If people can’t access treatment for a substance-use disorder (SUD) close to where they live, they might not get any treatment, said Justine Welsh, MD, a child and adolescent and addiction psychiatrist and director of the Emory Healthcare Addiction Services.

Having evidence-based care for SUDs throughout Georgia is just one goal of a new partnership between Emory Healthcare and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation. The Atlanta-based health system and the national, nonprofit addiction treatment provider created the Addiction Alliance of Georgia in a multiyear partnership that seeks to build wide-ranging treatment access for patients with a SUD as well as promote evidence-based research and education efforts for all Georgians.

“We’re going to put treatment where it is needed most by building networks throughout the state,” said Dr. Welsh. “This partnership will help to reduce transit times to treatment, enhance telehealth options and help build community-based linkages.”

Treatment options, according to Dr. Welsh, will be tailored to the needs of patients, and could include telehealth consultations, hospitalization, or intensive outpatient care. Emory already has started to build out pilot programs, and Hazelden Betty Ford is providing its well-established model for addiction care for the planned treatment programs. The alliance also is developing education and training resources for use in the community.

“We’re going to build out the program as the partnership grows,” said Steve Delisi, MD, an addiction psychiatrist and medical director for Hazelden Betty Ford’s Professional Education Continuum Solutions.

“We’re basing our effort on a fully integrated model of care, which includes medications like buprenorphine, and it also will include education and prevention in the form of community workshops, school prevention programs and related efforts throughout the state,” Dr. Delisi added.
While Emory and Hazelden Betty Ford are two well-known names in health care, the partnership’s ultimate success will come from its coordination and collaboration with other medical, health care and state leaders, emphasized Sandra Fryhofer, MD, a Georgia physician and member of the AMA Board of Trustees. “We need to be able to serve the addiction needs of the citizens in every corner of our state.”

To make the partnership work, Drs. Welsh, Delisi and Fryhofer said that efforts will align with ongoing public and private efforts and work with diverse stakeholders such as the Georgia Department of Public Health, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Grady Health System, Morehouse School of Medicine, the Medical Association of Georgia and federally qualified health centers throughout the state.

The idea for the Alliance was first conceived by Mohawk Industries Chief Financial Officer Frank Boykin, former CNN CEO Tom Johnson and Hazelden Betty Ford executive William C. Moyers in 2018.

Johnson and Boykin, both longtime members of the Atlanta business community, helped assemble a wide-ranging, nonpartisan group of community and professional leaders to discuss rising overdose and mortality rates and possible solutions. After more than a year of cooperative analysis and discussion between Emory Healthcare and Hazelden Betty Ford, the partnership was formed.

“We’re just getting started, so we have a lot of education, research and hard work ahead of us,” said Dr. Welsh. “But we have everyone on the same page, and we are confident this will greatly increase access to evidence-based care for patients throughout Georgia.”