

Increase Primary Health Care Access in West Virginia through Mobile Clinics to Save Lives and Improve Health Outcomes

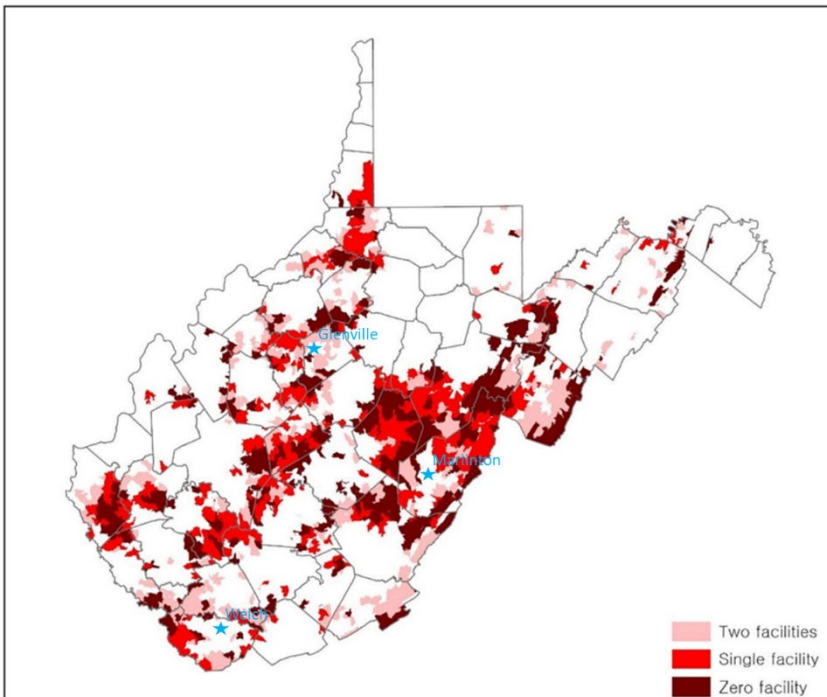
Executive Summary

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources should implement a mobile clinic to extend primary care to those West Virginians living in areas with limited access to primary care facilities. One of the main reasons driving cancer deaths is that the tumors were not found earlier, and a leading factor for a late diagnosis is that the patient did not seek care until it was too late. Making it easier to seek care by enabling rural residents of WV who live far from primary care facilities can therefore save the lives of West Virginians on a regular basis. A pilot program for a clinic based in Marlinton to provide primary care to rural communities around Marlinton can save lives, and if it is successful in Marlinton, could be expanded to other parts of the state.

Introduction

Geographic access to primary care is an impediment to seeking health care, which therefore reduces overall well-being when people have barriers to accessing health care. Spatial access is frequently measured as having one or more primary care providers [within 30 minutes of your home](#).

The map below shows areas of West Virginia in which there are no primary care providers within 30 minutes of driving time in dark red, and areas for which there are only one or two nearby providers in lighter shades of red. Residents of areas with no providers are



Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Over 50,000 West Virginians have one or zero primary health care providers within 30 minutes of their home.
2. Lack of access to primary health care is associated with poorer health outcomes, including elevated mortality rates.
3. A single provider may not be sufficient for a community as they may not accept certain insurance, or can close, making communities more vulnerable.
4. West Virginia policy makers should improve access through mobile clinics that can bring doctors and basic services to the highest-need areas of West Virginia.

already at a disadvantage regarding access to health care, and those in areas with one or two providers can also face limitations such as the only available provider not accepting the patient's insurance, the provider being overwhelmed to where they excessively send patients to specialists that are often located even farther away, or not being open during hours convenient to the patient. Residents of these areas are also at increased risk for losing access if a single provider closes.

Having additional providers within that 30-minute drive-time can reduce negative health outcomes. For example, an additional provider within 30 minutes can reduce a community's mortality rate on

average by [80 deaths per year per 100,000 residents](#).

A mobile clinic can provide access to communities within the underserved areas, such as a clinic based out of Marlinton, which is the town nearest the red areas in the eastern portion of the state. This area also presents challenges to residents who must travel longer distances to access health care because it is an especially mountainous area with roads that can be difficult to traverse in winter conditions.

Limits to accessing primary health care in West Virginia

Many West Virginians have to travel long distances, or lack the vehicle access to travel to access primary care services, defined as any entry point into the health care system. This is typically through a primary care physician, or family doctor, but can also include nurse practitioners, mental health or behavioral health services, or occasionally other specialized services. This is a problem nationwide, but is particularly acute in West Virginia, where there are communities where even a family doctor, much less a hospital, is 30 minutes or more away from home. When it is more difficult for people to get to a doctor, they delay seeking treatment and this leads to increased illness, worse illnesses, such as being diagnosed with cancer at a later stage, and increased death rates.

What can be done?

Approaches to improving people's ability to access health care services typically takes one of two forms, which form the basis of the options below.

- **The West Virginia DHHR can develop mobile clinics to bring primary care doctors and facilities into communities that otherwise lack services.** This helps residents who may have the vehicle access to travel, but do not have the time to travel long distances to seek medical care.
- **The West Virginia DHHR can contract with Uber Health or another ride-share service to offer low-cost or no-cost options to provide rides to health care facilities in nearby towns.** This assists residents who may not have access to vehicles, such as elderly people who no longer have a driver's license.

Recommendation:

I recommend that the West Virginia DHHR implement a mobile health clinic, based in Marlinton, and which would travel to the communities surrounding Marlinton to provide better health care accessibility to the thousands of residents of the surrounding area. This option is able to serve a wider audience than the ride-share option, because it is available to residents who do not have the time to use a ride-share to travel what is still a long distance to receive care. However, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. If a mobile clinic in Marlinton is successful at improving health care utilization rates, the program can then be expanded to other parts of West Virginia with limited health care access, such as basing mobile clinics in Glenville and Welch.

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This work was developed by a Bridge Faculty Fellow supported by West Virginia University's [Bridge Initiative in Science and Technology Policy, Leadership, and Communications](#). The Bridge Initiative identifies challenges and opportunities facing West Virginia and provides a bridge between the science and technology expertise of WVU faculty and staff and West Virginia's national, state, and local policymakers.

The views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the researcher and are not necessarily those of West Virginia University.

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