

Speech Therapy in Florida's Rural and Urban Assisted Living Communities

BACKGROUND

The proportion of older adults 65 and older is expected to nearly double by 2030.¹ With age, come changes in language, speech, and swallowing abilities. Speech therapy addresses these deficits in communication, in addition to assisting with chewing and preventing coughing and aspiration.² This service allows older adults to maintain social connectedness and reduce the likelihood of choking on food or liquids. Though speech therapy is essential to many older adults, their access to this service may vary depending on whether they live in a rural or urban area.³ This may be especially important in Florida, where an estimated 405,000 older adults live in rural areas, or about 9% of the state's older adult population.⁴ The prevalence of speech therapy among the state's rural and urban assisted living communities (ALCs) is unclear. As such, the purpose of the current brief is to better understand the potential disparities in speech therapy availability in Florida's rural and urban ALCs.

STUDY METHOD

Information on Florida's ALCs, their county-level addresses, and speech therapy availability was gathered from the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration* (AHCA).⁵ The 2010 U.S. Census data was also used to determine whether an ALC was located in either a rural or urban county. Rural counties are counties with less than 100 people per square mile, while urban counties are counties with at least 1,000 people per square mile.⁶

FINDINGS

Table 1 illustrates the overall rate of speech therapy across Florida's 3,090 ALCs, based on state AHCA data. Of these communities, 660 (21%) offered speech therapy, with rural counties accounting for only 9 (1.4%) of the 660 ALCs providing this service. Additionally, among the 30 rural counties in Florida, which have 79 ALCs, only five of these counties (i.e. Hendry, Highlands, Madison, Suwanee, Walton) have any ALCs that offer speech therapy. Further, the ALCs in these five counties represent only 11% of all rural ALCs offering speech therapy. In terms of urban ALCs, a total of 651 (22%) of the 3,009 communities provided speech therapy. Further, all urban counties in Florida had at least one ALC providing this service (see Figure 1).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest speech therapy is severely lacking in both rural and urban counties; however, it is most deficient in rural ALCs. Communication is essential to maintaining and creating social connections which can, in turn, impact well-being. Moreover, weakening or deterioration of mouth and throat muscles can increase the likelihood of choking, aspirating, and subsequent health issues.² Previous research on ALCs in the rural counties of Florida has found a lack of other services, like physical therapy, suggesting that communities in these counties are extremely underserved.⁷ Policymakers should incentivize providing speech therapy throughout ALCs in Florida, especially targeting rural counties to ensure residents have equal accessibility to this service.

*Data was collected on February 6, 2020

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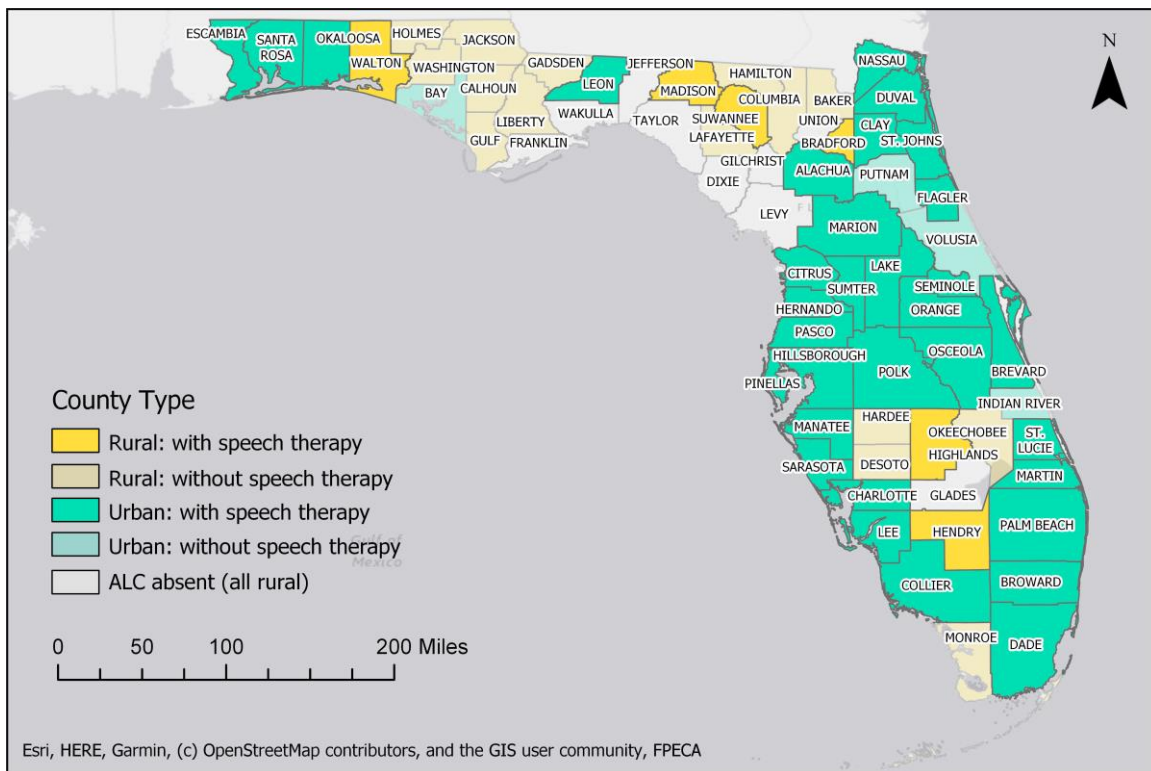


Figure 1. Florida Counties With and Without Assisted Living Communities with Speech Therapy.

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Table 1. Florida Assisted Living Communities By County (2020)

Counties (N=67)	Rural (Y/N)?	Speech Therapy Offered (Y/N)?	ALCs with Speech Therapy (N=660)
Alachua	N	Y	1
Baker	Y	N	0
Bay	N	Y	1
Bradford	Y	N	0
Brevard	N	Y	28
Broward	N	Y	75
Calhoun	Y	N	0
Charlotte	N	Y	6
Citrus	N	Y	3
Clay	N	Y	1
Collier	N	Y	12
Columbia	Y	N	0
De Soto	Y	N	0
Dixie	Y	N	0
Duval	N	Y	27
Escambia	N	Y	10
Flagler	N	Y	5
Franklin	Y	N	0
Gadsden	Y	N	0
Gilchrist	Y	N	0
Glades	Y	N	0
Gulf	Y	N	0
Hamilton	Y	N	0
Hardee	Y	N	0
Hendry	Y	Y	1
Hernando	N	Y	5
Highlands	Y	Y	1
Hillsborough	N	Y	66
Holmes	Y	N	0
Indian River	N	Y	8
Jackson	Y	N	0
Jefferson	Y	N	0
Lafayette	Y	N	0
Lake	N	Y	15
Lee	N	Y	22
Leon	N	Y	1
Levy	Y	N	0
Liberty	Y	N	0
Madison	Y	Y	1
Manatee	N	Y	14
Marion	N	Y	10
Martin	N	Y	4
Miami-Dade	N	Y	70

Monroe	Y	N	0
Nassau	N	Y	1
Okaloosa	N	Y	2
Okeechobee	Y	N	0
Orange	N	Y	36
Osceola	N	Y	4
Palm Beach	N	Y	66
Pasco	N	Y	8
Pinellas	N	Y	54
Polk	N	Y	6
Putnam	N	N	0
Santa Rosa	N	Y	1
Sarasota	N	Y	25
Seminole	N	Y	22
St. Johns	N	Y	9
St. Lucie	N	Y	9
Sumter	N	Y	8
Suwannee	Y	Y	1
Taylor	Y	N	0
Union	Y	N	0
Volusia	N	Y	18
Wakulla	Y	N	0
Walton	Y	Y	3
Washington	Y	N	0

Source: Surveying Agency for Healthcare Administration.

Note. ALC= Assisted living community.