

**Remarks from the Rural Maryland Council on the
Health Care Reform Coordinating Council's Draft Recommendations
December 8, 2010**

The Rural Maryland Council applauds the work of the Health Care Reform Coordinating Council and its efforts to ensure that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is implemented in a careful and thoughtful manner. We do not take issue with any of the recommendations proposed by the HCRCC to date; however, we do believe one important recommendation has been left out.

We encourage the Coordinating Council to recommend that the State of Maryland commit itself to implementing a robust statewide telehealth/telemedicine network as a tool to improve and even ensure access to quality care in rural and underserved areas of the state.

The Rural Maryland Council, which works with rural communities across the state to identify and address their unique challenges, has been studying the potential of telehealth/telemedicine for more than two years. We are convinced that a robust network would improve access to quality care for our most vulnerable citizens in our most distressed, remote and underserved neighborhoods. Such a network, however, cannot be implemented without the support, endorsement and partnership of urban and suburban providers. Thus, statewide leadership and coordination is a critical and necessary component to constructing such a statewide network. Rural areas simply can't do it alone.

While most areas in Maryland suffer from a healthcare work force shortage, the shortages in rural Maryland are the most severe and will be worse with time unless solutions proposed by the Workforce Workgroup are implemented. Included in the solutions is Comprehensive Workforce Planning. We encourage a statewide telehealth/telemedicine network to be part of this planning to connect our urban medical institutions with the rural areas in our state. Maryland is blessed to have some of the best medical institutions and providers in the country. Technology is the only cost effective way for those providers to reach and care for their rural brothers and sisters.

During the past year, the Rural Maryland Council and Maryland Rural Health Association conducted a survey of telehealth projects currently underway in the state in hopes we could find ways to use that technology more effectively in rural areas. We identified 95 sites to survey and 26 responded. However, those 26 facilities represented 48 different telehealth/telemedicine clinical sites in the state. Many of them noted that better statewide coordination and leadership could improve their viability and expansion. We are not asking the state to "control" or "allow" these projects, but to create a network or coordinating body that allows all players to be aware of each other and to facilitate more effective usage of telehealth/telemedicine technology to serve all citizens.

Governor O'Malley's Health Quality and Cost Commission recently created a Telemedicine Task Force which has recommended creating a Maryland Telehealth Network, starting with stroke. We heartily and enthusiastically endorse this effort; however, as our survey found, other physicians and medical facilities are also moving forward, using technology to treat their own patients and build their own networks with varying funding sources. Synchronization of all existing and future telehealth efforts must be coordinated to help solve the workforce shortage issues in rural areas. If the state designated an agency, office, commission, institution, etc. to coordinate all telehealth initiatives in the state, we believe that both those providing and receiving telehealth/telemedicine services would be able to more easily

coordinate efforts, share best practices, identify gaps (and even excess capacity), ensure interoperability and encourage the creation of more partnerships at more locations.

With the recent award of a \$115 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant to the State of Maryland, the statewide broadband network is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2013. By beginning to implement a coordinated statewide telehealth network now, Maryland could truly be the first state in the country to genuinely ensure that all of its citizens have access to quality health care.

The Rural Maryland Council stands ready to support the HCRCC efforts to implement a statewide telehealth network.

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