

## **Connection Takes Root at Annual Northwest Arkansas Health Summit**

National and state leaders in health care and community outreach recently convened at the Fayetteville Town Center to engage, learn, and collaborate on solutions to improve access to care across Arkansas.

The April 2 summit kicked off with a keynote discussion by Neel Shah, chief medical officer of Maven Clinic, and nurse midwife Cara Osborne about innovative maternal health approaches. The Maven Clinic is the world's largest digital clinic for women's and family health, with a care model that serves 24 million people globally.

Following Shah and Osborne's presentation, state secretaries and officials convened for a panel on rural health transformation. Included in the panel were Secretary Jim Hudson of the Department of Finance and Administration, Secretary Janet Mann of the Department of Human Services, Secretary Renee Mallory of the Department of Health, and Surgeon General Kay Chandler. The panel was moderated by Mellie Boagni, president, CEO, and founder of the Arkansas Rural Health Partnership.

"I think the goal would be every Arkansan in rural Arkansas would have access to the services and the basic needs, of every day," Mallory said. "Now, how we get there is the big question, but we start at the bottom, and we work our way up. That's what we've always done. That's what we'll continue to do."

This year's summit featured several breakout sessions centered around collaborative approaches that are improving health in Arkansas. Sessions included:

- **Stronger Together: Collaboration, Research, and Community Health Impact**, presented by Cassie Cochran, Susan Ward-Jones, M.D., and Bri Morris Gilbert, Pharm.D.
- **Food is Medicine: Nutrition and Innovative Approaches to Health in Arkansas**, presented by Eliza Short, Ph.D., Lisa Stafford, MHA, M.S., and Lanita Shaverd, Pharm.D.
- **From Pregnancy to Parenthood: Supporting the Mental Health of Arkansas Mothers**, presented by Erin Jefferson, M.D., Shona Ray-Griffith, and Wendy Davis, Ph.D.
- **Support at the Front Lines: Developing a Strengthened Community Health Workforce**, presented by Rosalinda Medrano Green, Carol Silva Morales, and Melli Boagni.
- **Food is Medicine: An Interactive Roundtable Session**, facilitated by Jenny Bogard.

Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., director of the Institute for Community Health Innovation, recognized the Community Health Centers of Arkansas (CHCA) and Cassie Cochran of the Arkansas Department of Health for their commitment and dedication to improving health across Arkansas.

Cochran, deputy director of public health programs at the Arkansas Department of Health, was awarded the Champion for Community Health Award, recognizing her visionary leadership to advance community health throughout the state.

“Cassie Cochran has led the Arkansas Department of Health local health units in a way that has transformed access to health care, and she’s done so through some really unique partnerships,” said McElfish. “She is a phenomenal leader. She is a friend to me and all Arkansans, and we are so fortunate to have her in our state.”

The Community Anchor Award was presented to CHCA and its chief executive officer, Lanita Shaverd, in celebration of CHCA’s transformation of health in Arkansas.

“The Community Health Centers of Arkansas have been such an amazing partner to bring innovation to the most rural parts of the state,” McElfish said. “They provide health care to some of the most rural and underserved community members across our state. They ensure that every Arkansan has access to health care, regardless of their ability to pay. To Lanita and to all the FQHCs [Federally Qualified Health Centers] across the state, we thank you for the service you provide to all Arkansans.”

CHCA is a nonprofit organization that works to expand access to affordable, quality care throughout the state, while creating a unified voice for Community Health Centers (CHCs) and the patients they serve. Since it was established in 1985, CHCA has served as a conduit for new programs, projects, and funding that supports greater access to comprehensive services for underserved populations throughout Arkansas.

The summit concluded with an additional state panel about health care policy in Arkansas. Participating in the panel were state Rep. Mary Bentley, Rep. Aaron Pilkington, and Rep. Denise Gardner. Stefanie Pawluk, executive director of the Northwest Arkansas Council’s Healthcare Transformation Division, moderated the panel.

The Northwest Arkansas Health Summit is hosted annual by the UAMS Institute for Community Health Innovation. This year’s summit also included support from Community Clinic, Heartland Forward, and Heartland Whole Health Institute.

“This year’s summit was a truly transformative experience, bringing together leaders and dedicated community members united by a shared vision for a healthier Arkansas,” said McElfish. While our rural landscape presents real challenges to accessing care, I am

confident that, through collaboration, we will drive meaningful change and build a healthier future for all Arkansans.”

To learn more about the institute, visit [communityhealth.uams.edu](https://communityhealth.uams.edu).