

Rural Health Report

*A Sustainable Initiative
for Rural Georgia*

January 2026



Children'sSM
Healthcare of Atlanta



At Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, we are steadfast in our commitment to creating the best possible outcomes for children throughout our state. As the only pediatric hospital system exclusively focused on kids and the only nationally ranked pediatric system in Georgia, we are here to ensure kids from all 159 counties have access to leading care and pediatric research. Families trust us with their children, and last year, they came to us more than 1.2 million times—more than 3,000 kids per day—to receive care for everything from broken bones to complex heart defects.

At Children's, we understand that a lack of access to quality care in rural communities is a crisis that needs immediate attention.

Towns all across Georgia are home to special, tight-knit communities that fill vital roles in our state's economy. Unfortunately, lack of access to high-quality medical care in many areas can make it challenging to raise a healthy family in such areas. More than half of Georgia's 120 rural counties do not have a single pediatrician practicing within county lines.

Together with Mercer University School of Medicine and the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center, we are expanding our pediatric leadership and training to ensure every child in Georgia has access to quality pediatric care close to home. Through a dedicated fund of \$200 million, our rural health initiative is a sustainable and long-term investment that we are making for the kids of Georgia today and into the future. By nurturing children into healthy, thriving adults, we empower the future of Georgia—driving our economy, shaping our growth and enriching our culture.

In sharing this report, we are excited to provide a closer look at how we are working to better understand and support the needs of families in Georgia's rural communities.

Sincerely,

Donna Hyland
CEO, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta



Children's and Mercer University School of Medicine proudly announced their affiliation to address pediatric healthcare access in rural Georgia at the Georgia State Capitol.

Our investment in rural health

By leveraging our unique expertise, Children's is working to help ensure **every child in Georgia** has access to pediatric care closer to home, no matter where they live.

Children's has established a dedicated and long-term sustainable fund of **\$200 million** to support rural pediatric healthcare. Thanks to this allocated fund, our rural health initiative and its associated programs have a **viable, long-term impact** on rural areas.

Children's is supporting

Mercer University School of Medicine (MUSM)
and the **Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center (GRHIC)**

as they continue to establish programs with rural hospitals and pediatricians with the aim of improving access to pediatric care closer to home.

Children's has made a significant financial pledge commitment to **Atlanta Ronald McDonald House Charities** to allow them to further their mission of nurturing the health and well-being of children and families, and provide a home away from home for those who must travel to Atlanta for healthcare.



The new Ronald McDonald House on the Arthur M. Blank Hospital campus opened on Dec. 10, 2025, to support the growing demand for complex medical treatment in our state. Pictured: Tracey Atwater, President and CEO of Ronald McDonald House Atlanta (left) and Donna Hyland, CEO of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta (right).

PODCAST: PEDIATRIC HEALTHCARE DESERTS IN RURAL GEORGIA

Listen to this episode of Hope and Will: A Parenting Podcast from Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, in which Dean Jean Sumner of MUSM; Marc Welsh, Vice President of Child Advocacy at Children's; and Lauren Brooker, a medical school scholarship recipient, share unique insight into our joint rural health initiative.



Investing in the rural providers of tomorrow

Rural pediatrician pipeline support

More than half of Georgia's rural counties don't have a pediatrician. This puts our kids in rural Georgia at risk of undiagnosed illnesses and preventable injuries. Given the identified need for more pediatricians throughout Georgia, Children's has committed to funding scholarships through a program at MUSM for medical students specializing in pediatrics who commit to serving in rural Georgia for at least four years after residency.

We are the only pediatric hospital in Georgia that has developed a sustainable plan to help increase the pediatrician workforce in rural areas.

- Through the **Children's Rural Pediatrics Scholarship Program**, Children's funds **10 full-tuition scholarships** annually. To date, Children's has funded a total of **27 full-tuition scholarships**.

PEDIATRICIANS IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Starting in 2026, the first pediatric scholars will have completed their medical training and will begin caring for kids in rural communities. This includes two graduates from the inaugural cohort of scholarship recipients who graduated from MUSM in 2023:

- Dr. Jonathan Edgy
- Dr. Nelliena Young

A scholar's journey to practicing in rural Georgia

Dr. Nelliena Young

Raised in Albany, Nelliena aspired to practice pediatrics from a young age. Upon graduating from MUSM, she completed her pediatric residency at Morehouse School of Medicine and rotated at our three Children's hospitals: Arthur M. Blank Hospital, Hughes Spalding and Scottish Rite.



To learn more about her journey, watch this video.

FEATURED SCHOLAR



Meet Jordan Simmons

Jordan was raised in Evans County, a rural county that does not have a pediatrician. As an MUSM student and rural scholar, Jordan has received specialized training, preparing her for a variety of patients and cases she may encounter in communities she will serve in the future.

"The Children's Rural Pediatric Scholarship has made it possible for me to make a meaningful impact in the lives of children who have been underserved for so long. By alleviating the financial burden of medical school, this scholarship allows me to focus on my passion for improving access to pediatric care in the communities that need it most. Beyond the financial support, I've had the invaluable opportunity to train with rural pediatricians across Georgia, gain insight into providing care in these settings, and observe how they navigate the unique challenges of rural pediatric medicine."

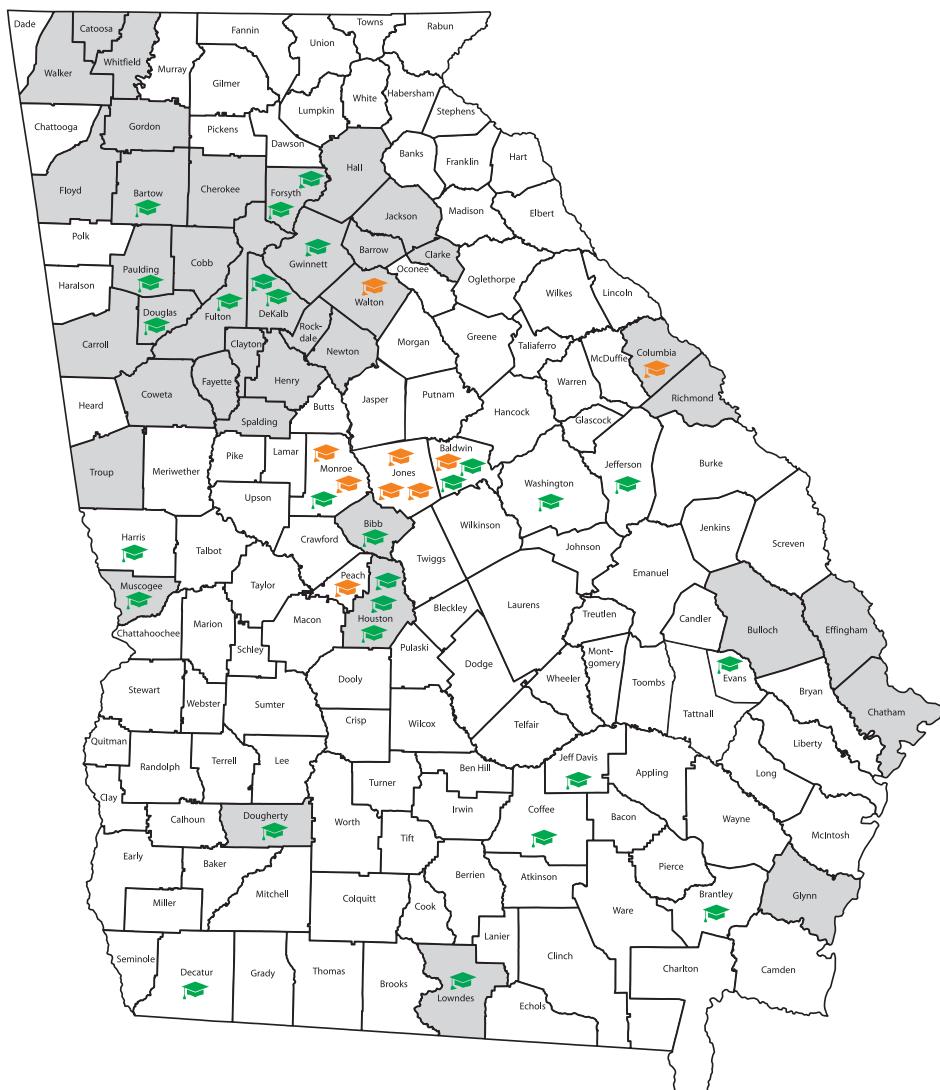


Marriage and family therapy in rural communities

Established in 2024, the **Children's Marriage and Family Therapy Scholarship**

Program awards scholars who have a strong commitment to becoming marriage and family therapists and serving in rural, medically underserved areas of Georgia. Upon completion of their education, scholars will be required to work full time for two continuous years in an approved rural Georgia county, and to serve the surrounding organizations or counties in need. To date, this program has funded **10 scholarships**.

Home counties of scholarship recipients



Our scholars

-  Home counties of Children's Rural Pediatrics Scholarship Program recipients (2023 to 2025)
-  Home counties of Children's Marriage and Family Therapy Scholarship Program recipients (2024 and 2025)

Gray shading represents non-rural counties

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Four of these scholarship recipients are already serving rural communities as of January 2026:

- Audrey Pugh
- Lakeshie Robinson
- Haley Troup
- Haley Waters



Meet Haley Waters

Haley grew up in a rural community and recognizes the need for fostering an interdisciplinary approach to care in rural areas. As of September 2025, Haley has been working as a marriage and family therapist.

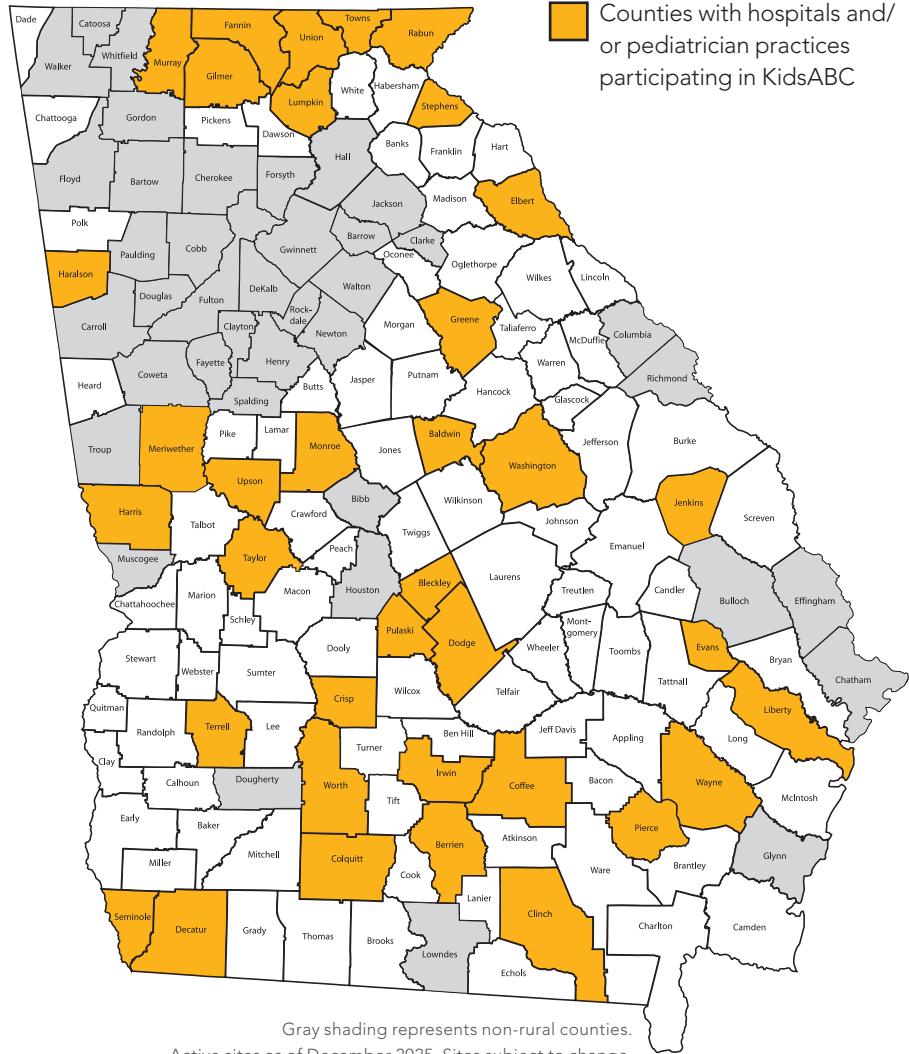
"This scholarship program does an incredible job preparing future mental health professionals to make a difference in rural Georgia. Now working as a therapist, I hope to bring awareness to the need to increase access to quality mental health care by equipping more clinicians to serve in rural communities."

Strengthening pediatrics in rural Georgia

MUSM, GRHIC and Children's formed the **Kids Alliance for Better Care (KidsABC)**, which provides avenues of support for Georgia's rural hospitals, school districts, pediatricians and rural family practitioners to keep care for kids close to home. The goal is for kids in rural Georgia to have access to the care they deserve: the best care possible, which is care guided by Children's in their own communities.



Now actively working with
hospitals and pediatricians in
36 rural counties



Transformational work in rural communities



"Rural Georgia is an essential part of our state. Healthcare plays an integral role in helping rural communities and the people who live and work there be successful. Caring for children is particularly important. When you positively impact the health of a child, you not only change that child's future; you also improve the health of their family and the community. Our joint initiative with Children's Healthcare of Atlanta brings hope for better access to healthcare, economic development, improved outcomes in rural communities, and possibilities of growth. We are proud of this truly transformational work."

— Dr. Jean R. Sumner, Dean, Mercer University School of Medicine

Rural hospital support

Rural hospitals currently face a challenge in their ability to treat and keep pediatric patients in their communities. KidsABC supports rural hospitals to better prepare them to respond to pediatric patients in their emergency departments. Through the alliance, participating rural hospitals undergo an assessment based on standards established by the National Pediatric Readiness Project to gauge their pediatric readiness, with a focus on staff competency, facility readiness and the presence of pediatric-focused clinical guidelines. Upon completion of the assessment, participating hospitals receive applicable training for hospital staff and assistance establishing guidelines/protocols.



Each year since 2023, a new cohort of rural hospitals has joined KidsABC. Currently, there are **22 rural hospitals** participating in the program.

Hospitals participating in KidsABC

- Clinch Memorial Hospital—Clinch County
- Coffee Regional Medical Center—Coffee County
- Crisp Regional Hospital—Crisp County
- Dodge County Hospital—Dodge County
- Taylor Regional Hospital—Pulaski County
- Mountain Lakes Medical Center—Rabun County
- Upson Regional Medical Center—Upson County
- Washington County Regional Medical Center—Washington County
- Bleckley Memorial Hospital—Bleckley County
- Colquitt Regional Medical Center—Colquitt County
- Elbert Memorial Hospital—Elbert County
- Evans Memorial Hospital—Evans County
- Monroe County Hospital—Monroe County
- Wayne Memorial Hospital—Wayne County
- Donalsonville Hospital—Seminole County
- Stephens County Hospital—Stephens County
- Jenkins County Medical Center—Jenkins County
- Liberty Regional Medical Center—Liberty County
- Warm Springs Medical Center—Meriwether County
- St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital—Greene County
- SGMC Berrien—Berrien County
- Irwin County Hospital—Irwin County



Colquitt Regional Hospital hosted a simulation training to enhance pediatric emergency readiness.



Exceptional care, close to home

"The mission of Coffee Regional Medical Center is to provide exceptional care and wellness close to home. KidsABC has provided our team with education, training, and access to pediatric care protocols and practices that have helped our team meet our mission and care for the youngest and often most vulnerable members of our community. We are proud to be part of KidsABC and applaud their efforts to support pediatric care in rural communities."

— Vicki Lewis, president and CEO of Coffee Regional Medical Center



The Coffee Regional Medical Center emergency department was recognized for its commitment to strengthening pediatric emergency care in Coffee County in 2024.

Enhancing care in our rural communities

Rural pediatrician support

Rural pediatricians often feel isolated with little access to subspecialty support, after-hours support and regular clinical updates. This initiative provides support and offers provider training. MUSM conducts an assessment to determine core training needs.



Each year since 2023, a new cohort of rural pediatric and family medicine practices has joined KidsABC. Currently, there are **18 rural practices** participating in the program.

Pediatric practices participating in KidsABC

- Eastman Pediatric Clinic & New Life Pediatrics—Dodge County
- Children's Healthcare Center of Sandersville—Washington County
- Sylvester Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine PC—Worth County
- Kids 1st Pediatrics—Baldwin County
- Crisp Regional Pediatrics—Crisp County
- Medical Center of Elberton—Elbert County
- Mercer Medicine—Harris and Taylor Counties
- Dawson Medical Center—Terrell County
- The Pediatric Center—Wayne and Pierce Counties
- Upson Family Physician Thomaston—Upson County
- Memorial Pediatrics—Decatur County
- North Georgia Family Medicine—Towns, Union and Fannin Counties
- Dr. Bill's Kids—Bleckley County
- 3:16 Family Medicine: Kids' Corner—Haralson County
- Georgia Mountains Health—Murray, Lumpkin, Fannin and Gilmer Counties
- Children's Healthcare Center, LLC—Washington County
- Southern Family Medicine—Evans County
- Coffee Regional Hospital Pediatric Group—Coffee County



Dr. Jennifer Stroud

"Through the expertise of Children's physicians and their collaboration, we've been able to offer high-quality pediatric care right here at home—something that once felt out of reach for a community of our size. Families who previously had to travel long distances for specialized care can now access the help they need without leaving town. For those who do still need to travel for more advanced care, the Children's team has made the process so much smoother, easing the stress for parents and ensuring that every child receives the best care possible—both here and at Children's."

— Dr. Jennifer Stroud, pediatrician in Douglas and affiliated with Coffee Regional Medical Center

Calls to Children's

Children's provides a direct line for rural providers participating in KidsABC to seek consultative support from Children's pediatric specialists.



Our teams received **366** calls to the Rural Access Line from July 2024 to June 2025.

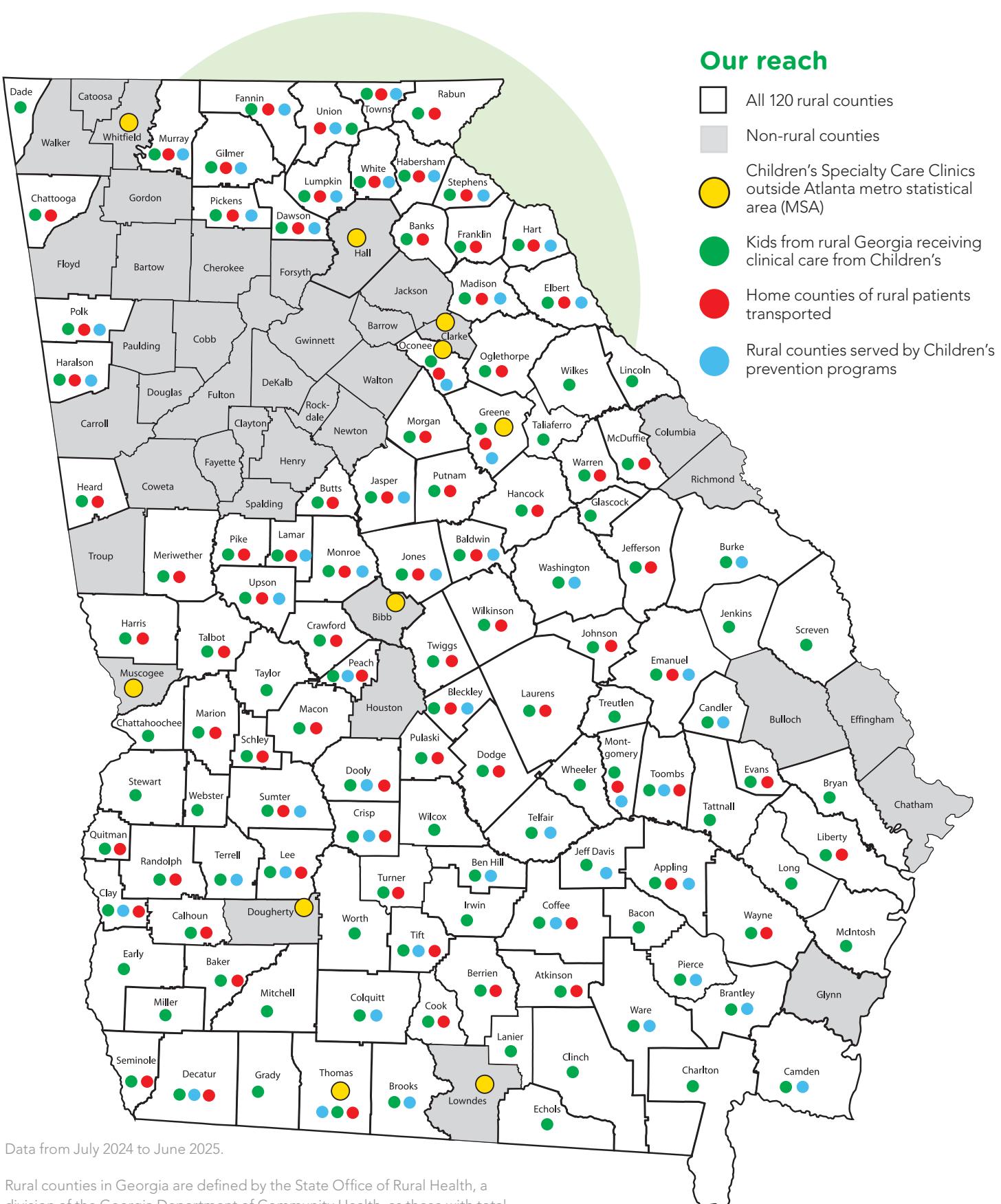
Behavioral and mental health support

Behavioral and mental health support continues to be identified as an urgent need across the country, with a specific need to create access points for rural providers and schools to connect to mental health professionals. MUSM and Children's work with schools, pediatricians and hospitals to develop a comprehensive approach to pediatric mental health.



This support is currently offered in **four rural school districts**, with mental health screening and services.

Our reach in rural Georgia



Kids across Georgia come to Children's for care



Children's cares for patients from all **159** counties in Georgia, including all **120** rural counties



Arthur M. Blank Hospital has **the only Level I pediatric trauma center** in Georgia, and Scottish Rite is a Level II pediatric trauma center. This means we're equipped to handle the most acute and severely injured kids in our state.

Our care to patients from rural communities



We cared for
25,903
patients



who came to
Children's for a total of
75,121 visits



3,239 patients received
inpatient care
at our facilities



Our team of pediatric
surgeons performed
5,558
surgeries



Our pediatric-trained
transport team facilitated
447
transports

57% of our rural patients are on Medicaid, PeachCare for Kids or unable to cover the cost of their care. That's about **15,000 kids**.

Patient and program data from July 2024 to June 2025.

Promoting an environment where kids can thrive

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Strong4Life

Through Strong4Life, the prevention arm of Children's, we provide training and resources to local schools, early care centers and community organizations focused on impacting kids across Georgia. Strong4Life.com was developed by our team of specialists as a free, easy-to-access resource to help Georgia's families raise healthy, safe, resilient kids.



Our prevention programs
reached kids in
52
rural counties.



Strong4Life
worked with
38
schools and early care
centers in rural counties.

PROGRAMS IN SCHOOLS ACROSS GEORGIA

School health services

The Children's School Health Program coordinates with the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia Association of School Nurses and the Georgia Department of Public Health to provide training, education, technical assistance and communication on clinical pediatric topics.

Children's reached **71** school health professionals
from **38** rural counties.



Project S.A.V.E.

Created in 2004, Project S.A.V.E. (Sudden cardiac arrest, Awareness, Vision for prevention, Education) is a Children's-led program designed with the mission of preventing sudden cardiac arrest in children, teens and young adults throughout Georgia.

Marcus Autism Center's School Consultation Program

Through Marcus Autism Center, Children's provides consultation, trainings and professional development for school systems to effectively serve students with educational needs and behavioral challenges. All school consultants are Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs).

Patient and program data from July 2024 to June 2025.

Meet Mattelyn, from Morgan County

As the only nationally ranked children's hospital in Georgia, we see patients from across the state. Every year, we care for kids from all 159 counties in Georgia, including kids from all 120 rural counties. Mattelyn is one of them.



On Memorial Day 2023, 10-year-old Mattelyn was riding on an ATV with her big sister and some friends around their family's farm. The group went too fast around a curve and **the ATV flipped over, landing on Mattelyn**. Her sister, although also hurt from the accident, was able to call for help, and their mother, Tori, immediately called 911. Mattelyn was quickly transported to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta with a collapsed lung, broken ribs, a broken collar bone and two leg fractures.

Doctors, surgeons and supporting staff at Children's collaborated to provide exceptional care for Mattelyn, which included four surgeries. Pediatric Plastic Surgeon Colin Brady, MD, performed a procedure called a free flap, where he transferred muscle and skin from her thigh to reconstruct her ankle.

During her **three weeks of recovery at our Scottish Rite Hospital**, Mattelyn worked with her physical therapy team three times a day to regain her ability to walk.

Mattelyn is now 13 and thriving; she's come a long way from learning how to walk again. She's an active teenager who loves cheerleading and being outdoors.

We were immediately so thankful for how quickly the trauma team at Children's cared for Mattelyn. It felt like we were surrounded by angels. I don't think Mattelyn would've made the recovery she made if she wasn't at Children's.

—Tori, Mattelyn's mother

