

“A War on Rural Healthcare,” by Dr. Chris Jones

Medicaid has been a lifeline for rural Arkansas, keeping hospitals open and ensuring low-income families get the care they need. But Governor Sarah Sanders and now President Donald Trump threaten to completely dismantle that safety net, leaving entire communities without healthcare access.

Trump’s proposed plan to effectively eliminate Medicaid looms over the country, while Sanders moved aggressively to strip coverage from tens of thousands of Arkansans. Now, Sanders is taking it a step further, rolling out a controversial work requirement that could force even more people off Medicaid—especially in rural areas where jobs are scarce.

The result? A healthcare crisis that is deepening by the day.

Medicaid Expansion: A Lifeline for Rural Arkansas*

In 2014, Arkansas expanded Medicaid through a program called the “private option,” which allowed the state to use federal funds to buy private insurance for low-income residents. This expansion dramatically reduced the number of uninsured Arkansans, particularly in rural counties, where hospital closures were a real and growing threat. This

Ashley County Medical Center saw a decline in unpaid emergency room visits, helping stabilize its finances. In **Baxter County**, Medicaid expansion meant fewer people delaying care until they were critically ill, easing pressure on local hospitals. And in **Lee County**, it helped cut infant mortality rates by giving expectant mothers access to prenatal care.

For years, Medicaid expansion kept Arkansas’ rural healthcare system afloat. But now, that progress is being ripped away.

Sanders’ Medicaid Purge and Work Requirement

Since taking office, Governor Sanders has aggressively purged Medicaid rolls, with Arkansas removing enrollees at twice the national average. Many who still qualify for Medicaid have been kicked off due to paperwork errors, slow processing, or administrative red tape.

Now, she's adding a new Medicaid work requirement that forces certain Medicaid recipients to prove they're working, volunteering, or in job training to keep their health insurance.

But here's the truth, Arkansans want to work and **most Medicaid recipients who can work, already do**. For those in rural areas, where job opportunities are scarce, proving compliance with these requirements is a major hurdle.

When Arkansas tried work requirements in 2018, 18,000 people lost coverage in just a few months—without any meaningful impact on employment rates. Instead, it left thousands uninsured and forced hospitals to absorb even more unpaid bills.

Despite that failure, Sanders is doubling down. And rural Arkansas will pay the price.

The Real-World Impact: Hospitals Closing, Families Struggling

The consequences of Medicaid restrictions are devastating.

- In Cleveland County, a community health center that once thrived under Medicaid expansion is now struggling to stay open.
- In Sevier County, where poultry workers rely on Medicaid, local clinics are seeing a surge in uninsured patients.
- In Lee County, where Medicaid helped reduce infant mortality, pregnant women are now at risk of losing access to critical prenatal care.

Meanwhile, rural hospitals—many already operating on razor-thin margins—are on the verge of shutting their doors. If that happens, residents will be left with no option but to drive hours for medical care, a reality that will cost lives.

A Crisis That Can Be Reversed

This isn't just bureaucratic mismanagement—it's a deliberate policy choice that prioritizes politics over people. President Trump's Medicaid elimination plan and Sanders' work requirements and mass disenrollments will devastate rural Arkansas, pushing more families into medical debt, forcing hospitals to close, and increasing preventable deaths.

But this can be stopped.

Here's what you can do:

- ✔ Contact your state representatives. Demand they fight against cuts to Medicaid and unnecessary work requirements.
- ✔ Support rural hospitals and clinics. Advocate for funding and resources to keep them open.

Our families, hospitals, and communities should not be collateral damage in a political fight. Arkansans deserve better.

Share your thoughts and comments at chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com.