

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2021**

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SENATE BILL 161

Short Title: NC Statewide Telepsychiatry Program/Funds. (Public)

Sponsors: Senators Davis, Steinburg, and Corbin (Primary Sponsors).

Referred to: Rules and Operations of the Senate

March 1, 2021

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT APPROPRIATING FUNDS TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES TO EXPAND THE STATEWIDE TELEPSYCHIATRY PROGRAM (NC-STEP).

Whereas, a recent national poll released by the American Psychiatric Association in late March found that more than 36% of Americans say that coronavirus is having a serious impact on their mental health; and

Whereas, as many as one in five people have a diagnosable and treatable psychiatric disorder; and

Whereas, at a time when treatment for psychiatric illness has never been more effective, many people with these disorders do not have access to psychiatric services due to the shortage and maldistribution of providers, especially psychiatrists. In North Carolina, there are 31 counties without a psychiatrist, and 90 counties are designated as mental health shortage areas; and

Whereas, the shortage of mental health providers has resulted in patients going to hospital emergency departments to seek services, leading to long lengths of stay and boarding of psychiatric patients in hospital emergency departments; and

Whereas, the use of digital technologies can bridge social distance, even while physical distancing measures are in place. Telehealth services are perfectly suited to this pandemic situation, giving people access to important services without increasing risk of infection; and

Whereas, the Statewide Telepsychiatry Program (NC-STeP) has been a leader in the area of telehealth; Now, therefore,

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

SECTION 1. There is appropriated from the General Fund to the Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Central Management and Support, Office of Rural Health, the sum of one million dollars (\$1,000,000) in nonrecurring funds for each year of the 2021-2023 fiscal biennium to be allocated to East Carolina University Center for Telepsychiatry and e-Behavioral Health for the statewide telepsychiatry program established under G.S. 143B-139.4B, known as NC-STeP. These funds shall be used to establish five new NC-STeP program sites.

SECTION 2. This act becomes effective July 1, 2021.

