

State Agencies Receive Grants to Improve Telehealth, Digital Inclusion in Appalachian Region

By Administrator

Tuesday, 20 October 2020 10:39 -

The North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT) Broadband Infrastructure Office (BIO), in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) Office of Rural Health (ORH), was awarded \$633,940 by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and a matching award of \$97,200 from the Dogwood Health Trusts for the Healthy and Connected Workforce initiative. Through the initiative, the agencies and their partners will implement a robust digital inclusion program while simultaneously increasing access to healthcare and economic opportunity for workers, vulnerable populations and disadvantaged groups in North Carolina's ARC region of Macon, Madison and Mitchell counties.

"This project will have a long-lasting impact on this region and its residents," said Thomas Parrish, acting NCDIT Secretary and State Chief Information Officer. "Ensuring that North Carolinians have access to digital and health literacy skills, affordable broadband and improved healthcare will prepare them for tomorrow's workforce and is an important investment in our communities and our future." Increasing access to quality healthcare through telehealth, broadband adoption and increased digital literacy will both improve the health of residents and enhance their ability to actively participate in the local workforce.

"Digital equity and inclusion are crucial to ensuring all North Carolinians have access to care, education and jobs," said Mandy K. Cohen, M.D., NCDHHS Secretary. "By increasing access to quality health care through telehealth, broadband adoption and digital literacy trainings, this project will enable our most vulnerable populations to receive the supports they need to achieve and maintain health and well-being."

The project will take a three-pronged approach. ORH will develop a Telehealth Technical Assistance model to provide support to health care sites across North Carolina interested in increasing access to care via telehealth. The project partners will launch three pilot programs in Macon, Madison and Mitchell counties to test and refine the implementation of telehealth programs. BIO and ORH will work with the Knight School of Communication at Queens University of Charlotte to develop a health and digital literacy curricula for the telehealth pilot program participants. Participants will receive computers, digital and health literacy skills training and 50 percent of a monthly subscription fee for internet service from a local provider--provided by the DHT matching grant to the program--to foster broadband adoption and use.

"Dogwood Health Trust is delighted to partner with NC DIT and the ARC on this project," said Janice Brumit, Chair of the Dogwood Health Trust Board of Directors. "More than ever broadband is a critical enabler of health care, and this effort will increase telehealth access and services for our most vulnerable citizens."

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The Healthy and Connected Workforce Initiative responds to findings in a year-long feasibility study completed by the project's partners with support from a previous Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) award and is expected to aid 124 organizations, 180 patients, 135 households, and 180 participants throughout the grant's life cycle. The project partners will partner with the local Councils of Governments, safety net sites and other community partners to implement the program.

This award was funded by the ARC POWER Initiative, which helps communities and regions affected by job losses in coal mining, coal power plant operations, and coal-related supply chain industries due to the changing economics of America's energy production.

"I congratulate NCDIT and NCDHHS for their POWER award, and commend them on the leadership they have shown in their community," said ARC Federal Co-Chairman Tim Thomas. "POWER grants are playing a critical role in supporting coal-impacted communities in the Appalachian Region as they recover from COVID-19 by building and expanding critical infrastructure and creating new economic opportunities through innovative and transformative approaches. Projects like this are getting Appalachia back to work."

To date, ARC has invested more than \$238 million in 293 projects, touching 353 counties across Appalachia since 2015. More information about ARC's POWER Initiative is available at www.arc.gov/power.

About NCDIT's Broadband Infrastructure Office

NCDIT's Broadband Infrastructure Office leads the statewide initiatives to expand high-speed internet access, adoption and use for all North Carolinians and serves as a statewide resource for broadband access, first responder communications and state-led classroom connectivity initiatives. In 2019, Gov. Roy Cooper issued Executive Order 91 (EO91), which lays out clear directives to expand broadband across the state through a task force comprised of cabinet agencies, which the office facilitates and supports. In partnership with the Friday Institute, the office is currently conducting a survey to gather better data on broadband availability and quality in the state. To learn more and to take the survey, visit ncbroadband.gov/survey.

About the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

The Appalachian Regional Commission (www.arc.gov) is an economic development

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partnership agency of the federal government and 13 state governments focusing on 420 counties across the Appalachian Region. ARC's mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia.