Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

Assessment of

GEOGRAPHIC DISPARITIES

in Healthcare Access

PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT

To evaluate the geographic disparities in access to healthcare, with an emphasis on broadband access and telehealth services, and make recommendations to improve access.

There are wide gaps in available healthcare services between those living in rural areas and those in urban areas of the Commonwealth. The barriers encountered by individuals with disabilities can make these gaps even wider. The expansion of telehealth during the pandemic brought to light the possibilities of telehealth to break down barriers to healthcare access for individuals in rural areas and individuals with disabilities. Virginia has been making great strides toward providing the broadband access required to access telehealth services.

Across the country, communities are working to develop options for individuals to access the healthcare that they need. Community-based solutions can help to close the gap and provide additional options regardless of that status of broadband access in a particular area. The recommendations in this assessment address possible solutions to the barriers to telehealth and healthcare access in categories including: Broadband Access, Telehealth Accessibility, Digital Literacy, and Resource Requirements.

The report offers 10 recommendations to improve access to healthcare for individuals with disabilities, including but not limited to the following:

Broadband Access

Universal broadband access is at least four years away. Community options should be developed to allow access, including providing access points at frequently used and easily accessible community organizations such as libraries, municipal buildings, schools, etc. Recommendation that:

- The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) should work with local communities to implement community-based options, such as use of community anchor institutions like public libraries and schools, to fill gaps in access in the near term and to provide options for access for all. DHCD should target those areas with higher percentages of individuals with disabilities and low levels of broadband access.

Telehealth Accessibility

Training in telehealth best practices is needed for providers and staff to equip them to meet the growing demand for telehealth services. Recommendations that:

- The Virginia Board of Health should create and implement a plan to educate telehealth service providers on current laws and standards for accommodating individuals with disabilities consistent with the Board's authority under Section 32.1-122.03:1 of the Code of Virginia. This plan should encompass various aspects, such as allowing extra time for appointments, ensuring the availability of suitable platforms that accommodate interpreters or other necessary support, and enabling remote login from a third location.
- The Virginia General Assembly should direct the Virginia Department of Health Professions to establish and implement a continuing education requirement for healthcare professionals on best practices for providing telehealth services, including specific information on telehealth and individuals with disabilities.

Community-based solutions to address barriers are used throughout the country and can be used as models to create community-based solutions here in the Commonwealth. Recommendation that:

- The Virginia Broadband Advisory Council should study the innovative partnerships being developed in other states and use them to develop recommendations to the Governor's Office for consideration for the SFY 2026 budget on how Virginia can expand broadband access through community partnerships.

Digital Health Literacy

Digital health literacy is a major barrier to the use of telehealth, particularly in rural areas. Many individuals in rural communities lack trust in systems created without their involvement. Any outreach must be done through local community organizations and individuals who live in the community, giving them a unique understanding of barriers faced in rural areas. Recommendation that:

- When updating the state telehealth plan, the Virginia Telehealth Network and the Virginia Department of Health should incorporate strategies and a plan for collaborating with community partners to offer digital literacy services to individuals who require them.

Resource Requirements

Access, including affordability, of technology needed to participate in telehealth is a barrier for many. Recommendation that:

- When updating the state telehealth plan, the Virginia Telehealth Network and the Virginia Department of Health should include strategies to increase access to resources, including using the Virginia Assistive Technology System and the Assistive Technology Loan Fund Authority.