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**AR-Connect Links Arkansans With Virtual Care
For Mental Illness, Stress Related to COVID-19**

LITTLE ROCK – Arkansans experiencing mental health issues or stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic may receive immediate help 24 hours a day through the AR-Connect program at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) with no out-of-pocket cost to the patient.

The program began in May and offers the opportunity to talk to a trained medical professional by telephone or live video for anyone dealing with problems like anxiety, depression and substance abuse or discomfort stemming from the pandemic.

The AR-Connect call center is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at 501-526-3563 or 800-482-9921. The live video virtual clinic operates Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

“AR-Connect came about because of COVID-19 and it has been very helpful for those dealing with the problems it has caused in their lives,” said G. Richard Smith, M.D., director of the UAMS Psychiatric Research Institute and chair of the Department of Psychiatry in the UAMS College of Medicine.

“There are so many people across our state needing help and not knowing where to turn, particularly those worried about the effect COVID-19 is having on them and their loved ones. For them, AR-Connect has been a godsend.”

Callers are screened by specially trained nurses, and if needed, are contacted by a therapist within 24 business hours. Virtual appointments are conducted via telephone or live video, the ultimate goal being to find help for the patients in their home community.

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“Many of the calls we have received since May have been from people who were unable to get help because of COVID-19 and all of the restrictions it has caused,” said Smith. “Others may have simply needed to find resources like child care or shelter. We’ve been fortunate enough to help everyone who has called, no matter what they needed.”

The lack of trained behavioral health specialists in Arkansas and the stigma associated with mental illness has made it difficult for many Arkansans to get the help they so desperately need. AR-Connect offers them timely care without the need for a referral.

“Those patients who appear in danger of committing suicide are given the number for the national suicide hotline or their nearest emergency room,” said Smith. “For everyone else, we make sure they have an appointment with a trained therapist who can evaluate their needs and determine the best way to meet them.”

The AR-Connect therapists, once they are confident the condition has been properly addressed, will connect the patient with a provider in the community for long-term care and follow up with the patient in a month and six months to ensure they are receiving the care needed.

Creation of the program was funded in part by a grant from the federal government’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS' clinical enterprise including its hospital, regional clinics and clinics it operates or staffs in cooperation with other providers. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. U.S. News & World Report named UAMS Medical Center the state's Best Hospital; ranked its ear, nose and throat program among the top 50 nationwide; and named six areas as high performing — cancer, colon cancer surgery, heart failure, hip replacement, knee replacement and lung cancer surgery. UAMS has 2,727 students, 870 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram.

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