

# Greenbrier County Health Alliance

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A grasstops and grassroots partnership for health equity in rural West Virginia

## County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County



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## Greenbrier County, West Virginia

Greenbrier County is the second largest county in West Virginia, covering over 1,000 square miles. With its lush forests, green hills and valleys, and small farms and pastures, Greenbrier County is comprised of 16 rural communities, each with its own unique economy and culture. Within Greenbrier County, many communities do not have the resources needed to support residents' health and well-being. Healthcare services, businesses, and the tourism industry are concentrated in Lewisburg, the county seat and home of the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine (WVSOM), the state's largest medical school. Communities in the Meadow River Valley area, on the other hand, have been significantly impacted by declines in the coal and timber industries, a lack of government and business investment, and recent floods. In many communities, schools, clinics, and grocery stores are half an hour or more away by car. The lack of a robust public-transportation system makes it challenging for many residents to access health-care services or a full-service grocery store. Similar to other regions with a history of natural-resource and manufacturing-based economies, measures of health and quality of life in Greenbrier County and throughout Appalachia tend to be worse than the United States' average.

### Building Rural Leadership

In 2015, the WVSOM Center for Rural and Community Health formed the Greenbrier County Health Alliance (Health Alliance) with support from the West Virginia Clinical and Translational Science Institute to promote health equity among Greenbrier County's rural communities. The Health Alliance advances its work through a partnership of "grasstops" (organizational partners) and "grassroots" (Community Ambassadors). For the Health Alliance, health equity means collaborating with communities at a grassroots level to assess and determine local needs and implement community-driven solutions.



*Greenbrier County landscape*

The Community Ambassador Program is the heart of the Health Alliance's health equity work. Community Ambassadors are volunteers who want to advance change in their towns and communities by partnering with residents on projects that promote health equity. At least once a year, the Health Alliance awards \$1,000 mini-grants to over a dozen Community Ambassadors, who work to implement community-defined projects. As Sally Hurst, former executive director of the Health Alliance, explains, "The Health Alliance invited rural communities to identify what they wanted to work on and to define how they wanted to engage." In rural communities where funding for community improvement efforts is sparse, the Health Alliance's mini-grants are seed money for local solutions that grow through mutual support and leveraged resources among the Health Alliance's network of Community Ambassadors and organizational partners.



**Established in 2015**

Every person in every community in Greenbrier County has a fair and just opportunity to reach their greatest potential for health.

#### **GREENBRIER COUNTY, WV**

**Geography:** Rural

**Population:** 34,662

**People of color:** 7%

**Median Household Income:** \$43,600

***“Community Ambassadors are folks that know the community and are known by the community. The knowledge they bring to the table is most valuable to the Alliance.”***

*—Dave Lumsden, GHCA Board Member*

## Bringing Health to the Community

Community Ambassadors aim to “change the environment to change the culture.” Using their local relationships and expertise, ambassadors engage those who experience the most barriers to resources—people experiencing poverty, seniors, individuals with a disability, and residents without access to transportation.

The ambassadors may utilize mini-grant funds to activate underused spaces to promote health, such as establishing a joint-use agreement with a school so that the gym is available for resident use or creating a senior playground. For geographically remote communities with limited access to healthy food, ambassadors bring healthy, affordable food to residents by partnering with farmer’s markets to deliver extra produce to homebound residents and teaching families how to grow container gardens.

Fostering social cohesion and connection is key to health and well-being for rural communities in Greenbrier County. One of the first Community Ambassador’s projects involved tearing down a wall in a community center to create a larger space in which seniors can meet and share meals. In 2021, the inaugural Greenbrier Valley Pride parade celebrated and brought visibility to the LGBTQ community; this event was seeded and led by the Community Ambassadors.

***“It’s not just about physical health; it’s getting people together—it’s about emotional and spiritual health.”***

*—Community Ambassador*

The network of Community Ambassadors generates mutual support across the county. In quarterly meetings, ambassadors not only learn from one another but also leverage one another’s resources to support each other’s mini-projects. For example, when the Race Matters group hosted a block party for the African American community, other ambassadors brought a demonstration garden to teach people how to grow their own vegetables and held Tai Chi classes. As one ambassador put it, “The grant money multiplies 10-fold with volunteerism in the community.”

### Loretta Young, Community Ambassador for Race Matters

Loretta grew up in Ronceverte and was one of the first Black children to integrate into the elementary school. She has always had to be “mindful of who I am, where I am in American history.” After working at UNICEF in New York City, she returned to Greenbrier to help address health disparities among the Black community.

As the Race Matters Community Ambassador, she lifts up the priorities of Greenbrier’s relatively small Black and Latin communities to the Health Alliance. Recently, their community survey showed that diabetes and COVID-19-vaccine uptake are top priorities.

The block party at Dorie Miller Park, funded by a mini-grant, is just one of their many initiatives to promote culturally relevant and healthy food, physical activity, and connection in order to prevent and manage diabetes. Race Matters is also partnering with Black churches to host activities, such as hypertension and diabetes management trainings, line-dance classes, and the creation of a cookbook for healthy soul food.

When a Latino community member called Loretta to tell her that the pharmacy asked for their green card, the Race Matters group spread the word to the Latin community about free COVID-19-vaccine clinics funded by the Partnership of African American Churches. They also held a workshop for immigrants on knowing one’s rights.

## We Are the Data

Reflecting on the history of the Health Alliance, Sally Hurst explained that “to know how to move the needle on issues, we needed to know where we were coming from.” So Health Alliance leaders turned to the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps (CHR&R) data and model to guide their priority setting and gain a shared understanding of community issues. The Health Alliance also uses and adapts CHR&R resources, including the County Health Rankings data, the County Health Rankings model, and What Works for Health, to train the Community Ambassadors on social determinants of health, health equity, and evidence-based strategies to inform their projects.

Given the different priorities of each community, ambassadors draw from their own lived experience and community insights to inform projects. They receive training from the WVSOM staff on how to gather their own data, such as conducting surveys and focus groups, to understand community needs, assets, and priorities. An early cohort of ambassadors collaboratively created an asset map to understand what and where healthy assets, such as clinics and walking trails, exist across Greenbrier County. The mapping laid bare the gaps and helped the Health Alliance discern where to focus their efforts.

***“The Alliance recognizes diversity in each of the areas we serve, unique situations [in which] we cannot use existing data...[so] we are the data. We are the people who are hands on with the people.”***

—Community Ambassador

Ambassador Communities	
Towns	Priority Populations or Projects
Alderson	Race Matters
Renick	People with Disabilities
Quinwood	Farmers
Ronceverte	Greenbrier Valley Pride
White Sulphur Springs	The Marvel Center



**Debbie Sizemore, Community Ambassador for Williamsburg**

Debbie has always been committed to the health of her community. She grew up in Greenbrier County and worked as a community health coordinator. She joined the Health Alliance from day 1 because she believes that change comes from the bottom up instead of top-down. As she explains, “What is unique about the Health Alliance is that each community gets to determine what their issues are and what they want to focus their efforts on.”

Debbie is a Community Ambassador for Williamsburg, a town that lacks gas stations, stores, and schools. People travel over half an hour by bus and car to get to school and work. Yet they are a resilient community whose members take care of each other. When Williamsburg lost their ambulance, they taught community members to administer basic CPR and first aid because the nearest ambulance takes 40 minutes to reach their town.

She coleads Williamsburg Works on Wellness to bring physical activity and nutrition opportunities to youth and seniors. Bike Rodeos teach young people how to ride and fix a bike. Daytime Tai Chi and indoor-walking classes for seniors offer a space for connection and movement.

### Carolyn Rudley, Phyllis Cantrell, and Tony Benedetto

—Community Ambassadors for People with Disabilities



Carolyn, Phyllis, and Tony are champions for the health and well-being of residents with disabilities. They work at Gateway, a nonprofit that provides vocational training and job placement for individuals with disabilities.

Their first mini-grant project fostered understanding and connection between the disability community and WVSOM medical students. For the first time, medical students learned from disabled individuals about how to talk to, interact with, and care for them, ultimately influencing the quality of care that disabled individuals receive.

More recently, to address food insecurity and promote healthy eating among the disabled community, they transformed an unused swimming pool into the Jardin, a community garden of vegetables and flowers. The food that was grown was used for healthy snacks for clients. When there was an excess of tomatoes, the clients learned how to can them! The Jardin is also a place in which all residents can connect and be in nature.

## Strength in Numbers

But by creating an alliance among “grasstops” (organizations and agencies) and “grassroots” (Community Ambassadors) across its many small rural communities, the county can align its priorities and make the case for rural community development efforts. The WVSOM staff offer training and support for Health Alliance members, including Community Ambassadors, to leverage data and write grants to gain funding to improve community health.

Over the years, the Health Alliance has received multiple grants to seed Community Ambassador-led projects and to fund or support multisector efforts. For example, the Meadow River Valley Community Center in Rupert was born out of the collective envisioning of three nonprofits: the Meadow River Valley Association, the Marvel Center, and the Greenbrier County Health Alliance. This led the Meadow River Valley Association to develop a five-year strategic plan and receive one of six competitive grants to become a “Blueprint Community” through a program by the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh. This Blueprint Community grant is designed to support local leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and strategic planning to create long-term impact on the economic well-being and quality of life for underresourced communities. Once a large school campus wrecked by flooding, the Meadow River Valley Community Center will be instrumental in revitalizing the Meadow River Valley area with its community kitchen, small-business incubation space, early childhood development center, medical clinic, and low-income senior housing.

*“Do not forget Appalachia...Given the long history we have, it will take time and resources to get us the quality of life and transformation that each of us deserves.”*

— Loretta Young, Community Ambassador

### Greenbrier County Health Alliance

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