

UAMS-led Proposal Competing for \$75 Million to Advance Health Care and Technology in Northwest Arkansas

A proposal led by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) is in the running to receive about \$75 million in federal funding for a health care workforce and technology initiative in Northwest Arkansas.

The UAMS-led effort is among 60 finalists from around the nation announced December 13, 2021, by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Each finalist receives about \$500,000 in federal grant money as part of the first phase of a \$1 billion competition known as the Build Back Better Regional Challenge.

The regional effort will focus on health sector jobs creation and “e-health” technology advancement.

According to the proposal, the initiative would “grow an e-health transformation cluster in Northwest Arkansas that will focus on economic growth and resilience through electronic health solutions; entrepreneurial health care technology; and equitable workforce development.”

The project will focus on the creation of new jobs in the health care sector for underserved workers, new accelerated bachelor of nursing degrees and a regional simulation center to train health care workers.

The plan also calls for increasing the number of residency training slots for physicians and support for “entrepreneurial health care professionals” in developing new technology and health care businesses in Northwest Arkansas.

The proposal comes about after years of working Northwest Arkansas Council’s Health Care Transformation Division, said Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., director of the UAMS Office of Community Health and Research and associate director of community outreach and engagement at the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute. McElfish is named on the proposal as the effort’s regional economic competitiveness officer.

“UAMS, the Northwest Arkansas Council, and our regional health care partners have been working on large strategic efforts for several years to transform Northwest Arkansas into a regional health care destination,” McElfish said. “This funding would advance those efforts to the next level.”

As part of these strategic efforts, the Northwest Arkansas Council established a Health Care Transformation Division in 2019 with the goal of transitioning Northwest Arkansas into a health care destination through increased access to care, more availability of high-level specialty care and integrating wellness of mind and body as an integral component of health care.

The Health Care Transformation Division, which includes Arkansas Children's Northwest, Community Clinic, Mercy, Northwest Health, UAMS, University of Arkansas, U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, Washington Regional, and the Whole Health Institute, is committed to an ongoing collaboration among providers to make the region a destination for health care.

The proposal's request for funding for graduate medical education steams from the need for more residency positions to train physicians in the region. Without residency slots, doctors educated in Arkansas must leave the state to complete their training. Additional residency slots will keep more of those physicians practicing in the state after their training is completed.

The focus on telemedicine comes as no surprise, as patients have increasingly made use of online technology to see doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic. A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services research report found that loosened restrictions on many types of telemedicine visits during the ongoing pandemic resulted in Medicare telemedicine visits increasing to nearly 52.7 million in 2020, up from about 840,000 a year earlier.

"There's been an increased use of not just telemedicine, but e-health tools overall," McElfish said.

The federal Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) developed the competitive grant challenge as a part of programs created under federal legislation known as the American Rescue Plan, passed earlier this year to provide coronavirus relief funding.

The EDA received concept proposals from 529 communities across the country representing all 50 states and five territories.

"We are thrilled to be a finalist in the Build Back Better Regional Challenge from the U.S. Department of Commerce," said Amy Wenger, vice chancellor of the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus. "Continued access to high-quality and value-based health care is a key component to Northwest Arkansas' economic growth. We have a strong regional coalition in the Northwest Arkansas Council's

Healthcare Transformation Division that is working to advance health care in Northwest Arkansas and bring new jobs to the region.”

Finalists now move on to the competition’s second phase, which has a deadline of March 15, as they seek to be one of among 20-30 regional coalitions named as major grant winners and recipients of up to \$100 million in grant awards. The major grant winners are expected to be named in August or September.

“The Build Back Better Regional Challenge aims to supercharge local economies and increase American competitiveness around the globe,” said Secretary of Commerce Gina M. Raimondo. “The outpouring of interest in this program shows the demand for the Build Back Better agenda and the desire to not only create good-paying jobs, but also strengthen our country’s economic resiliency for years down the road.”