New Jersey Chapter
INCORPORATED IN NEW JERSEY
American Academy of Pediatrics
DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®

NEW JERSEY
RURAL HEALTH TRANSFORMATION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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New Jersey Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics Awarded and Engaged in Four Rural Health Transformation Grants to Strengthen Child and Family Health Across Rural New Jersey

Funding will expand access to oral health services, adolescent mental healthcare, trauma-informed care, and provider education in rural communities statewide

PLAINSBORO, N.J. – The New Jersey Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (NJAAP) is proud to announce its leadership and partnership in four initiatives funded through New Jersey's Rural Health Transformation (RHT) Program, a historic federal investment designed to strengthen healthcare access, preventative healthcare, workforce capacity, and health outcomes in rural communities across the state. The first round of awards, announced by Governor Mikie Sherrill on July 31, 2026, represents an $83 million investment in healthcare innovation and service delivery across rural New Jersey.

Through this funding, NJAAP received one award totaling $515,257, funded through the federal Rural Health Transformation Grant, led jointly by New Jersey Department of Human Services and New Jersey Department of Health, to support efforts that improve oral and mental health outcomes for children and adolescents in rural New Jersey, with a particular focus on uninsured and underinsured populations. NJAAP is also partnering with Hackensack Meridian Health and Virtua Health on two additional RHT initiatives to expand provider education, trauma-informed care, and preventive health services in rural communities.

"Every child deserves access to high-quality healthcare, regardless of where they live," said **Felicia K. Taylor, MBA, CAE, Chief Executive Officer of NJAAP.** "These programs represent a meaningful investment in the health and well-being of children and families in rural communities across New Jersey. Whether expanding access to preventive oral healthcare, connecting youth to mental health services, or providing healthcare professionals with vital resources and training, each initiative helps strengthen local systems of care and ensures that every child has the opportunity to grow, thrive, and reach their full potential."

Together, these four initiatives reflect NJAAP's commitment to improving health outcomes for children and families in rural New Jersey through preventive healthcare, early intervention, workforce development, and innovative models of care. The initiatives address critical challenges facing rural communities, including shortages of pediatric behavioral health services, barriers to oral healthcare, limited access to specialty expertise, and the need for enhanced provider

education and support. Through direct service programs, practice transformation efforts, and strategic partnerships, NJAAP and its collaborators will help ensure that children and families can access high-quality care closer to home.

Across all four initiatives, NJAAP will serve eligible rural areas, including communities designated as rural under federal and state definitions in Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, Hunterdon, Salem, Sussex, and Warren counties. Additional eligible communities within federally designated rural census tracts include Browns Mills, Fort Dix, Hockamick, New Hanover, Pointville, and Upton in Burlington County; Ackers Corner, Bear Tavern, Coopers Corner, Harbourton, Harts Corner, Princetonville, and Rosedale in Mercer County; Naval Weapons Station Earle-Mainside in Monmouth County; and Great Bay Boulevard and Island Beach State Park in Ocean County. The four initiatives include:

- **Smiles at Every Visit: Integrating Oral Health and Early Literacy into Pediatric Care** – NJAAP's Smiles at Every Visit initiative helps rural pediatric practices integrate oral health screening, fluoride varnish application, early literacy promotion, and caregiver education into routine well-child visits for young children. By combining preventive oral healthcare with the American Academy of Pediatrics' Brush, Book, Bed model, the initiative equips providers and families with practical tools to promote healthy development, prevent tooth decay, and strengthen school readiness. The program also supports participating practices through training, quality improvement activities, and enhanced referral pathways to pediatric dental care, helping establish sustainable systems that improve outcomes for children throughout rural New Jersey.

- **Access Beyond Care for Teens –** Through Access Beyond Care for Teens, NJAAP is expanding access to mental health services for uninsured and underinsured teens ages 13-17 living in identified rural NJ Counties. Working with Talkspace, a virtual behavioral health partner, the program connects teens to licensed mental health clinicians, ongoing secure messaging, as well as self-guided wellness and mental health resources, while providing pediatric primary care providers with training and resources to better address concerns such as anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicide risk. By reducing barriers related to transportation, provider shortages, and confidentiality concerns, the initiative helps adolescents access timely support when they need it most.

- **Partnership with Hackensack Meridian Health: Strengthening Pediatric Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Care** – Through the Rural Health Transformation Grant led by Hackensack Meridian Health, NJAAP is providing education to both primary care providers and rural communities. For primary care providers serving New Jersey's seven state-designated rural counties, NJAAP is offering Project ECHO® education focused on trauma-informed care, positive and adverse childhood experiences (PACEs) and pediatric behavioral health. This training helps providers understand how trauma and life experiences can affect a child's health, development and behavior. It also strengthens their ability to create safe and responsive clinical environments, screen for concerns early, engage families in supportive conversations and connect children and caregivers with appropriate services. NJAAP is partnering with the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey (NAMI NJ), whose community educators are providing trauma-informed care engagement, behavioral health outreach, and connecting communities with resources through

educational programming in community organizations, schools, libraries, and faith communities in the seven state-designated rural counties.

- **Partnership with Virtua Health: Building Rural Health Workforce Capacity –** NJAAP is also partnered with Virtua Health to implement a Project ECHO® learning collaborative designed to strengthen the knowledge and skills of healthcare professionals and community partners serving rural South Jersey. The program provides education on key rural health topics, evidence-based screening and treatment practices, and connections to local social determinants of health resources. It also offers strategies for connecting patients and families with community resources. The initiative is designed to educate healthcare professionals and community partners in rural communities, helping to build a stronger and more connected rural healthcare workforce while supporting the delivery of high-quality care in underserved communities.

"These programs demonstrate the power of collaboration to improve health outcomes for children and families," Taylor added. "By working alongside healthcare systems, community organizations, and pediatric providers, we are creating sustainable solutions that will strengthen rural healthcare for years to come."

According to the State of New Jersey, more than one million New Jersey residents live in a rural community, where challenges such as healthcare workforce shortages, limited access to specialty services, and barriers to preventive care can make it more difficult for families to access needed support. The RHT Program seeks to address these challenges through targeted investments that strengthen healthcare systems and improve access to care.

About the New Jersey Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics
The New Jersey Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics is dedicated to the attainment of optimal health, safety, and well-being of all New Jersey infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, and to supporting pediatricians and other child health professionals as trusted leaders in pediatric healthcare. NJAAP supports more than 2,000 member pediatricians, subspecialists, residents, and allied health professionals across the state and provides education, quality improvement initiatives, technical assistance, and statewide leadership to strengthen pediatric care for New Jersey's children and families.

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