



Virginia Farm Wellness & Resilience: Strengthening Farmer Mental Health

Access and Rural Virginia

Executive Summary

Virginia's agricultural community is facing a growing mental health crisis driven by economic instability, rising operational costs, labor shortages, climate-related stress, and limited healthcare access in rural areas. Agriculture remains one of the Commonwealth's largest private industries; Virginia's agriculture and forestry sectors together generate more than \$105 billion in economic impact and support around 490,000 jobs statewide. At the same time, rural communities continue to experience elevated suicide risk and severe behavioral healthcare shortages, while many farmers struggle to locate and access existing support systems.

This policy brief proposes a coordinated statewide agricultural mental health framework that combines community-based outreach, farmer-focused teletherapy expansion, centralized resource navigation, and streamlined grant access. Rather than replacing existing programs, the initiative would strengthen and unify them through a visible, state-supported system designed specifically for Virginia's agricultural communities. Because the proposal primarily coordinates and expands existing systems rather than creating entirely new standalone agencies, implementation costs can remain relatively limited while improving statewide efficiency and resource utilization.

Context or Scope of Problem:

Agriculture remains one of Virginia's most economically important industries, with about 38,600 farms operating on more than 7.3 million acres. Nearly 95% of Virginia farms are family-owned, meaning financial hardships, operational instability, and mental health challenges frequently affect entire households and multigenerational livelihoods rather than individual workers alone. Rising production costs, labor shortages, unpredictable weather conditions, debt pressures, and market volatility continue to place significant strain on rural communities across the Commonwealth.

Simultaneously, rural communities continue to experience disproportionately high mental health risks and limited healthcare access. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



(CDC), suicide rates in non-metro areas increased by 46% between 2000 and 2020, compared with 27.3% in metro areas, and rural residents also have 1.5 times the rate of emergency department visits for nonfatal self-harm. Virginia also faces substantial provider shortages. The Health Resources and Services Administration reports that 102 of Virginia's 133 counties and county equivalents are federally designated primary care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), affecting 29 percent of the state's population, while 93 counties are designated mental health care HPSAs, affecting nearly one-third of Virginians (Andrew et al., 2024).

Virginia already has several promising nonprofit, university-based, federally supported, and community-led programs that partially address these issues, including but not limited to AgrAbility Virginia, VA FARMS, and the Virginia Telemental Health Initiative. However, these initiatives largely operate through separate partnerships, temporary grants, charitable healthcare systems, universities, or federal support structures rather than through a centralized statewide framework coordinated by the Commonwealth itself. As a result, public awareness and access remain inconsistent across regions.

This policy brief recommends establishing a centralized and coordinated statewide framework that improves access to existing mental health and agricultural support services through community-based outreach, teletherapy expansion, centralized resource navigation, and public awareness efforts that are specifically targeted towards rural populations. The challenge is not simply the existence of resources, but the difficulty of navigating them. Many farmers must search across multiple agency websites, grant portals, clinic systems, and nonprofit directories that all operate independently with different eligibility requirements and intake processes. Simplifying access is especially important given that the average Virginia farmer is approximately 59.2 years old, while many agricultural assistance systems have shifted almost entirely online. Improving coordination is therefore not only a healthcare issue, but also an issue tied to economic resilience and the long-term stability of Virginia's rural communities and agricultural workforce.

Policy Recommendations

I. Community Sentinel Outreach Network

France's Mutualité Sociale Agricole (MSA) developed one of the most comprehensive agricultural suicide prevention systems in Europe after the French Ministry



of Agriculture directed the organization in 2011 to create a national suicide prevention strategy for agricultural workers. The system focuses on prevention, early detection, support, and referral through programs such as a specialized mental health hotline staffed by professionals trained in rural stressors, and the Sentinel Network, which trains trusted community members, such as veterinarians, agricultural advisors, retirees, and even neighbors, to identify signs of distress and connect struggling individuals with support services before crises escalate. France's Mutualité Sociale Agricole (MSA) Agri-Sentinel system has around 8,900 trained sentinels as of 2026.

Virginia should implement a similar state-coordinated framework by establishing a statewide agricultural sentinel outreach network integrated through Cooperative Extension offices, agricultural organizations, county fairs, universities, and rural healthcare systems. Farmers are often more likely to interact regularly with veterinarians, extension agents, lenders, clergy, and agricultural advisors than with mental health professionals, making these trusted individuals particularly effective points of early intervention. Trusted individuals who already interact regularly with agricultural communities could receive mental health awareness and referral training focused specifically on agricultural stressors and rural healthcare access. Rather than relying on fragmented nonprofit outreach, a Commonwealth-supported system that has quarterly sessions and workshops facilitated in public community spaces and hosted by mental health specialists or professionals would act as an approachable solution to encourage awareness and improve public visibility, acting as an early intervention system throughout Virginia's agricultural communities.

II. Farmer-focused Teletherapy Expansion

Domestically, Michigan State University Extension's Managing Farm Stress program shows that teletherapy can be tailored effectively for farmers. MSU has partnered with Pine Rest Mental Health Services to connect farmers, farm families, and commercial fishers with online counseling from therapists who understand agricultural life and are trained in the particular agricultural stressors that farmers face. The program also reduces barriers through remote access and financial assistance for uninsured or underinsured participants, directly addressing the two biggest obstacles in rural healthcare: cost and distance.

Virginia should build a similar model by expanding farmer-specific teletherapy pathways through existing clinics, universities, and agricultural support network



infrastructure. The Virginia Telemental Health Initiative already provides free online therapy through free-clinic partnerships, and its reported scale, which includes giving more than 7,300 teletherapy sessions for 571 unique patients referred by 31 free and charitable clinic partners in 2025, shows that a model that expands teletherapy is feasible in the Commonwealth; it just needs to be expanded. With this program, providers should receive training in agricultural culture and rural stressors to reduce the common disconnect between farmers and traditional mental health services. A state-coordinated system would unify these efforts into a single referral structure, making teletherapy easier to access across rural Virginia without requiring the creation of an entirely new healthcare system.

III. Implement a Centralized Grant Application System

Virginia should establish a unified agricultural grant and resource portal to reduce the administrative burdens that currently prevent many farmers from accessing available support programs. Today, producers must navigate multiple disconnected systems, including VDACS WebGrants, Grants.gov, and USDA-specific application portals, each with separate registration requirements, timelines, documentation standards, and login credentials. Federal applications alone can require weeks of preparation and multiple preliminary registrations before applications can even begin. For Virginia's small farms, which account for more than 80% of all farms in the Commonwealth and generate less than \$50,000 in annual sales, these administrative burdens can become a major obstacle to participation.

To address these inefficiencies, Virginia should establish a unified agricultural grant portal modeled after the "Common App" approach. Farmers would create one profile, upload documents once, and reuse core operational information across multiple applications rather than repeatedly navigating separate systems. The platform could also include multilingual support, plain-language instructions, automatic eligibility matching, and real-time application tracking to improve accessibility for underserved and first-time applicants.

Virginia already has a successful model for this type of modernization through the Virginia Permit Transparency (VPT) initiative. Since its launch in 2022, the system has significantly reduced permit processing times. Originally developed from the Department of Environmental Quality's "PEEP" platform, VPT created a centralized, web-based system allowing applicants to track permit progress across agencies in real time. The platform now covers more than 100,000 permit applications annually across ten state agencies. By



increasing transparency and improving coordination, the Department of Environmental Quality reduced average permit processing times by 70%, saving Virginia citizens up to \$40 million annually. The project was also developed cost-effectively by leveraging existing state resources and technology infrastructure.

A unified grant platform would apply the same principles of centralized access, transparency, and streamlined administration to agricultural funding programs. By reducing redundant paperwork and simplifying the application process, the Commonwealth can improve grant accessibility, reduce administrative costs, and allow farmers to spend more time operating their businesses rather than navigating bureaucracy. The platform would also function as a centralized information hub, allowing users to filter programs by funding amount, deadlines, eligibility requirements, and purpose, such as disaster relief, operational support, conservation incentives, or debt stabilization. This would reduce the time required to identify and apply for relevant programs while increasing overall participation in existing funding opportunities.

Legislated Action Requested & Expected Outcomes

- I. Recommended State Action
 - A. The Commonwealth should direct VDACS, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the Virginia Department of Health to jointly develop a coordinated statewide agricultural mental health initiative focused on community outreach, teletherapy expansion, and centralized resource navigation.
- II. Implementation Considerations
 - A. The proposal emphasizes coordination and expansion of existing infrastructure through universities, charitable clinics, Cooperative Extension offices, telehealth partnerships, and agricultural organizations rather than creating entirely new systems. A phased implementation approach could allow the Commonwealth to evaluate outcomes and long-term sustainability before broader expansion.
- III. Expected Outcomes
 - A. The initiative could improve access to rural mental health services, strengthen early intervention efforts, reduce barriers to support programs, and support the long-term economic resilience of Virginia’s agricultural communities.



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