

Dear Sir:

1. Name and Address: Dr. Kathy J. Mitchell, Virginia Highlands Community College
2. Affiliations: Dean of Nursing & Allied Health and Dean of the Virginia Appalachian Tricollege Nursing Program at Virginia Highlands Community College, Abingdon, VA. Member of Board of Directors at Johnston Memorial Hospital, Abingdon, VA, member of Advisory Committees for King University Nursing Program and Southwest Virginia Paramedic Program.
3. The communities of Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee face many health care challenges that are so powerful that it is difficult to identify those that are the greatest.
 - Certainly, one of those great challenges is drug abuse. Drug abuse affects individuals, families, workforce, economy, education, etc. This is commonly recognized as a major problem; yet, there are very limited resources to deal with it.
 - Inadequate health insurance leads to residents receiving insufficient health care interventions and neglecting critical health care needs, resulting in a population with less than optimal health.
 - Mental health is a major problem in our service region and is often misunderstood or treated as a stigma, something to be hidden rather than addressed. Mental health conditions coexist with many other physical conditions and is often a contributing factor of an individual's physical condition. Mental health affects everyone.
 - Demographics indicate that Southwest Virginia/East Tennessee is an underserved area for healthcare services. Training, recruitment, and retention of qualified healthcare professionals continues to be a challenge.
 - A large percentage of the population falls in a low economic range and is prone to inadequate insurance and other resources needed for optimal health.
4. Integrating the 2 health systems, Wellmont and Mountain States Health Alliance, will provide opportunities to:
 - Combine resources to help build stronger healthcare centers as agency resources are consolidated to create more advanced and focused departments. Problems to address include drug abuse, mental health, and disparities in health care.
 - Address community health issues from a centralized location, targeting the unique health needs of our region.
 - Commit to development of academic and research opportunities and to support post-graduate health care training. This can only strengthen the healthcare workforce in the region. As an education, I am particularly excited about this aspect.
 - Attract and retain a strong workforce which is paramount to community health.