

ENTERPRISE RECORD

It shouldn't be this hard to see a doctor | Guest commentary

By [Andrew Coolidge](#)

PUBLISHED: August 30, 2025 at 3:11 AM PDT

If you live Northern California, you know that seeing a doctor isn't always easy. Whether it's a six-week wait for a routine checkup, hours in the ER waiting room, or a 70-mile round trip to see a specialist, access to health care in rural Northern California has become an uphill battle.

These aren't isolated problems. They are symptoms of a rural health care system that's stretched thin — too few doctors, not enough clinics, and an unsustainable burden on families and health care professionals alike.

As someone who has served this community in elected office and continues to work with local organizations focused on rural development, I believe we need to treat this as the serious issue it is: not just a policy challenge, but a quality-of-life issue that's affecting the physical and economic well-being of our region.

Across Northern California, our health outcomes rank among the worst in the state. In counties like Butte and Yuba, we face higher than-average rates of cancer, suicide, and chronic illness. At the same time, we have some of the lowest ratios of physicians per resident. For example, many towns in our area have fewer than one primary care doctor for every 3,000 people — a far cry from what's needed.

We don't need more top-down mandates or bureaucratic red tape. What we need are practical, boots-on-the-ground solutions to bring doctors and services into our communities — and keep them here.

One successful model I've worked to support is the rural residency program led by Healthy Rural California. By training new doctors in rural areas like Butte County, we not only boost local health care capacity, but also increase the chances those doctors will stay and practice in our region. This kind of work is exactly the kind of targeted, locally driven investment that makes a difference. It respects the unique needs of rural areas and helps build up long-term stability in our health care system.

But these solutions won't succeed unless we make it easier — not harder — for medical professionals to work in rural California. That's where legislative action is needed. The legislature needs to focus on lowering burdens to care and making it easier for physicians to come and practice in the high-need areas of our state.

One area where the legislature has done the right thing is the Medical Injury Compensation Reform Act (MICRA). Since it was passed in the 1970s, MICRA has played a critical role in keeping malpractice insurance costs under control for California's doctors. Without MICRA, physicians could be litigated into bankruptcy for unsubstantiated allegations of malpractice. This matters in every part of the state — but in rural communities, it can be the difference between a doctor opening a clinic or choosing to practice elsewhere.