

June 4, 2024



Advocacy for Innovative Care: Shaping Telehealth 2030

Interprofessional Interns Design Paths for Advocacy for Telemental Health in Rural Minnesota and Wisconsin

Tuesday, May 28, 2024.

Students from the University of Minnesota presented work on the future of Telehealth and of Mental and Behavioral Health to the Telehealth Committee of Wilderness Health on May 28th, 2024.

Therein, they reported on a study of policy in both Minnesota and Wisconsin in two areas of concern: *telehealth* (in all its applications, from basic doctor visits to specialist care) and *mental and behavioral* health. They found that Wisconsin and Minnesota have innovated in different, often complementary ways.

Where Minnesota's Medicaid expansion has vastly increased access to mental and behavioral healthcare, Wisconsin, in refusing that package, has struggled to find everyone the help that they need. Minnesota's increased access has not been matched by an increase in providers, though – the waits remain long, and so remain a barrier.

Similarly, Wisconsin participates in a number of interstate compacts that widens who can deliver care via telehealth. Minnesota licensure boards across different types of care providers have been more cautious in regulating who can deliver care via telehealth, restricting care to Minnesota residents by out-of-state caregivers – creating waits, again. Wisconsin does have significant gaps in reimbursement as compared to Minnesota, which then results in fewer providers willing to accept Medicaid patients.

In both states, telehealth is an essential way of connecting patients to care providers, especially in rural areas where long drive times and fewer providers are barriers. Crisis response and decriminalizing of mental illness were additional common themes in legislation.

Students also explored the need to support residents of both Minnesota and Wisconsin across the “digital divide.” Lower-cost access to high-speed internet, training on devices and software, and help with assistive technology for those with disabilities are key to ensuring everyone can benefit from telehealth.

The conversation with the Telehealth Committee also brought up reimbursement issues. Payment parity (or equivalent payment) for audio-only visits is also especially important to ensure those who cannot navigate video visits can still receive care. Also in both states, patients and providers are served better when mental and behavioral health is reimbursed at rates that meet the costs to provide the care.

In their work, the students drew deeply on resources from NAMI, MN and WI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) and regional resources like gpTRAC (Great Plains Telehealth Resource and Assistance Center). In so doing, they connected with professionals working in healthcare very different from their own. The students came to Wilderness through the Interprofessional Internship program in the Office of Academic Clinical Affairs.

About the Interns

The Office of Academic Clinical Affairs [Interprofessional Internship Program](#) places graduate and professional students from the University of Minnesota with community partners around the state. Interns apply collaborative practice skills to solve problems for clinical partners, developing real-world working relationships. Through their experience, they advance what the university calls “interprofessional education and practice” – teaching healthcare providers to communicate with administrators, community advocates, and more – decreasing the hyperspecialization that students experience as they complete their medical and professional training. The 2023-24 theme for internship projects was to deliver, enhance, or expand access to rural and mobile health services, programs, and education.



Kandeija Bagurusi is pursuing her Doctorate in Physical Therapy (2025). She has previously worked at an Outpatient Pediatric Therapy Clinic assisting therapists during patient sessions. She hopes to become a Pediatric Physical Therapist working directly with children and their families to be a part of assisting them in reaching their full abilities and potential.




Connor Oetzmann is an MHA candidate at the University of Minnesota committed to strengthening his understanding of the complex and ever-changing healthcare system. According to Oetzmann, “As an aspiring healthcare leader, I have a strong passion for quality improvement and health equity.”

Bagurusi noted that, “This experience has afforded me the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of current policies shaping patient care. Recognizing that policy is a powerful tool for meaningful change, I am committed to advocating for health policies that meet the diverse needs of patients in our ever-evolving world.”

Oetzmann added, "I am deeply grateful for this experience, as it provided me with a valuable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of current policies and how policy changes are made. It is crucial that both current and future policies ensure rural areas have adequate access to mental and behavioral health services, as well as telehealth services"

Zomi Bloom, Wilderness Health Telehealth program manager, applauded the interns for their commitment and passion for the project. “In this project, we’re focusing on advocacy and education. Understanding policy and finding ways to educate healthcare leaders and legislators throughout our region is key to increasing access to care.” Materials, including preliminary reports, policy briefs, and more, can be found at <https://z.umn.edu/AdvocacyforInnovativeCare>.

Wilderness also recognizes the contributions of Katie McLaughlin, JD, who is pursuing her MD and assisted the early portion of this project. Katie is proud to be from the Iron Range in rural northeastern Minnesota. She has over a decade of professional, community leadership, and volunteer experience in law and healthcare including mental healthcare, human services, child advocacy, and non-profit leadership across rural, urban, and suburban settings. The interns were also supported by Dr. David Beard of the University of Minnesota Duluth.

 <p>WILDERNESS HEALTH</p>	<p><i>About Wilderness Health-</i> a non-profit collaborative of independent providers working together to improve rural health care in Northeastern Minnesota and Wisconsin. Headquartered in Two Harbors since 2013, Wilderness Health aims to create a unified and supportive network for its members through its core values of collaboration, independence, networking, and quality. For more information about Wilderness, visit https://wildernesshealthmn.org/.</p> <p>Wilderness Health Members: Bigfork Valley Hospital Community Memorial Hospital Cook Hospital Ely-Bloomenson Community Hospital Fairview Range / Range Regional Health Services Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital Aspirus Lake View North Shore Health Aspirus St. Luke’s</p>
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