



NEWS RELEASE

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Vaya Health phone initiative to connect WNC residents to telehealth services

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Vaya Health is helping western North Carolinians connect to telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic with a donation of 500 smartphones for individuals who have no other way to access behavioral healthcare.

The initiative will allow qualified Vaya members with mental health, substance use disorder or developmental disability needs to participate in critical treatment by phone or video amid county and statewide stay-at-home orders designed to slow the spread of the new coronavirus. Vaya will distribute the phones to local healthcare providers to issue to members who have no phone or other treatment options and who meet priority criteria.

Priority populations include individuals who are being discharged from an inpatient behavioral health unit, who visit the emergency department frequently, who are part of the Transitions to Community Living Initiative or who depend heavily on regular treatment contacts to maintain good mental health.

Based in Asheville, Vaya manages public funding for behavioral health and developmental disability services for individuals who receive Medicaid or are uninsured in 22 western North Carolina counties. Increasing access to telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic can help participants stay both mentally and physically well, said Vaya CEO Brian Ingraham.

“Most importantly, Vaya and our network providers want to ensure the people we mutually serve can connect to care to maintain good mental health and pursue recovery from substance use,” Ingraham said. “Preventing symptoms from escalating into a crisis also reduces the strain on local emergency departments.

“Additionally, research shows individuals with behavioral health disorders or developmental disabilities are more likely to experience chronic illness than the general population. Attending an appointment virtually – rather than in-person – can reduce potential exposure to the virus.”

According to the federal Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), telehealth services are particularly useful in increasing access to care for residents of rural areas, like much of the Appalachians. Rural residents may have to travel greater distances to seek care and have fewer transportation options.

Vaya purchased the phones in April from Verizon Wireless to distribute to network providers that successfully applied to participate in the initiative. Providers will distribute the phones to Vaya members who lack other treatment options and assist with initial setup and app downloads.

Vaya will also maintain data plans on phones no cost to providers or participants for six months or until the COVID-19 crisis ends. For more COVID-19-related behavioral health and developmental disability information, visit www.vayahealth.com/coronavirus-updates.

About Vaya Health

Based in Asheville, N.C., Vaya Health manages public funds for mental health, substance use disorder and intellectual or developmental disability services in 22 western North Carolina counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey. Access to care and crisis assistance are available 24/7 at 1-800-849-6127. Learn more at www.vayahealth.com.

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