



AUBURN

RURAL HEALTH INITIATIVE NEWSLETTER ISSUE 13: April 2026

[View as Webpage](#)

Strengthening Rural Health Through Collaboration: AU RHI at the Gulf South Summit



Graduate student Anna Beth Gandy and undergraduate students Clara Ragan and Communication Intern Janaya Wheeler represented Auburn University at the 2026 Gulf South Summit in Houston, Texas, held March 26–28. They served as presenters who shared the Auburn University Rural Health Initiative (RHI) 's impactful work.

Their topic, “Building Healthy Rural Communities Through Strategic Collaboration,” highlighted the challenges and opportunities shaping rural health work, including the “blockages and clearances” that influenced community engagement. Some barriers include physical, financial, infrastructural, and organizational issues within rural Alabama communities. They covered the “floods and droughts” that influence rural health access, where resources could be scarce, while others are underutilized. The team demonstrated that AU RHI partnerships helped fill these gaps.

In partnership with Alabama Extension, RHI works closely to close healthcare gaps in rural communities through collaboration by combining Auburn's academic strengths with Extension. Through collaboration, accessible healthcare services, prevention programs, and health education can connect directly to rural residents who may face barriers to proactive care.

Attendees gained insight into how RHI continues to make community-centered health programming successful, working with Alabama Extension, to increase access to affordable, convenient healthcare across rural Alabama.



AU RHI Communication Intern: Janaya Wheeler, Senior '26

"This semester, I served as a Rural and Public Health Communication Intern for the Auburn University Rural Health Initiative (RHI), where I applied my Communication major and Public Relations minor skills. I am the face behind the screen, who crafted RHI's monthly newsletters, a feature article in *Beyond Auburn Magazine*, and contributed to three feature articles in the *Camp Hill Chronicle*. I managed social media content for Tiger Giving Day and created weekly posts across Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook. I prioritize sharing positive news and success stories across AU Outreach social media pages throughout my collegiate career. This opportunity cultivated my interests in media.

My work as a Communication Intern also included reaching out to Alabama Extension administrators for OnMed Care Station updates and community events. Another priority of mine was to highlight student leaders in the Rural Health Connect program. My internship with the RHI team allowed me to travel to the University of West Alabama and various other counties for patient registration and to present at the Gulf South Summit in Houston, Texas. I am forever grateful for this incredible work experience, which has strengthened my skills in writing and social media management. I had the pleasure of serving in a position that supported me in expressing my creativity beyond the classroom, and the experience provided valuable connections and broadened my perspective as an aspiring PR professional."

Student Spotlight



Lauren Jones
President of Rural Health Connect

"Serving as president of Rural Health Connect has impacted my college experience more than I could have ever imagined when we started a year ago. I've learned what it takes to lead as part of a team and how much effort happens behind the scenes to run an

organization and create impactful community events. More than anything, this experience confirmed my dream of practicing rural medicine. We can talk all day in class about the challenges facing rural communities, but until we see them firsthand, it's hard to grasp how deeply they affect daily life. I will forever be grateful for this experience and to all of the Auburn students and staff that have poured their time into such a meaningful impact in Chambers County."



The Road Ahead with Clara Ragan, Senior '26

Undergraduate student Clara Ragan's incredible Auburn experience was shaped by her outstanding achievements, receiving scholarships that allowed her to extend her academic pursuits. She took on a second major and gained hands-on experience through campus involvement and a White House internship that sparked her passion for public health.

Clara exclaimed, "My time as a Rural Health Fellow with RHI has been nothing short of transformative. My many trips to West Alabama to host programs and work with community members solidified my passion for rural public health. Working with a diverse team of community leaders, university faculty, and other students has strengthened my perspectives on effective solutions and coalition building in rural areas. I am excited to carry all of the skills and knowledge I gained from my time in RHI into public health graduate school and beyond!"

These experiences have equipped Clara to pursue a Master of Public Health at Emory University, with the long-term goal of returning to rural Alabama to expand access to quality healthcare.

[Read More](#)



RHI Graduate Student Spotlight

Anna Beth Gandy is a graduate student in clinical mental health counseling and a Graduate Assistant with the Rural Health Initiative. In this role, she supports programs addressing mental health disparities in rural communities, with a focus on community engagement, education, and increasing awareness of barriers to care.

"Serving as a graduate assistant with the AU Rural Health Initiative has been one of the most life-giving and formative experiences of my graduate journey. Walking alongside rural communities, listening to their stories, and witnessing both resilience and need has not only deepened my passion for mental health but also shaped who I am as a future counselor and advocate."

She collaborates with community partners, helps coordinate outreach efforts, and contributes to initiatives that promote holistic well-being across the lifespan. Anna Beth is particularly interested in the intersection of mental health, lifestyle factors, and community support systems, and is passionate about equipping individuals with practical tools to improve overall health. Alongside her work, she is gaining clinical experience as a counselor-in-training, with a focus on bridging clinical practice and community-based care to ensure services are accessible and culturally responsive.

Stepping Into Mental Health

In continuation of its *Stepping Up for Mental Health* initiative, Clay County will be hosting a community event Saturday, May 18, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The event will showcase local leadership, collaboration, and a shared sense of community to ensure residents feel valued. The following will participate: Ashland Fire Department, Alabama Department of Health (All Kids), Bre's Ministry, SAFE Family Services Center's Parents as Teacher Program, and East Alabama Regional Planning. This community event will create awareness, reduce stigmas, and encourage mental health conversations.

Mark Your Calendar

Mental Health Session # 3 Suicide: Understanding Risk, Warning Signs, and Response

- April 24, 2026
- 11:45 a.m.
- 9–11 a.m.
- Location: Central Alabama Community College-Betty Carol Graham Technology Center, 675 Cherokee Road, Alexander City, AL 35010

Step Into Health

- April 23, 2026 at 11:45 AM to 12:45 PM
- May 14, 2026 at 11:45 AM to 12:45 PM

Stay updated on all events!

Facebook pages

Visit Chambers County:

<https://www.facebook.com/chambershealthwellness/>

Visit Greene County:

<https://www.facebook.com/p/Greene-County-Commission-100064291143692/>

Visit Hale County:

<https://www.facebook.com/HaleCountyAlabamaExtensionOffice>

Visit Sumter County:

<https://www.facebook.com/AlabamaCooperativeExtensionSystemSumterCounty/>

Visit Wilcox County: <https://www.facebook.com/WilcoxCountyAlabamaExtension/>

Ways to Connect

For Faculty

[Propose a Program](#)

[Request for Research](#)

[Search for Funding](#)

For Students

[Apply for Internship](#)

[Become a Volunteer](#)

For Community

[Ambassador Program](#)

[Become a Volunteer](#)

Our Locations

Chambers County

Chambers Community Health and Wellness Center

404 9th Ave SW, LaFayette, AL 36862

Mon–Fri: 8 AM–8 PM | Sat: 1 PM–6 PM

(334) 459-0173

Ms. Leah Sledge lns0007@auburn.edu (334) 864-9373

Ms. Debra Ward warddeb@auburn.edu (334) 459-0173

Greene County

Boligee Community Center, 17404 County Road 20, Boligee, AL 35443

Mon–Fri: 9 AM–6 PM

Ms. Iris Sermon — (334) 844-5442 | ics0017@auburn.edu

Hale County

Akron Public Library, 207 1st Ave South, Akron, AL 35441

Tue: 8 AM–5 PM | Wed & Thu: 8 AM–12 PM | Fri: 5 PM–8 PM

Ms. LaTarsha Tubbs — (334) 844-4017 | lct0012@auburn.edu

Sumter County

Gainesville Municipal Complex, 10900 State St, Gainesville, AL 35464

Mon–Fri: 8 AM–6 PM

Ms. Shakeria Williams — (334) 844-5029 | ssw0046@auburn.edu

Wilcox County

Elijah Tracey Shaw III Community Center, 17349 AL-5, Catherine, AL 36728

Regular Hours:

Mon/Wed/Fri: 9 AM–1 PM | Tue/Thu: 1 PM–6 PM

Shanicqa Davis — (334) 844-3011 | smd0122@auburn.edu

Give Now

Check out our socials for more information!



Auburn University Outreach and Alabama Cooperative Extension System are addressing significant health disparities across rural Alabama in partnership with the Colleges of Pharmacy, Nursing, Human Sciences, Liberal Arts and with full engagement of the communities involved.



AUBURN
UNIVERSITY

Outreach

Auburn University Office of Public Service | 101 O.D. Smith Hall | Auburn, AL 36849 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!