

# **DISEASES OF DESPAIR IN CENTRAL APPALACHIA IN THE TIME OF COVID AND EFFORTS TO ASSIST**

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The disproportionate impact of COVID on People of Color has been well documented, but rural white populations are also at increased risk. Central Appalachia has been impacted for decades by the Diseases of Despair - Suicide, Drug Overdoses and deaths due to Alcoholism, with rates significantly higher than the rest of the country, but there is also now a high rate of COVID related morbidity and mortality, forming a Syndemic. The multiple interactions between COVID and the Diseases of Despair have enhanced the deadly impact of both conditions. I will examine this interaction and the cultural background in which it occurs. In Central Appalachia, where health care resources are historically insufficient, due to the closure of local hospitals, difficulty attracting health care providers, and immigration of skilled providers from the area, the further impact of COVID on inadequate resources has been devastating, imperiling efforts to treat the endemic Disorders of Despair, further enhancing the subsequent devastation. I will explore efforts to assist in this situation and how that has been impacted by COVID. Our efforts to ally with local providers in Central Appalachia have been challenged by the presence of COVID on several levels. This has required a shifting of priorities and new efforts to address needs. These efforts to counter this impact will be discussed. The increasing importance of technology and the downside of this dependence on technology in a rural area will be examined. The overall public health crisis will be examined within the cultural context of Central Appalachia. Present political struggles and the Culture Wars have impacted efforts to improve mental health care in Central Appalachia and have heightened the impact of COVID in further deteriorating mental and physical health in the region.

## **Learning Objectives**

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. acquire an understanding of the interaction between disenfranchisement and exploitation resulting in an endemic of mortality relating to mental illness and the impact of a viral epidemic within a specific cultural setting further diminishing mental health and its treatment.
2. judge the efforts to address the subsequent public health crisis using technology and cultural awareness despite formidable barriers.

## **References**

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2. Navarro, V. Why the White Working-class Mortality and Morbidity Is Increasing in the United States: The Importance of the Political Context. *International Journal of Health Services*. 49(2):197-203, 2019 04.