Request for Virginia MCO and DMAS Support of eConsult to Improve Access to Care for Medicaid Patients

Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS) and managed care organizations (MCOs) have the opportunity to work together to improve access to specialty care for Medicaid members through support of electronic consult (eConsult). eConsult facilitates communication between primary care providers (PCPs) and specialists, often eliminating the need for member travel and time off work for in-person specialty care visits.

Benefits of eConsult

In programs across the country, eConsult has demonstrated increased access to specialty care for Medicaid patients, reduced turnaround time for care management guidance, a reduction in unnecessary or inappropriate referrals, and cost savings. Medicaid agencies in states including California (p10), Colorado and New York (p578) have activated CPT codes 99451 (specialist/consultant) and 99451 (treating provider), resulting in cost savings. MCO data dashboards demonstrate the positive impacts of these programs. During the COVID-19 PHE, VIrginia activated codes for eConsult use as part of its administrative provider flexibilities.

Ensuring High Quality, Cost Effective eConsults

- **Appropriate use of eConsult** – eConsult is best utilized for routine, non-urgent patient needs. The PCP maintains the patient relationship and determines when an eConsult is appropriate. PCPs can request a second opinion or refer a patient subsequently. eConsult is often viewed as the first step in the referral process. eConsult resolves the PCP's question in approximately 75% of eConsults, avoiding an in-person visit.
- **Best practice questions and responses** – In mature programs, eConsult providers are trained to write effective questions including a clinical question, relevant patient history, and diagnostics including labs and images. Specialists' responses are rated for quality and satisfaction by primary care providers. PCPs are upskilled in the process, reducing utilization over time.
- **Specialist response turnaround time** – programs work with their specialist networks to agree upon an optimal turnaround time which ranges from an average of 4 hours (remote, contracted network) to 3 days (academic medical centers) – a dramatic reduction in wait time from weeks or months for an in-person visit.

Managed Care Organization Collaboration in Support of eConsult

Providers demonstrate improved utilization of eConsult when it is covered by all of their patients' managed care plans, reducing the need to determine if a patient is eligible to receive an eConsult. To create a widely accepted, sustainable program, MCOs can:

- **Contract with an eConsult platform** that offers a specialty network for managed care members.
- **Cover the costs of the platform** and the eConsult encounters for their plan members.
- **Engage clinics** with a high volume/excessive wait times for specialty referrals, and/or long distance to travel for in-person specialty care.

Call to Action

Virginia MCOs are supporting eConsult as a means of increasing access to quality care. VCHA has been awarded Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) funding to promote eConsult, support utilization and systems integration. We ask that DMAS include eConsult as a reimbursable benefit by adding these CPT codes to the State Medicaid Fee Schedule. This will encourage providers to capture eConsults within patients' electronic health records, improving reporting and the quality of patient care. DMAS eConsult endorsement will support the sustainability of eConsult beyond the RHTP.