



Policy Resolution 2019-04

Health Care in Western States

A. **BACKGROUND**

1. Ensuring access to high-quality, affordable health care services is an important element of maintaining and enhancing the quality of life in western states for our growing populations. It is the basis for healthy communities and healthy economies.
2. Western states face unique challenges in health care, including growing rates of substance use disorder, provider shortages in underserved and rural areas, and limited access to broadband. Low population densities and the vast distances between population centers also make it difficult for providers to establish economically-sustainable health care systems in rural areas.
3. Distance and density also inhibit construction of the technology infrastructure that would provide or improve broadband connectivity in underserved and rural areas. Expanding broadband access provides numerous quality-of-life benefits for rural Americans, including economic development, social connectivity, education, public safety, and access to telehealth and telemedicine.
4. The health care sector faces severe personnel shortages in western states, despite efforts of Western Governors, such as the foundation of Western Governors University and other medical training programs in western states, to ensure adequate numbers of qualified medical personnel. This challenge is particularly acute in the West's underserved and rural areas. Ensuring access to health care services requires an adequate number and distribution of physicians, nurses and other trained health care professionals. Population growth, aging residents, and challenges involving Tribal health care and services for veterans require a renewed focus on developing our nation's health care workforce.
5. Western states struggle with access to behavioral health services and higher-than average suicide rates. The ten states with the highest suicide rates in the nation are all located in the West.
6. Substance use disorder (SUD), including alcohol and drug misuse, is a major public health and safety crisis affecting nearly 21 million Americans. It is particularly prevalent in western states where individuals are more likely to have SUD during their lifetime. SUD crosses all social and economic lines and tragically takes the lives of tens of thousands of Americans every year. While state and federal progress has been made to fight this epidemic, additional efforts are necessary to help bridge prevention and treatment gaps in western states.
7. In many cases, health disparities and barriers to accessing health care are particularly acute for certain populations in the West. A better understanding of the role that social determinants play in health outcomes can inform the development of effective health policy to increase access for these populations.

8. Western states have a unique body of experience, knowledge and perspective with respect to health care. The Western Governors' Association (WGA) is ideally situated to collect and disseminate information, including best practices, case studies and policy options, that states can use to improve the foundation for health care services and advocate for shared policy priorities on behalf of their citizens.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Federal efforts to address health care workforce and access needs should reflect early, meaningful and substantive input from Governors, who are best positioned to assess the needs of their states and help develop solutions to meet these needs. State-federal collaboration and coordination are integral to addressing these health care challenges. Wherever possible, and where appropriate, the federal government should respect state authority and maximize flexibility granted to states and Governors.
2. The federal government should work with states to facilitate the deployment of broadband to underserved and rural areas, recognizing that adequate broadband access has a direct correlation on rural populations' ability to access telehealth and telemedicine.
3. Despite efforts by Western Governors to address the shortage of qualified health care workers, significant challenges remain. Governors urge the federal government to examine and implement programs to ensure states have an adequate health care workforce – including in primary care and other in-demand specialties – that is prepared to serve diverse populations in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Governors also support efforts to increase the diversity of the health care workforce to improve health outcomes for all.
4. Western Governors support efforts to improve the quality and quantity of behavioral health services available to our residents, as these services are essential to reducing suicide rates and treating a range of behavioral health conditions, including substance use disorder.
5. The federal government should work toward treating addiction as a chronic illness and work with Western Governors to develop strategies for addressing substance use disorder that work in concert with state efforts and recognize regional variations in substance use disorder patterns.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a bi-annual basis. Please consult westgov.org/resolutions for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.