



### Garrett County, MD

*2017 RWJF Culture of Health Prize Winner*

## A Community Holding Hands To Bridge its Divide

Tucked between Pennsylvania and West Virginia on the far western edge of Maryland's panhandle, rural Garrett County (population 29,460) is a study in contrasts. Driving along one of its few main roads on a cool summer day, one passes fast-food restaurants and aging strip malls, small family farms, a big box store. Then a valley opens up on either side, bathed in Appalachia's green beauty.

Up at Deep Creek Lake, in the heart of the county, multimillion-dollar homes and fast-multiplying condos fuel a more than \$300 million tourism economy. Meanwhile, many county residents work seasonal and low-wage jobs at tourist-friendly restaurants, hotels and resorts, and the county faces a child-poverty rate of [19 percent, compared with 14 percent of all Maryland children](#). Dependent on industries such as health care, light manufacturing and farming, in addition to tourism, Garrett County's median household income is about two-thirds the state average.

To address the challenges and bridge economic, cultural and health divides, Garrett County has capitalized on a deep-rooted strength: Everyone seems to know everyone, and neighbors care for each other and band together. That community spirit has brought about a robust, data-driven health planning process focused on reducing disparities in housing, education, employment, income and health care so that all residents can thrive. This small town spread across farmland and country roads has found a way to enable every high school graduate to attend community college for free and has raised \$4.9 million to build a cancer center in its county seat.

The county's health planners have drawn in the most vulnerable residents — including those struggling with intergenerational poverty, chronic disease, and housing instability — county leadership, and health care and social services partners. They are encouraging participation and tracking progress using an online planning tool, [MyGarrettCounty.com](http://MyGarrettCounty.com). The multifaceted collaborative effort has earned the county a 2017 Culture of Health Prize.

“One of the good things about being small is we communicate very effectively,” says County Commissioner Jim Hinebaugh. “A lot of sharing goes on.”