

Title: Availability of Virtual Treatment for Unhealthy Alcohol Use Versus Access to Broadband Internet in Virginia

Lead Author: Caitlyn Syptak, Alexander Hirsch, MS2 (MS2, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine)

Abstract: In 2018, 16.9% of Virginian adults struggled with excessive alcohol use. Publicly-funded alcohol use treatment is provided by Community Services Boards (CSBs). The COVID-19 pandemic forced CSBs to provide purely virtual treatment. However, internet reliability varied across the state, and may have resulted in decreased access to care. It is hypothesized that within each CSB catchment area, a portion of residents could not engage in treatment due to inability to access the internet. **Methods:** Availability and modality of virtual services provided by CSBs, obtained via telephone surveys, were compared to broadband internet accessibility based on data from the American Community Survey. This study is part of a larger ongoing AHRQ-funded project addressing risky alcohol use in primary care. **Results:** All 40 Virginian CSBs offered virtual counseling services. 14.2% of Virginia households had no internet access. The percentage of households without access to internet was determined for each region: Northern VA: 5.4% of households (SD 1.4%; served by 5 CSBs); Shenandoah Valley: 17.1% (SD 6.9%; 8 CSBs); Hampton Roads: 13.0% (SD 6.6%; 8 CSBs); Central VA: 16.8% (SD 8.9%; 8 CSBs); and Western VA: 24.1% (SD 6.9%; 11 CSBs). **Conclusions:** While telehealth is a viable option for alcohol use treatment, 14.2% of Virginians cannot access virtual services, either due to inadequate broadband infrastructure or inability to pay. Internet is an essential service that must be both available and affordable. Local and state government should invest in broadband infrastructure and ensure affordable access for all Virginians.