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Virginia's Black Lung Clinic Program Receives Federal Funding to Serve Coal Miners and Their Widows

The St. Charles Health Council, Inc., d/b/a Stone Mountain Health Services, a Federally Qualified Health Center that provides integrated medical and behavioral health care services in Southwest Virginia, was awarded $1,072,356 from the Health Resources and Services Administration to support the continued implementation of its Black Lung Clinic Program.

The Stone Mountain Health Services Black Lung Clinic Program was established in 1991 to serve active, retired, and disabled coal miners, and their widows. SMHS patients face the highest prevalence and worst outcomes of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease, in the nation. Surveillance in recent years uncovered the largest cluster of progressive massive fibrosis, the most severe form of black lung disease, ever reported among SMHS patients. Analysis of self-reported behavioral health outcomes highlights that black lung patients face extremely high rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality and trauma. In addition, overall health outcomes of black lung patients are heavily influenced by the social, economic, environmental and health care disparities in Southwest Virginia.

To meet these documented needs of coal miners, Stone Mountain Health Services will continue to provide black lung services at its St. Charles and Vansant Respiratory Care Centers in Lee and Buchanan Counties. The program will focus on improving access to black lung screening, evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment; improving access to subspecialty pulmonary care in partnership with the University of Virginia; improving quality of life for patients through interventions targeting behavioral health and social determinants of health; enhancing access to a new, innovative Pulmonary Rehabilitation and Wellness program; providing benefits counseling with experienced and effective lay representation; and increasing awareness of black lung disease at the local, state, regional and national levels.

"We have a dedicated and compassionate team," said Margaret Tomann, Black Lung Program Director, "Committed to advocating for the health, wellbeing, and federal benefits claims of coal miners and their widows. We are excited to strengthen relationships with our partners at The University of Virginia, The Black Lung Data and Resource Center at The University of Illinois at Chicago, and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, along with many other local, state, and national partners, to improve quality and availability of services for coal miners in our region."

Stone Mountain Health Services has a long history of successfully advocating for those with black lung disease. From July 2018 – June 2019, the Black Lung Clinic Program served 2450 miners from eight states; filed 471 new federal black lung claims; represented miners and their widows at 116 court hearings; and had 314 miners and widows awarded federal black lung benefits. In 2019, the Stone Mountain Health Services Black Lung Clinic Program was recognized as the Virginia Community Healthcare Association's "Team of the Year", Virginia Rural Health Association's "Best Practice in Rural

Health", and the National Rural Health Associations "Outstanding Rural Health Organization." Given its geographic location at the epicenter of the nation's increase of black lung disease and the strength and breadth of its multifaceted program, Stone Mountain Health Services is well positioned serve coal miners and their families with quality medical, behavioral and lay legal services in the years to come.