Lt. Governor requested that Laura send the information to her office so that it can be shared. She also offered to co-sponsor the Town Hall Meetings.

Heather Hampton-Knodle stated that she had reached out to a local hospital to see if there were concerns on health care issues. She stated that the hospital noted three concerns: transferring patients, vaccine storage, and lack of skilled professionals at rural hospitals.

Laura responded as for the freezer needs for the vaccine, the county health departments are working on this issue. Please have the hospital contact their county health department.

Doug Wilson shared that the USDA is assisting distance learning, broadband in rural areas, and assisting with telehealth availability.

Sameer Vohra (citizen representative to the GRAC and also the director of the Department of Population Science and Policy at SIU School of Medicine) shared that hospitals with concerns should be referred to the Illinois Critical Access Hospital Network (ICAHN). He also noted that the IL State Public Health Department (IDPH) is working on creating regional networks. He acknowledged that several hospitals are creating their own networks, but that the Illinois Critical Access Hospital Network is working to create networks to fill voids of staffing, bed capacity, etc. He also noted that IDPH is working with the CDC to house freezers for vaccine storage although the other vaccines do not need to be stored to that extreme. The federal government is offering to help assist with this cost and investment.

The Lt. Governor thanked Laura for her report and to others who had offered comments.

Education and Workforce Development

The Lt. Governor requested that Bobby Mannis provide an update on education and workforce. Bobby said that webinars have been held to assist with the completion of FASFA, tuition and debt, and post-secondary education. He mentioned he has been working with the Hunt Institute to host workshops on rural education issues.

The Lt. Governor thanked Bobby for the updates.

Economic Development & Infrastructure

The Lt. Governor stated that Norman Walzer would be providing an update.

Norm announced that the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs – 32nd Annual Community and Economic Conference would be held February 24 – 25, 2021. The conference will be offered virtually this year.

He noted that the GRAC, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Rural Partners, and the University of Illinois Extension would be hosting a series of webinars and offering Rural Research Reports.

Norm mentioned that because of many economic, social, and pandemic-related issues, business transition is changing. Norm asked if there are opportunities for the GRAC to help business succession as business owners sell their operations to the next generation of business owners. He stated that the impact of COVID and the recession has caused hardships for small rural communities. These include both financial and demographics issues. His committee is looking into to the question, “How to deal with cutbacks and loss of income. Do we need to reorganize?”

The Lt. Governor thanked Norm for his comments.

She questioned, “How do we start being more innovative. How do we start succession planning and recovering from the pandemic? What is the impact of the pandemic? How do we provide leadership development or coaching to leaders in rural communities? Do we offer webinars, online workshops, strategic planning sessions, etc.?” Her office will be looking into these questions.

6. Member Updates and Reports

Sal Garza from the DCEO announced an opportunity to collaborate. The Illinois Main Street program has a grant program to provide grants for renovation of historic or main streets. He will send this info to the Lt. Governor's office.

The Lt. Governor asked if there were any public comments. There were no public comments at this time.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced her office was working on schedule the meeting dates for 2021. Her staff will be in touch to confirm the meeting logistics. She then requested a motion to adjourn.

Heather Hampton-Knodle made a motion to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Laura Kessel. The meeting was adjourned at 11:21.

Respectfully Submitted:

Sandy Wittig and Chris Merrett
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs
Western Illinois University