

News Release

For Immediate Release in Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania and Yancey Counties

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Plan for the Future

Western Highlands Network Announces Plans to Develop a Management Agreement with Smoky Mountain Center

April 25, 2013– The Western Highlands Network (WHN) Board of Directors approved a plan today to begin work with Smoky Mountain Center (SMC) in developing a partnership between the two organizations for overseeing the management of behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disability services under the 1915(b)/(c) Medicaid Waivers and other functions for Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania and Yancey Counties.

While the recent decision by the Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Aldona Wos to end the 1915(b)/(c) Medicaid Waivers contract between the NC Division of Medical Assistance and Western Highlands Network came as a surprise to Western Highlands leadership, and initially created some concerns about the ability to ensure uninterrupted services to behavioral and intellectually/developmentally disabled residents of Western North Carolina, the decision has opened up new opportunities for a stronger and more comprehensive system for the region through a partnership between Smoky Mountain Center and Western Highlands Network.

According to Western Highlands Network Board Chair Charles Vines, “on Friday, April, 5 we received a letter from Secretary Wos of her decision to end the contract with WHN effective July 31, 2013. While Western Highlands has experienced organizational challenges in initiating operations to manage Medicaid funds during the initial year, we were very surprised by this announcement in light of the progress that the WHN Board and staff have made in turning our financial situation around.” Mr. Vines went on to say that “WHN had turned around a deficit from the first 6 months of 2012 that was over \$4,000,000, to a projected surplus of over \$2,000,000 as of June 30, 2013.”

Mandy Stone, Assistant County Manager of Buncombe County, and Western Highlands Network Board member relays, “the Board of Directors and Administrative staff began to think about the positive opportunities to prepare for the future by exploring a partnership with Smoky Mountain Center to create a stronger, 23-county presence. After meeting with the SMC Board of Directors Executive Committee and Administrative staff, we felt that our mutual commitment to a seamless continuity of care for consumers receiving services and the stability for providers in the WHN Network could be the underpinning for a strong collaboration.”

Ms. Stone went on to say, “the Western Highlands Board felt that Smoky Mountain Center is a natural partner in preparing for the future. Both organizations understand the needs of Western North Carolina and have a strong history of engaging consumers and families in understanding what works best in the services they need, as well as actively involving our provider network in planning to provide high quality, accessible services for those we serve. As important, both organizations have worked diligently to establish relationships with local governments, health and human service agencies and the health care systems in our counties to promote responsive and collaborative relationships that enhance the lives of individuals with behavioral health or intellectual/developmental disabilities.”

Western Highlands Network’s Acting CEO Charlie Schoenheit went on to say, “One of the primary reasons that exploring a relationship with Smoky Mountain Center is advantageous is that they view Western Highlands Network employees as a valuable resource critical to the success of Smoky Mountain Center’s assumption of the 1915(b)/(c) Medicaid Waivers contract as well as other functions”.

At this point, Mr. Vines states, “Western Highlands Network’s Board of Directors believes that working with Smoky Mountain Center is the best approach to assuring that services for individuals with behavioral health issues and intellectual/developmental disabilities continue with no disruption. Once we establish this stability and continuity of care, both organizations can place a broader focus on the future of our partnership in representing the 23 western and foothills counties of the state and the opportunities it brings for enhancing access and quality of services and operational efficiencies. We can also strive to achieve the goals of greater coordination of care as set forth in the Governor’s proposed new integrated health care model, *Partnership for a Healthy North Carolina*”.

Smoky Mountain Center, with administrative offices in Sylva, Waynesville, Lenoir and Boone, as well as staff locations throughout a 15-county catchment area, is the Local Management Entity/Managed Care Organization (LME/MCO) that manages behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disability services under the 1915(b)/(c) Waivers in Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, McDowell, Swain, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties.

Rick French, Chair of the SMC Board of Directors, relates that “Smoky Mountain Center is pleased that the Western Highlands Network Board of Directors chose to partner with our organization and the new opportunities the partnership will offer for Western North Carolina. We both share a strong history of serving the western and foothills counties of the state and are committed to maintaining a strong local presence in the communities we serve, as well as being responsive to the unique needs of each county in our respective catchment areas.”

Smoky Mountain Center CEO Brian Ingraham states, “Our primary goal is to establish a collaborative process with the Board and staff of Western Highlands Network that will promote open communication and active engagement with consumers, providers and community stakeholders in the transition of managing Medicaid funds for individuals receiving Medicaid behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disability services in the eight counties served by Western Highlands Network.

Mr. Schoenheit noted that “now that the Western Highlands and Smoky Mountain Center Board of Directors have approved the plan for moving forward in preparing for the management of the 1915(b)(c) Waiver operations and other functions, staff of both organizations will begin meeting to plan for a smooth transition. While we have a lot of work ahead to develop a transition plan, we are committed to doing so in a manner that will focus on providing information and regular communication with consumers, families, providers and all of the community agencies and local governments in our service area.”

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