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## House Select Committee on Advancing Rural and Small Town Health Care

April 30, 2024, at 11:00 a.m.

Southwest Virginia Community College, Russell Hall, Room 202

<https://studies.virginiageneralassembly.gov/studies/678>

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The House Select Committee on Advancing Rural and Small Town Health Care (the Committee) met in Tazewell County with Delegate Rodney T. Willett, chair, presiding.<sup>1</sup> Delegate Willett began the meeting by discussing the previous day's facility tours taken by the Committee and thanking Senator T. Travis Hackworth and Delegate James W. Morefield for their hospitality. The meeting continued with introductions and opening remarks followed by presentations and discussion. Materials presented at the meeting are accessible through the [Committee's meetings webpage](#).

### **Presentation: Addressing Rural Health Workforce Issues**

*Harrison Hayes, Executive Director, Virginia Health Workforce Development Authority*

*Beth O'Connor, Executive Director, Virginia Rural Health Association*

*Wendy Welch, Executive Director, Southwest Virginia Graduate Medical Education Consortium*

Mr. Hayes began his presentation with a brief overview of his organization, the Virginia Health Workforce Development Authority, and discussed the study the organization conducted on addressing primary care, nursing, and behavioral health workforce issues. From this study, Mr. Hayes highlighted the difficulty of retention and recruitment for rural areas and noted that convincing providers from other areas to move to rural areas has not been effective. The organization's study also showed that health incentive programs are underutilized for rural students. Mr. Hayes suggested several potential paths toward increased rural health care workforce attrition, including provision of resources for child care, housing, and food insecurity to lower-wage health care professionals to alleviate the difficulties of working in low-income rural areas; increased use of apprenticeship and career and technical education programs; use of rural health competency initiatives; and increased broadband access to expand access to telehealth.

Ms. O'Connor then presented on recent successes in the rural health workforce. She discussed the administration of a federally funded health services training program, which has trained and employed 41 individuals in the rural health care workforce and is currently training an additional 81 individuals. She emphasized the cost-effectiveness of the program and the multifactor approach it takes toward developing a rural health care workforce.

Next, Ms. Welch presented on cultural issues in the rural health workforce. She discussed the cultural expectations and difficulties faced by doctors training in or training for rural areas. She highlighted the importance of cultural knowledge to the administration of care to rural

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<sup>1</sup> **Members Present:** Delegate Rodney T. Willett (chair), Delegate Robert D. Orrock, Sr. (vice-chair), Delegate Ellen H. Campbell, Delegate Nadarius E. Clark, Delegate Joshua G. Cole, Delegate Amy J. Laufer, Delegate Israel D. O'Quinn, Delegate Daniel W. Marshall III, Delegate Kannan Srinivasan, Delegate Howard Otto Wachsmann, Jr.

**Members Absent:** Delegate Candi Mundon King, Delegate Mark D. Sickles

populations. Students from Southwest Virginia who graduate from medical school often leave the area to receive further training, and many of those students do not return to practice in the area. Ms. Welch suggested that relevant cultural education on the populations that health care professionals expect to serve can help alleviate some of the attrition difficulties for rural health care workforces.

### **Presentation: Telehealth is Not a Panacea for Rural Health Care, but it is Helping**

*Dr. Karen Rheuban, Director, Karen S. Rheuban Center for Telehealth, University of Virginia*

Dr. Rheuban discussed the benefits of telehealth, important considerations for implementation of a successful telehealth program, and the specific programs utilized in the University of Virginia medical system. Dr. Rheuban gave a brief overview of the history of telemedicine in the Commonwealth and presented a list of policy considerations for telehealth moving forward. This list included ensuring coverage and payment for provider-to-provider eConsults and patient-generated eVisits, as well as aligning funding priorities with critical health care needs of the Commonwealth.

### **Presentation: The Challenges and Successes of Rural Health Care Delivery**

*Dr. Chad Couch, President of Ballad Health's Northern Region*

Dr. Couch gave an overview of Ballad Health, its service area, and the services it provides. He discussed the difficulties of employing physicians in certain specialties in rural areas, highlighting an obstetrician vacancy that the health system has been unable to fill since 2020. Dr. Couch discussed workforce challenges, including significant turnover, and spoke about Ballad Health's investment in academic programs to expand career pathways in health care for students local to its rural service areas.

### **Presentation: The Blueprint for Health in Appalachia**

*Dr. David L. Driscoll, Director, Healthy Appalachia Institute*

Dr. Driscoll presented on the 2023–2024 Blueprint for Health Improvement and Health-Enabled Prosperity from the Healthy Appalachia Institute. The blueprint identified health challenges in the LENOWISCO, Cumberland Plateau, and Mount Rogers Health Districts. He discussed how areas in Southwest Virginia experience significant disparities in health outcomes when measured by leading causes of mortality and the significant interplay between factors that contribute to negative health outcomes in Southwest Virginia. Dr. Driscoll also emphasized the impact and interaction of substance use and mental health issues, and the interaction of both with the challenges of poverty in the area. He then presented strategies for improving access to health care, reducing substance use, trauma, and poverty, and promoting healthy diets and exercise in the region.

### **Public Comment and Next Meeting**

The members of the Committee decided to forego discussion after the presentations and briefly discussed the possibility of holding a virtual meeting for discussion at a later time.

The Committee opened the floor to public comment. A member of the public asked members to keep oral health in mind when discussing workforce development.

The Committee set the dates and location for its next meeting as June 17 and 18 in and around Farmville.



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For more information, see the [\*Committee's website\*](#) or contact the Division of Legislative Services staff:

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