

## Priority Recommendations for Expanding Access to Mental Health Services in Virginia: The Background of the Recommendations and the Plan for Implementation

The Appalachian Telemental Health Network Initiative – Virginia Pilot, which is described in detail in the attached proposal, is comprised of four projects. One of those projects is the continuation and expansion of Project ECHO, a telemedicine project that connects primary care providers with medical specialists through teleconferencing to expand the treatment capacity of those primary care providers. Project ECHO is currently managed and directed by the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), and we propose that this continue. Implementation of the other three projects (establishing a Telemental Health Provider Directory, offering telemental health workforce training, and providing Telemental Health Network infrastructure development and support) will be managed through a Collaborative consisting of the Healthy Appalachia Institute (HAI) at the University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVa-Wise), the Southside Telehealth Training Academy and Resource Center (STAR) housed at the New College Institute and the Virginia Telehealth Network (VTN). These three entities were created to bring innovative health services to underserved populations, and particularly those in the rural southwestern region of Virginia. The three proposed projects are intended to be a vital next step in that effort by laying the groundwork for a robust telemental health network that can reach currently underserved Virginians.

### Background

In 2006, political, education, and healthcare leaders began meeting to explore ways to improve population health in far Southwest Virginia. These meetings led to the General Assembly's creation of the Southwest Virginia Health Facilities Authority in 2007 (renamed the Southwest Virginia Health Authority (SWVHA) in February 2009). UVa-Wise, in partnership with the University of Virginia and the Graduate Medical Education Consortium (GMEC) located on the UVa-Wise campus, received funds from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to establish a public health institute known as Healthy Appalachia Institute (HAI). Located within the Office of Economic Development and Engagement at UVa-Wise, HAI actively works with community organizations to develop programs that link health, education and economic development for improved health outcomes in Southwest Virginia. In 2008, with the leadership of HAI and the SWVHA, leaders from throughout the region joined together to conduct a community health assessment, compiling data, completing data analysis, conducting a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), establishing goals, and developing a regional strategic health blueprint. The result was the *Blueprint for Health Improvement and Health-Enabled Prosperity*, adopted on May 13, 2009 and most recently updated in 2016. The Blueprint includes clear directives for improving both mental health services and telehealth capacity in the region.

HAI is also one of the team leads for the Appalachian Prosperity Project (APP). The APP is a partnership among UVa-Wise, the Coalfield region, the private sector, and the state with the goal to advance education, health, and economic prosperity in Southwest Virginia. The proposed Appalachian Telemental Health Network will provide HAI with funds to recruit providers, deploy technology, collect data and engage in business development. All of these functions closely align with the overall mission and goals of HAI, SWVHA and its *Blueprint for Health Improvement and Health-Enabled Prosperity*, as well as the APP.

Finally, HAI is also closely aligned with the UVa Center for Telehealth. The Center for Telehealth has over 20 years of experience in facilitating access to specialty medical care and advancing clinical service, teaching, research and public service throughout underserved areas in Virginia. David Cattell-Gordon, Director of the Office of Telemedicine at UVa also serves as Co-Director of the HAI.

STAR Telehealth was developed in 2012 as a joint program sponsored by the UVa Center for Telehealth and the New College Institute in order to meet the training needs of health care providers seeking to use advanced telemedicine and telehealth systems to improve access to quality healthcare for rural and medically underserved populations. Partial funding for the development of STAR Telehealth was made possible by the Virginia Health Workforce Development Authority. To date, STAR has successfully trained over 840 health care professionals.

The Virginia Telehealth Network (VTN) is a nonprofit incorporated in 2006 with the mission of advancing the adoption, implementation, and integration of telehealth and related technologies statewide and promotes the coordination and delivery of care for all Virginians. The VTN is a membership organization, with a Board of Directors and members representing the public, private, and government sectors statewide. The VTN has a successful history of being a respected and neutral convener of stakeholders to facilitate the sharing of resources, support quality improvement initiatives by using technologies, and address barriers to telehealth.

### **Implementation**

The HAI, STAR Telehealth and VTN Collaborative bring with them a lengthy history of successfully managing large scale projects and initiatives to meet the needs of rural and underserved populations in Virginia. The Project Director that will be hired for the Appalachian Telemental Health Network through the HAI will serve as the central point of contact for the Collaborative and will both manage, monitor and provide regular progress updates to the General Assembly (or such entity as the General Assembly may direct). Data that will be collected for monitoring purposes include:

- numbers of providers trained
- hours of mental health services provided
- numbers of patients seen
- miles of travel avoided
- efficiencies in care provision achieved
- increased access to mental health care achieved.

In addition, the Project Director will be responsible for submitting an annual legislative study report on behalf of the Collaborative that will also include a section related to progress in developing a sustainable business model that includes engagement in public and private partnerships with managed care plans, providers, hospitals and health systems as well as with economic and workforce development initiatives. This will be a critical component of the management of this project and will ensure continuity of operations beyond the three years of State Funding.

The New College Institute has expressed a willingness and has the capacity to serve as the fiscal agent and provide fiscal management of the project on behalf of the Collaborative. All partners in the Collaborative are also prepared to follow whatever direction the General Assembly may set in this regard.