



Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care, Inc.

## Vermont Statewide Telehealth Workgroup Overview

**Testimony Provided to: House Energy & Technology Committee  
Wednesday, May 20, 2020  
Via YouTube Livestream**

### **I. Introduction**

Vermont's Statewide Telehealth Workgroup was established in Fall of 2019 and was initiated under The Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care's (VPQHC's) current 9416 billback contract. VPQHC's work coordinating the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup is slated to continue under our upcoming two-year contract covering fiscal years 2021-2022, which is currently in the process of being executed with the Vermont Department of Health.

Workgroup membership is entirely voluntary, and open, and includes provider representatives and representatives from provider organizations from across the continuum of care, payer groups, OneCare Vermont, The State of Vermont, and others.

The purpose of the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup is to improve the quality of, and access to, healthcare across Vermont, through the expansion of telehealth. The workgroup identified wanting to achieve the below-outlined objectives, which are memorialized in its draft workgroup charter. Many of these objectives are largely in alignment with recommendations made in the [Statewide Telehealth Strategy for the State of Vermont](#) (2015):

- i. Create, and update the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup charter, to include the workgroup mission, aims, and objectives.
- ii. Provide a routine meeting format for sharing telehealth initiatives in the State of Vermont.
- iii. Provide a routine meeting format for sharing state and national policy and reimbursement changes across all payers.
- iv. Track population-level trends in telehealth use in Vermont.
- v. Develop an inventory of telehealth activities across the State of Vermont.
- vi. Create an inventory of barriers to telehealth expansion, and telehealth technical assistance needs across providers.
- vii. Advise, and review, technical assistance offerings.
- viii. Maintain a webpage including resources for all information related to telehealth in the State of Vermont that is readily, and easily, accessible to both providers and patients, on the Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care, Inc. website, in addition to telehealth implementation resources, webinars, and best practices. Materials posted will not be duplicative of resources that exist elsewhere; where appropriate, links will be included on the VPQHC sites to outside partner websites.



Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care, Inc.

During the month of March, gasoline was poured over this project which ignited a rapid-cycle response and VPQHC was “off to the races” to deliver educational information both effectively and rapidly to accommodate social distancing mandates.

Of significant value to the State of Vermont is that this structure was already established, in place and operational at the start of the pandemic to accommodate such a rapid deployment of additional resources and educational programs. This structure is inclusive of the entire continuum of services, incorporating primary care, mental health, specialty care, home health, and dental care.

## II. COVID-19 Response

Since the onset of COVID-19, VPQHC has leveraged the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup structure to collaborate with key partners to disseminate telehealth resources and information to help providers implement telehealth quickly under COVID-19. VPQHC has primarily done this through two avenues:

**1) Topical Webinars:** In collaboration with partners, VPQHC has sponsored three telehealth-related webinars since April 2020, based on identified provider needs:

- 4/2/2020: Vermont Telehealth Town Hall (Telehealth 101)
- 4/7/2020: Telehealth Q&A: A Discussion with Commercial Payers
- 5/8/2020 Telehealth for Mental Health Providers
- Some feedback we have received:
  - o *Thank you for this! It helped alleviate some fears and confusion.*
  - o *Thank you so much! Glad I was able to attend.*
  - o *Thank you for this webinar. Very informative.*

**2) Twice-Weekly Telehealth “Virtual Open Office Hours”:** Since April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in partnership with the Northeast Telehealth Resource Center, Bi-State Primary Care Association, and Alpine Telehealth, VPQHC has held twice-weekly telehealth open office hours. To date, we have held a total of fifteen office hours, with combined attendance of 292 people. Open office hour themes have included: Medicare billing and reimbursement, Federal telehealth funding opportunities, teledentistry, a discussion about how telehealth fits under the ACO model, and what role it will play in a post-COVID-world, barriers to telehealth in chronic care management, and telehealth & patient outreach. That said, office hours also give providers the opportunity to come with any questions they have related to telehealth implementation, to get answers, both from their peers, and Subject Matter Experts.

In addition, since the onset of COVID-19, two webpages were added to the VPQHC website: A [Vermont Telehealth Resources & Workgroup page](#), and a [Vermont Telehealth Events](#) page. These pages include an inventory of payer policies, implementation resources, recordings of past webinars, FAQ documents, PDFs of presentations, information about upcoming telehealth events, and the weekly office hours, and other resources. Combined, our two telehealth webpages have had



Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care, Inc.

over 1,000 “clicks” during this time period, and our overall website visits increased by 86% over the previous month.

### **III. Future State – Ongoing Response & Next Steps**

VPQHC intends to reconvene the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup to review and update the initial workgroup charter and workplan to ensure the objectives as currently outlined continue to meet the coalition members’ needs, given the drastic changes to the telehealth landscape under COVID-19. In addition, VPQHC will continue to search for funding streams that could:

- Support the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup coordination activities
- Access to Subject Matter Experts to be able to support provider-driven, telehealth-related educational opportunities
- Enhance our ability to carry out additional objectives and areas of need identified by the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup

On a separate, yet related, note, VPQHC is also exploring ways to fund a pilot project, wherein providers would be able to supply their patients with the equipment they need to participate in telemedicine visits –items such as a tablet, and connectivity booster. Several providers in Vermont has expressed interest in this program, and we are currently in the process of detailing what this would look like, and available models to build off of.

Further, VPQHC supports removing barriers that exist that prevent providers with integrating telehealth into their care “toolbox” as a fully functioning, viable tool – such as barriers to reimbursement, equipment, connectivity, and technical skills. We envision telehealth to not be the only component, but a key component, of the healthcare delivery system, wherein patients receive the right care, at the right time, the first time. In addition, we do not envision telehealth as supplanting, but rather supplementing, in person care to support achieving the best patient outcomes, and meeting provider and patient preferences.

Of particular relevance to the issue this committee is addressing, VPQHC recognizes that it is difficult to have telehealth appointments with slow upload speeds and impossible for telehealth appointments for households with no capability, and supports efforts led by the Department of Public Service, the legislature, and other entities, to expand broadband across the state. VPQHC further supports the investigation of other, short-term initiatives, to expand access, such as providing emergency funding to upgrade Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPS) around the state, which we have heard could improve speeds and reach additional thousands of unserved and underserved households in the more immediate future, until 100/100 symmetrical broadband is available to every premises in the state.



Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care, Inc.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

VPQHC is well-positioned as the statewide quality assurance organization to coordinate, lead and implement rapid cycle improvement initiatives. We have an extensive legacy of collaborative project work that has “moved the ball down the field” and across the goal line.

We currently have many affiliated partners that we work with and through to deliver a systems-level approach to improvement. We continuously meet the challenge to disseminate best practice that deliver high quality, equitable outcomes for Vermonters. VPQHC routinely delivers data-driven evaluation to identify opportunities for improvement with comprehensive corrective action plans to address identified needs. Our measurement, alignment and validation expertise is brought to bear when identifying value statements for improvement initiatives and establishing appropriate outcome metrics. As a neutral convener, VPQHC leads fully integrated, highly-functioning learning health systems to deliver improved capability and reliability across the continuum of care.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the current state and future aspirations of Vermont’s Statewide Telehealth Workgroup. As always, VPQHC remains a resource to the House Energy & Technology Committee.