VPQHC
Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care, Inc.

DRAFT - CONNECTIVITY CARE PACKAGES PILOT PROPOSAL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The onset of COVID-19 has made it evident that telehealth is foundational to a functional healthcare delivery system. However, not all Vermonters have the equipment, nor the digital literacy skills, they need in order to successfully participate in telehealth visits. In a survey recently administered by the Vermont Medical Society, 87% of providers indicated that the patient not having a smartphone or video capability was a barrier to accessing telehealth services, and 79% indicated a patient's inability to operate digital equipment as a barrier. This situation has the potential to exacerbate inequities in health care access, and health outcomes. The "Connectivity Care Packages" pilot proposal detailed herein aims to address those barriers to telehealth provision in Vermont by working with clinicians to provide telehealth equipment to patients that need it, and establishing a Vermont Telehealth Alliance that would be charged with coordinating technical assistance for participating health care sites, and their patients. Three types of connectivity packages would be available, based on service type: primary care, mental health, and home health. Our recommendation is to leverage existing CARES money to support this pilot project, which is essential for addressing immediate barriers to telehealth provision, and which will help inform long term expansion efforts.

I   Background

Since the onset of COVID-19, telehealth utilization in Vermont has increased exponentially. During this pandemic, telehealth has become an essential tool to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and provide clinicians the tools they need to treat patients. Through the Public Health Emergency, the gaps and barriers to delivering telehealth services in Vermont have been accentuated, barriers which include, but are not limited to: lack of patient equipment allowing for audio-visual capabilities, internet service plan limitations, non-reliable internet connection, lack of patient (and provider) technical skills to operate telehealth equipment, and lack of deaf or hard of hearing translation services. With the anticipation that there will be at least a second wave of the pandemic, it is essential that we address these barriers to prepare our patients and providers, to the greatest extent possible, for a seamless telehealth delivery experience, with the goal of maintaining equitable access to the healthcare delivery system, and to maintain or improve health outcomes.

It is the intent of this project to address three identified barriers to providing telehealth services in Vermont: 1) lack of patient equipment with audio-visual capability, 2) lack of deaf or hard of hearing translation services, and 3) digital literacy skills for both providers and patients – components that will collectively comprise a service package that will be referred to as a "Connectivity Care Package."

II Aim

Through the provision of "Connectivity Care Packages", the aim of this project is to address specific barriers related to telehealth services implementation, with the goal of promoting equitable access to the healthcare delivery system and health outcomes.

III Objectives

a) Through an application process, identify providers that are ready, willing, and able to participate in the "Connectivity Care Packages" pilot project
b) Provide telehealth equipment to providers
c) Establish a Vermont Telehealth Technical Assistance Alliance, which will be tasked with coordinating with other organizations to ensure robust technical assistance is provided to participating sites throughout the lifecycle of the grant, and for co-developing a sustainability plans with sites to ensure program success beyond the lifecycle of the grant
d) Develop and implement a process evaluation to identify lessons learned, and best practices, which can help inform future expansion efforts

IV Project Description

This pilot will include: 1) the provision of equipment packages to ready, willing, and able providers; 2) robust technical assistance throughout the lifespan of the pilot project, and 3) and the completion of a process evaluation to identify lessons learned that can help inform future expansion efforts.

a) Project Participation Requirements

In order to participate in this pilot project, providers will need to:

1. Complete a brief application
2. Commit to participate in at least 1:1 technical assistance session
3. Participate in the co-design of a sustainability plan, in collaboration with the Vermont Telehealth Technical Assistance Alliance to carry the work forward beyond the lifecycle of the grant
4. Monthly check-in calls with Vermont Telehealth Technical Assistance Alliance
5. Commit to participate in the process evaluation for the project

Providers will be furnished with a consent form, and participant information form, which will fully detail the project, participation requirements, and other information to help individuals make a fully informed decision on whether or not to participate.

b) Equipment Provision

Through the initial application, providers will self-select the equipment that they are interested in obtaining, according to the below-outlined three tracks, and the quantities of equipment they would need.

   i.   Primary Care/Clinical Package
   - Tablet with audio-visual capability pre-loaded with appropriate apps and security
   - Diagnostic peripherals, including but not limited to:
     - Blood pressure cuff/pulse oximeter
     - Digital stethoscope
     - Otoscope (pediatrics)
     - *Other (dependent on stakeholder feedback)*

   ii. Mental Health Care Package
   - Tablet with audio-visual capability pre-loaded with appropriate apps and security
   - *Other (dependent on stakeholder feedback - VCP)*

   iii. Remote Telemonitoring Package
   - *Dependent on stakeholder feedback - VNAs*

Packages can also include the following components dependent on patient needs:

- WIFI hot spots or boosters
- Internet service provider minutes
- Translation services for hearing, and/or language impaired

c) Vermont Telehealth Technical Assistance Alliance

A "Vermont Telehealth Technical Assistance Alliance" will be established for the lifespan of the project. Two full-time staff people would be hired to manage The Alliance. The Alliance would:

- Run weekly "Telehealth Open Office Hours" for telehealth technical assistance – providers, telehealth coordinators, and others, can come with any question they have related to telehealth implementation

- Coordinate 1:1 technical assistance sessions with each participating site, tailored to site-specific needs – subject matter experts in telehealth implementation & reimbursement, would be arranged accordingly to address needs
- Coordinate monthly check-in calls with each participating site
- Support three concurrent "Best Practices in Telehealth" ECHO sessions for primary care, mental health, and home health
- Coordinate telehealth trainings based on identified areas of need
- Establish robust technical assistance triage flow in collaboration with the Statewide Telehealth Workgroup, to identify optimal path of technical assistance requests, and address gaps
- Aggregate patient-facing resources on telehealth, and identify and address gaps
- Manage network of consultants to ensure provider technical assistance needs are met

The two secured staff persons would also centrally manage the statewide equipment program, and troubleshoot needed repairs and replacements.

d) Process Evaluation

It is the intent that lessons learned, and identified best practice, from this pilot project will help inform future expansion efforts. In collaboration with an evaluation consultant, VPQHC will develop and implement a robust process evaluation for this project.

V   Timetable

In process of drafting