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Enhancing Vermont's Healthcare Delivery System: Telemedicine Child Psychiatry *Backgrounder – Winter 2011*

What is it?

A pilot to deliver child psychiatry services via telemedicine to the state's Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). As identified by the Health Care Reform Commission in its December 2007 recommendations to the legislature related to investments in Vermont's health care delivery system, the use of telemedicine leverages existing professional capacity with technology. This initiative pairs the resources of UVM with the state's network of rural FQHCs to fill a critical resource gap to build a self-sustaining infrastructure over three years.

The Need for a Family Based Approach to Child Psychiatric Services

At any given time, 23% of Vermont children of all ages suffer from a treatable child psychiatric condition, but most of these vulnerable Vermont children never get the health care they need. A feasibility study conducted in August 2007 by the UVM College of Medicine – with support from the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) State Office of Rural Health & Primary Care, in partnership with Bi-State Primary Care Association (Bi-State) – documented the demand for child psychiatry services and the applicability of FQHC sites, as medical homes, for a "Family Based Approach" to care.

Dr. James Hudziak (UVM College of Medicine professor of Medicine, Pediatrics and Psychiatry) and his team at the University of Vermont, Child Psychiatry Division in the Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families, (VCCYF) has made a concerted effort over the past five years to develop a thoughtful program for assessment and multimodal treatment of these children. This "Family Based Approach" looks at both the genetic and environmental components of the child's condition and takes into account the fact that many conditions run in families. This approach recognizes that it is the interaction of the child's risk for psychiatric illness and the environment that he/she is raised in that either puts a child at risk for these chronic conditions or protects them from these conditions.

The Solution

Bi-State has been able to leverage federal USDA Distance Learning and Telemedicine funding with funding from the VDH State Office of Rural Health and Primary Care and the VT Department of Mental Health to support the purchase of state-of-the-art telemedicine equipment for six of Vermont's rural FQHCs and to implement a pilot of Dr. Hudziak's Telemedicine Child Psychiatry at several health center sites. The pilot began at two health centers in the summer of 2009 and has spread to two additional FQHCs. The pilot centers report that this service has been extremely helpful to their patient families and that without this pilot the children and families would have had a very difficult time getting services.

Bi-State will continue to work with others in the state with the goal of achieving Medicaid and other third-party payer reimbursement for telehealth services as a strategy for long-term sustainability.

The Telemedicine Child Psychiatry project:

- Pairs Vermont health centers' medical, nursing, social work, and psychology staff with the UVM VCCYF child psychiatric consultative team,
- Provides monthly training and education resources for health center staff by UVM faculty,
- Helps strengthen and expand the newly established UVM Child Psychiatry Fellowship program (supported by the VT Child Health Improvement Program and Senator Leahy), and;
- Provides critical child psychiatry assessment and consulting services across the state that will establish relationships to help recruit and retain new child psychiatrists for Vermont.

Other New Telemedicine and Distance Learning Activities

The VA Medical Center in White River Junction is also using telecommunications technology to expand its psychiatry practice in northern Vermont through the Northern Tier Center for Health (NoTCH) in Richford and Little Rivers Health Care in Bradford, Vermont. The FQHCs have also used the equipment to attend Outreach and Ladies First trainings held by Bi-State's Outreach Specialist.