



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Federal grant to Vaya Health to help prevent, reduce homelessness in WNC as part of COVID-19 response

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – Eight western North Carolina counties will soon have additional resources to combat homelessness and help residents stay safer and healthier in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vaya Health will manage a new N.C. Emergency Solutions Grant that aims to serve at least 100 households in Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, Madison and Swain counties through September 2022. The grant is funded through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and distributed via the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

The initial grant award totals \$228,684, with the potential to double that amount next year. The funding will allow Vaya to partner with the nonprofit HERE in Jackson County to support housing stabilization and homelessness prevention for residents in danger of losing their home or who have nowhere to live in the wake of COVID-19.

Vaya, an Asheville-based managed healthcare organization, oversees publicly funded mental health, substance use and intellectual and/or developmental disability services in 22 western North Carolina counties. Vaya also administers an array of housing supports programs in the region.

“Having a safe, stable place to live is an integral part of mental health, physical health and wellbeing,” said Vaya Chief Population Health Officer Rhonda Cox. “COVID-19 has disproportionately affected individuals and families experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. This initiative is a key part in our region’s long-term recovery.”

HERE, based in Sylva, is a primary regional homelessness services provider and offers programs including emergency shelter, housing supports and assistance in accessing healthcare services, including mental health care.

“The Emergency Solutions Grant will help bring community stakeholders together to strengthen our ability to respond to homelessness in western North Carolina,” said HERE Program Director Robert Cochran. “We continue to see an increased need for housing assistance in the region, and we’re excited to build a more formal infrastructure that allows more people to access safe and affordable housing.”

Housing is considered affordable when it costs 30% or less of a household's budget. According to the N.C. Housing Coalition, more than 20 percent of families in most counties in far western North Carolina pay above this percentage for housing, including three in 10 households in Jackson County. An N.C. Balance of State Continuum of Care count conducted earlier this year found 323 people living in homelessness in the eight-county region, including 30 families with children.

Housing instability is expected to increase due to the slow economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. By January 2021, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's nationwide eviction moratorium expires, up to 240,000 renter households in North Carolina could experience an eviction filing, according to the National Council of State Housing Agencies.

The western North Carolina program is open to all qualifying households in the eight counties and is not limited to Vaya members. A key focus will be rapid rehousing for people who are homeless, with priority on individuals who are unsheltered or living in unsafe conditions and who have pre-existing health conditions that make them especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The program will also provide housing, rental assistance and housing case management to qualifying low-income households facing immediate eviction with no other place to live.

The program will follow the state's Back@Home model, which was used to house eastern North Carolina residents in the wake of Hurricane Florence in 2018. The model connects residents to resources, services and permanent housing to prevent homelessness and create stability and long-term self-sufficiency.

Grant activities also will incorporate the United Way's NC 211 system, which helps connect North Carolinians with local human service programs, and NCCARE360, a statewide coordinated care network that links people to community resources that can help them improve their health. The grant is part of an effort by the North Carolina Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs to identify creative solutions to make local communities stronger as they recover from the pandemic. It is expected to begin in November.

For information about the grant program, contact HERE at 828-477-4946 or at info@hereinjacksoncounty.org. For more information on health and human services and resources in your community, dial 2-1-1 to reach the United Way of North Carolina.

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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