

## Blue Cross NC Awards \$200,000 Grant to Free and Charitable Clinics To Address Behavioral Health Crisis Among State's Most Vulnerable

- Behavioral health-related visits to free and charitable clinics have jumped 40% in 2 years
- Two rural clinics to partner with CareNet, Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation

**WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (June 7, 2022)** – North Carolina's free and charitable clinics are partnering with the state's largest health insurer to improve access to behavioral health care for the state's uninsured and underserved at a time when the need for behavioral health care is exploding.

The North Carolina Association of Free & Charitable Clinics (NCAFCC) announced that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (Blue Cross NC) awarded \$200,000 to support two member clinics, [Hands of Hope Medical Clinic](#) in Yadkinville and the [Free Clinic of Rockingham County](#) in Reidsville.

Visits to free and charitable clinics by patients seeking behavioral health services in 2021 jumped nearly 40% from 2019 levels, according to NCAFCC data, in large part due to stresses related to COVID-19 as patients experienced the loss of loved ones, unemployment and pandemic-induced social isolation.

"The Blue Cross NC grant addresses not only a serious health crisis unfolding in communities across our state, but a critical health equity issue as well," said Randy Jordan, CEO of the North Carolina of Free and Charitable Clinics. "We applaud Blue Cross NC for its role in improving access to behavioral health care for uninsured and underserved people in the rural areas this program is intended to serve."

The \$200,000 grant is part of more than \$2 million in grants [Blue Cross NC awarded to 11 organizations](#) as part of its "[Addressing the Behavioral Health Crisis in North Carolina](#)" program. The initiative supports the insurers' goal to improve access to behavioral health care in rural and underserved communities – including Yadkin and Rockingham counties – by 25% in five years.

"A whole person approach to care includes addressing mental health needs, and treatment for these disorders is very effective," said Dr. Nora Dennis, lead medical director of behavioral health and health equity at Blue Cross NC. "No one should have to live with untreated mental illness, so it's important that these resources get to every corner of our state. Blue Cross NC is investing in programs to help ensure rural and historically underserved communities have access to behavioral health resources that ultimately make health care better for all."

NCAFCC partnered on the grant with CareNet Counseling, a behavioral health service of Atrium Wake Forest Baptist Health, and the Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation, which will work together to ensure behavioral health services are integrated with the clinics' primary care services.

Integrating behavioral health into the primary care setting is important because 50% of clinics' primary care patients have a mental health condition, and 80% of people with a mental health diagnosis seek care from their primary care provider rather than a specialized mental health provider, research shows.

The grant will allow CareNet counselors to work with primary care providers at the clinics to identify patients in need of behavioral health services and provide counseling to patients on-site at each clinic two days a week. The grant will also support the purchase of laptops and tablets so that patients will be able to receive help via telehealth when they need it if an on-site provider is not available.

“Hands of Hope is so grateful to Blue Cross NC for making this grant available,” said Marty Driver, executive director of Hands of Hope Medical Clinic. “With their help, we will now be able to provide the much-needed behavioral health support for our patients who struggle with the ongoing challenges in today’s uncertain times.”

“The Free Clinic of Rockingham County is so excited to be a beneficiary of the Blue Cross NC behavioral health services grant,” said Kim Rider, executive director of the Free Clinic of Rockingham County. “Given the shortage of mental health providers in Rockingham County, this will be such a huge benefit to our patients, many of whom who have been on a waiting list to receive mental health services.”

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#### **About North Carolina Association of Free & Charitable Clinics**

The North Carolina Association of Free & Charitable Clinics supports 73 member-clinics in expanding access to healthcare, reducing health disparities and improving the health of uninsured and underinsured individuals. Member clinics are a vital part of North Carolina’s safety net, providing care for 80,000 patients in 86 counties, including primary and specialty medical care, dental care, pharmacy services, optometry, behavioral healthcare; lab tests and hospital referrals. The association supports member clinics with education, advocacy, research, funding and collaboration, and promotes quality healthcare for all North Carolinians. Learn more at [www.ncafcc.org](http://www.ncafcc.org).

#### **About Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina:**

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (Blue Cross NC) is committed to making health care better, simpler and more affordable. We have been driving better health in North Carolina since 1933, working to tackle our communities’ greatest health challenges. Blue Cross NC serves its customers and communities of 4.3 million members, including approximately 1.1 million on behalf of other Blue Plans. Blue Cross NC is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. Visit Blue Cross NC online at [www.bluecrossnc.com](http://www.bluecrossnc.com). All other marks are the property of their respective owners.

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