



www.mercer.edu

April 17, 2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact: Jennifer Fairfield-Williams, (478) 301-4037 or fairfield_j@mercer.edu

Mercer University School of Medicine and its Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center Expand Major Rural Pediatric Health Care Initiative to Newly Selected Hospitals

MACON — [Mercer University School of Medicine \(MUSM\)](#) and its [Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center \(GRHIC\)](#) are expanding their rural pediatric health initiative to additional rural counties across Georgia with the selection of five hospitals.

In February 2023, the School of Medicine and GRHIC, with the support of [Children's Healthcare of Atlanta \(Children's\)](#), launched a major initiative to strengthen access to pediatric health care in rural communities across the state of Georgia. This effort established the [Kids Alliance for Better Care \(KidsABC\)](#) and initially involved hospitals, pediatricians and school systems in 12 rural Georgia counties.

Georgia rural hospitals currently face many challenges regarding their ability to treat and keep pediatric patients in their communities. To better equip rural hospitals to respond to pediatric patients in the emergency departments, KidsABC assists rural hospitals with meeting milestones to significantly enhance the care they already provide for their youngest patients. The goal is to keep care for kids close to home. For year two of the initiative, MUSM and GRHIC have selected five additional hospitals:

- 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

“Growing the KidsABC program is essential to continue expanding and strengthening the care pediatric patients receive at home, in their hospitals and in their pediatrician’s office,” said MUSM Dean Jean R. Sumner, M.D., FACP. “The plan is to build on the success of the first year of KidsABC. We believe the relationships and the work done will be transformative for rural Georgia. The commitment from Children’s is significant and will expand the local and regional health care landscape now and for years to come. The School of Medicine and its Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center are honored to work with rural physicians and health care professionals to bring needed resources and training so they can provide the highest level of care to their community.”

“The Kids Alliance for Better Care program made amazing strides in impacting the children of Georgia in its inaugural year,” said Donna Hyland, chief executive officer, Children’s. “As KidsABC enters its second year, Children’s looks forward to continuing its support of Mercer University School of Medicine and the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center (GRHIC). They are a trusted community partner and well suited to guide KidsABC in addressing the current and future needs of Georgia’s rural pediatric population.”

KidsABC brings together a network of rural hospital emergency departments, pediatric offices, regional and state pediatric tertiary care hospitals, and school systems to address the challenge of health care access, which many rural families face. KidsABC participants are equipped with the necessary tools, protocols, training, and research, so families have access to subspecialty care, mental health care, and emergency medical care in their hometowns.

Programs within KidsABC address the challenges of distance to specialty care and limited resources. KidsABC emphasizes the importance of early intervention in achieving positive outcomes. Children’s has provided specialized pediatric clinical guidance to launch and sustain these programs. Specific work related to this initiative includes:

- **Rural hospital emergency department support** - Through KidsABC, rural hospitals receive the training and support in building regional pediatric networks. This support helps the hospitals respond to pediatric patients in their emergency departments more effectively. In the pilot’s inaugural year, the project included eight rural hospitals.
- **Rural pediatrician support** - This initiative provides physician-to-physician telehealth support and offers provider training for physicians, advanced practice practitioners and nurses. Five rural pediatricians practicing in six rural counties were part of the pilot.
- **Behavioral and mental health support** – MUSM, GRHIC, and Children’s worked with schools to deliver mental health and wellness assessments to students and develop interventions appropriate for local needs. Virtual mental health counseling is made available as well as training in suicide awareness and prevention and stress management.

Additionally, to increase the health care workforce in rural communities, the Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta Rural Pediatric Scholarship Program was established to provide 10 scholarships each year for MUSM pediatric medical students who have committed to living and serving in rural communities. This year, a new Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta Marriage and Family Therapy Scholarship Program was established to provide scholarships for marriage and family therapy students who are committed to living and working in rural Georgia and providing mental health services to rural children.

KidsABC programs will continue expanding with the selection of additional rural hospitals, pediatric and family medicine offices, and school systems in rural counties across Georgia for the next eight years as part of the ten-year initiative.

About Mercer University School of Medicine (Macon, Savannah and Columbus)

Mercer University’s School of Medicine was established in 1982 to educate physicians and health professionals to meet the primary care and health care needs of rural and medically underserved areas of Georgia. Today, more than 60 percent of graduates currently practice in the state of Georgia, and of those, more than 80 percent are practicing in rural or medically underserved areas of Georgia. Mercer medical students benefit from a problem-based medical

education program that provides early patient care experiences. Such an academic environment fosters the early development of clinical problem-solving and instills in each student an awareness of the place of the basic medical sciences in medical practice. The School opened additional four-year M.D. campuses in Savannah in 2008 and in Columbus in 2021, and a clinical campus in Valdosta in 2024. Following their second year, students participate in core clinical clerkships at the School's primary teaching hospitals: Atrium Health Navicent The Medical Center and Piedmont Macon Medical Center in Macon; Memorial Health University Medical Center in Savannah; Piedmont Columbus Regional Hospital and St. Francis Hospital in Columbus; and SGMC Health in Valdosta. The School also offers master's degrees in preclinical sciences and family therapy and Ph.D.s in biomedical sciences and rural health sciences.

About Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center

In 2018, Georgia lawmakers dedicated special funds to establish a new Rural Health Innovation Center tasked with confronting the complex health care challenges and wellness disparities facing rural communities. Mercer University School of Medicine was awarded the grant funds in 2019 and formally established the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center on its Macon campus. MUSM boasts a longstanding commitment to serving rural Georgia's health needs, with a mission to educate physicians dedicated to tackling the health challenges in rural Georgia. The Rural Health Innovation Center serves as a critical resource to rural communities to improve access and effectiveness of health care by offering research, collaboration, and training opportunities.

About Children's Healthcare of Atlanta

As the only freestanding pediatric healthcare system in Georgia, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta is the trusted leader in caring for kids. The not-for-profit organization's mission is to make kids better today and healthier tomorrow through more than 60 pediatric specialties and programs, top healthcare professionals, and leading research and technology. Children's is one of the largest pediatric clinical care providers in the country, managing more than 1.1 million patient visits annually at three hospitals (Egleston, Scottish Rite and Hughes Spalding), Marcus Autism Center, the Center for Advanced Pediatrics, urgent care centers and neighborhood locations. Consistently ranked among the top children's hospitals by U.S. News & World Report, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta has impacted the lives of kids in Georgia, across the United States and around the world for more than 100 years thanks to generous support from the community.

###