Meeting Summary

House Select Committee on Advancing Rural and Small Town Health Care

September 16, 2024, at 12:30 p.m.

Eastern Shore Community College, Melfa, Virginia

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

The House Select Committee on Advancing Rural and Small Town Health Care (the Committee) met on the Eastern Shore of Virginia with Delegate Rodney T. Willett, chair, presiding.[1] Materials presented at the meeting are accessible through the Committee's meetings webpage.

Panel Presentation: Addressing Obesity and Diabetes in Rural Areas

Sarah Stanton, Executive Director, Joint Commission on Health Care
Dr. Susan Wolver, Medical Director, VCU Medical Weight Loss Program
Dr. Lisa Price Stevens, Chief Medical Officer, Department of Medical Assistance Services
Heidi Dix, Senior Vice President of Policy, Virginia Association of Health Plans

Each panelist delivered a brief presentation before discussion.

- Ms. Stanton started by discussing the Joint Commission on Health Care's study on obesity in the Commonwealth. She discussed Virginia's increasing rates of obesity and Medicaid's coverage of obesity prevention services. She then summarized the Joint Commission on Health Care's recommendations for policies to reduce obesity, which include removing limits on access to medical nutrition therapy and increasing coverage for weight management medicine and bariatric surgery.
- Dr. Wolver discussed weight loss medications, which include semaglutides, and the new Medicaid guidelines that require a BMI higher than 40 to be eligible for weight loss medications. Dr. Wolver described her struggles with obtaining coverage for patients who need these medications for their weight loss therapy.
- Dr. Stevens delivered a presentation on obesity and diabetes from a rural health perspective. She gave an overview of who in the Commonwealth is covered by Medicaid and offered some statistics on how many citizens of the Commonwealth are obese or who live with type 2 diabetes. She also discussed the obesity and diabetes prevention, detection, and treatment options available to Medicaid recipients.
- Ms. Dix discussed the coverage of obesity care by health plans in the Commonwealth. She reported that the only mandate for coverage is nutritional counseling, that access to bariatric surgery is difficult because of the need for a showing that it is medically necessary, and that access to weight loss medications is difficult because those medications are very costly at the moment. She gave a brief overview of differences in coverage between typical health plans.

[1] **Members Present:** Delegate Rodney T. Willett (chair), Delegate Ellen H. Campbell, Delegate Nadarius E. Clark, Delegate Joshua G. Cole, Delegate Amy J. Laufer, Delegate Daniel W. Marshall, III, Delegate Mark D. Sickles, Delegate Kannan Srinivasan, Delegate H. Otto Wachsmann, Jr., Delegate Candi Mundon King (virtual)

Members Absent: Delegate Robert D. Orrock, Sr. (vice-chair), Delegate Israel D. O'Quinn

Presentation: Providing Free Access to Life Saving Drugs in Rural Areas and Across Virginia

Amy Yarcich, Executive Director, Rx Partnership

Ms. Yarcich gave an overview of Rx Partnership and the work it does to increase access to medication for vulnerable patients in the Commonwealth. It works with a network of 31 clinics throughout Virginia to provide medications to patients who could not otherwise afford them. The program began by coordinating the donation of bulk medications from four brands and distributing them to free clinics. In 2019, Rx Partnership started a generic program to provide generic medications to its clinic partners with pharmacies, but it must purchase these medications. Ms. Yarcich discussed some of the issues regarding access to medications and reported that Rx Partnership is working to expand its reach, increase clinic awareness of the program, expand current and new partnerships, and strengthen organizational capabilities to support strategic initiatives.

Presentation: Addressing Social Determinants of Health in Rural Virginia: Do We Need a Secretary of Rural Affairs?

Andrew Block, Professor, University of Virginia School of Law

Professor Block discussed the disparity in care for rural Virginians: they tend to have greater health care needs than the rest of the Commonwealth while having less access to opportunities for care. He explained that the social determinants of health in rural Virginia are interconnected in their contribution to negative health outcomes among the rural population. Professor Block mentioned that numerous state-level Secretariats can partially address individual silos of the issues that cause these negative health outcomes and can utilize disparate funding streams; however, the Commonwealth lacks a Secretariat with a full-time comprehensive focus on rural affairs that can act as a single point of access for support, grants, oversight, and assistance. Professor Block recommended (i) a JLARC study of the feasibility of establishing a Secretary of Rural Affairs, (ii) additional study on the funding structure of Virginia's core services and the impact that the funding structure has on the ability of rural communities to deliver core services to residents, (iii) reform of funding structures as necessary, and (iv) the differentiation of responses to rural problems based on region and racial demographics.

Presentation: The Rural Medical Transportation Challenge

Aaron Moore, Transportation Management Services Unit Manager, Department of Medical Assistance Services

Mr. Moore delivered a presentation on the Transportation Management Services Unit at the Department of Medical Assistance Services. He discussed the non-emergency medical transportation benefit available through Medicaid and gave a brief overview of how he administers a program that provides Medicaid recipients with access to transportation.

Public Comment and Next Steps

The Committee opened the floor to public comment during which Jeremy Counts delivered a brief presentation on the increasing closures of rural pharmacies in Virginia.

The Committee discussed the process for completing its business and the generation of a final report by December 15, 2024.

For more information, see the *Committee's website* or contact the Division of Legislative Services staff:

Chandler Brooks, Staff Attorney, DLS
cbrooks@dls.virginia.gov
804-698-1843

Hannah Yates, Staff Attorney, DLS
hyates@dls.virginia.gov
804-698-1873