



The Vermont Rural Health Alliance (VRHA): Putting Health Policy into Practice

Backgrounder – Winter 2011

What is it?

VRHA is a vehicle for Vermont's rural health centers, clinics, and small hospitals to work collaboratively to put the state's ambitious health care reform agenda into practice. VRHA responds to the need policymakers have identified to strengthen and enhance health care systems, while improving access to and quality of care.

The resources currently available to rural health care providers are stretched to capacity. VRHA provides an additional resource, allowing rural primary care providers to embrace and excel at the challenges that are being presented to them by statewide initiatives such as Vermont's Blueprint for Health and outreach for the Green Mountain Care Medicaid expansion programs. Together, VRHA members are in a prime position to pilot the system change envisioned for the new initiatives in health care reform, payment restructuring, health information technology, and Vermont's health information exchange network.

VRHA has identified the following goals:

- Support the readiness for development and participation in the Vermont Blueprint for Health;
- Support Health Information Technology (HIT) and Health Information Exchange (HIE);
- Support and enhance outreach and enrollment activities for Green Mountain Care;
- Support statewide 340B Prescription Drug Network development;
- Use telemedicine and distance learning technology to increase service offerings in rural communities;
- Foster integration of primary care and behavioral health (mental health and substance abuse services);
- Increase health care services for Vermont's farmer and/or farmworker populations; and
- Review and respond to health care reform changes at the state and federal level.

Leveraging Resources

Bi-State developed VRHA as a Health Center Controlled Network (HCCN) in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) Office of Rural Health & Primary Care and the federal Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP). In 2007, Bi-State received federal network planning grant funding. In Act 71 of 2007, the legislature appropriated matching funding for a federal rural health network development grant awarded on March 25, 2008. That match funding is included in the Blueprint budget. In June 2010 VRHA received funding from the federal Bureau of Primary Health Care to support HIT goals, focusing on data integrity, HIE, and quality improvement.

Leveraging Collaboration

The membership of VRHA consists of Bi-State, eight Federally Qualified Health Centers, two Critical Access Hospitals and five Rural Health Clinics, the 11 sites of the Vermont Coalition of Clinics for the Uninsured, Vermont's Area Health Education Center (AHEC) network, the Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care (VPQHC), and Vermont Information Technology Leaders (VITL).

VRHA clarifies and demystifies state reform initiatives to convey concrete and actionable steps to its members. The Alliance acts as catalyst and facilitator between numerous top-down health care reform initiatives and rural providers at the ground level, who are themselves struggling with day-to-day issues of patient care, practice operations, reimbursement, and recruitment and retention. The Alliance also provides a forum for members to learn from each other's experiences and provide a feedback loop to policy makers about the challenges and successes of implementing the reform initiatives.

Shared Services

Beginning in 2011, VRHA will also leverage economies of scale to develop a menu of shared, sustainable, and money-saving services for network members and potentially other rural health providers who will benefit with better operational effectiveness and efficiencies.