



**Penn
Highlands
Healthcare**

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**Trina Abl, DO, MBA, Remarks
Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee
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It's an honor to be here today on behalf of rural hospitals – and we appreciate the opportunity to speak before the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee regarding “Rural Healthcare Access and Technological Intervention.”

According to the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania, in Fiscal Year 2023, the Penn Highlands Healthcare hospitals in Northwestern, Central and Southwestern Pennsylvania represented a total benefit of nearly \$2 billion to the Pennsylvania economy. This benefit includes approximately \$918.8 million in spending by the hospitals for goods and services needed to provide healthcare services and support hospital operations as well as employee salaries, wages and benefits.

Despite being a major economic generator throughout the commonwealth, our nine hospitals, like the many other rural hospitals in Pennsylvania and throughout the United States, face many unprecedented challenges. Rural hospitals have been facing substantial cost increases for labor, drugs and supplies. Coupled with inadequate reimbursement rates and ongoing staffing shortages – recruitment and retention -- we are struggling financially.

However, in order to retain skilled physicians, providers and staff to provide the care for our communities so that people are not forced to leave their region for quality care, rural hospitals must invest in advanced technology.

The use of technology has been beneficial in healthcare by providing us with enhanced diagnostic precision and accuracy. Everyone is familiar with the advancements in medical imaging such as the state-of-the-art MRI and CT scanners that produce sharp images that aid in early diagnosis and treatment. AI-powered diagnostics are now available. These tools use algorithms to analyze medical images and patient data to help identify potential issues which leads to

faster and more accurate diagnosis. AI also can be leveraged to improve the quality of care in areas such as radiology and pathology where films or slides are currently read by the human eye of a physician and subject to human error. When those reads are augmented by AI, we can improve accuracy and detection of diseases such as cancer.

Technology also is improving treatment and surgical techniques. Penn Highlands DuBois was the first health system in Northwestern/Central Pennsylvania to offer Mako Smart Robot for joint replacement surgery. We also use the da Vinci Robot for minimally invasive surgery for a wide range of delicate and complex operations. But there is even more. Technology is now available that enables physicians and providers to modify individual therapies based on a person's unique makeup for a more effective outcome.

Today's technology also enables physicians and providers to streamline communications. Telehealth or telemedicine has had a significant impact – especially for patients with mobility issues or limited access to healthcare facilities. We all know that patients can access healthcare services from the comfort of their homes; and Penn Highlands Healthcare has taken it a step further and we have partnered with school districts in Northwestern Pennsylvania to provide telehealth services in schools.

The final point I want to make about technology is that it helping with efficiency and productivity. As you will recall when I began my remarks I discussed the recruitment and retention challenges. AI can be leveraged to off load tasks and reduce work load on physicians and other healthcare workers. For example, we have software to help office staff with billing and denials management; aid physicians in populating their notes as well as future opportunities with ambient listening technology.

As rural healthcare providers acutely feel the challenges of maintaining a workforce to meet the needs of the communities they serve, these AI tools can supplement and alleviate some of the burdensome parts of the workload enabling providers and caregivers to focus on hands-on, direct patient care.

Rural healthcare is an important part of the Pennsylvania patchwork. Speaking on behalf of Penn Highlands Healthcare, we are committed to ensuring that people in the regions we serve have access to quality care in their region.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of this hearing today.