

Addressing the Impacts of COVID-19 on Rural Communities

Grant will support a virtual learning community for health care providers

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UNH's [Institute for Health Policy and Practice](#) (IHPP) is one of the partners of a five-year, \$2.37 million grant that will help health care providers and communities address the impacts of COVID-19 in northern New England and northern New York, with a focus on the mental and physical well-being of residents living in rural communities.

Called the Collaborative for Advancing Rural Excellence and Equity (CARE2), the initiative is funded by the Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) and will focus on the northern regions of New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont and New York – areas that have large rural sections with aging populations. Isolation issues among the aging population have worsened due to the pandemic, along with an increased rate of substance use. In addition, a shrinking health care workforce in these regions has further heightened the need for resources that will help providers reach more adults and families who are in need of services.

“We are grateful for this opportunity to stand with providers and the individuals they support to address mental health and cognitive health effects from COVID-19 and isolation,” says Laura Davie, co-director of the Center on Aging and Community Living at IHPP. “Now is especially the time to bring the region together to address the challenges older people have experienced, both within long-term care facilities and in home and community-based settings.”

CARE2 will develop a learning community for a broad spectrum of health care providers based on the national [Project ECHO®](#) model that IHPP launched in 2018. The project will include a review of the effects of emerging COVID-19 variants as well as the impacts of isolation and lack of access to treatment for substance use disorder and behavioral health issues. Project ECHO® is an evidence-based method that connects interdisciplinary experts with community-based practitioners to mentor and share expertise through case-based learning sessions. The model enables practitioners in rural areas to manage complex health-related conditions in their own communities. IHPP was the first to launch Project ECHO® in New Hampshire and is a formal ECHO Hub partner.

“Since 2018, IHPP has had more than 1,000 health care members participate in Project ECHO,” says Marcy Doyle, IHPP’s clinical and quality improvement director. “This funding will help us further enhance workforce efforts across the region in the areas of behavioral health, substance use disorder treatment and long-term care and aging supports.”

UNH is collaborating with Medical Care Development’s Northeast Telehealth Resource Center to implement the CARE2 program, and is also joined by the University of New England, University of Vermont and University of Maine.

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