

Telehealth Expansion: COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Treating Patients in a Pandemic and in Hard-to-Reach Areas

Over 90 percent of Community Health Centers are utilizing telehealth to meet their patients' needs. **Telehealth services help address pandemic, geographic, economic, transportation, and linguistic barriers** to health care access. Because Community Health Centers are required to **offer comprehensive services in areas of high need, including sparsely populated rural areas**, health centers are pioneering the use of telehealth, to expand access to quality health care services.

The Facts

- Telehealth has proven to result in **better outcomes for patients**, including homeless, veteran, and urban populations, making it a crucial tool to deliver comprehensive primary and preventive health care for all patients.
- Telehealth has emerged as a vital force connecting health centers to their patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, **98% of health centers nationwide have offered telehealth services**, compared to just 43% in 2018.
- **Health centers serve 1 in 5 Americans living in rural communities.** Telehealth programs are especially critical in rural areas, where many residents can face long distances between home and health provider, particularly specialized providers. **In rural communities, before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half (46%) of health centers utilized telehealth for services outside the clinic.**
- Telehealth will remain an **integral part** of health centers operations **after the Public Health Emergency ends.**

The Challenges

- In 2020, Congressional and CMS actions to loosen pre-pandemic Medicare and Medicaid telehealth restrictions enabled health centers to continue serving patients effectively; **these critical policies expire with the end of the Public Health Emergency (PHE) and should be made permanent.**
- For America's seniors on Medicare, health centers will no longer be permitted to provide telehealth services as **"distant sites" (location of the provider), audio-only visits or be paid a rate that reflects the cost of services.**
- For low-income individuals covered by Medicaid, states will no longer receive federal matching funds that ensure health centers are **paid for audio-only visits and reimbursed at the same rate as in-person care.**
- Telehealth has been a safe harbor for health centers – and a lifeline for many – during the pandemic. Ending distant site and audio-only protections will severely impact many of our patients **who do not have easy access to broadband and smartphones.** Preserving adequate payment for health centers will **help keep our doors open.**

How you can help:

- **Co-sponsor the Protecting Access to Post-COVID-19 Telehealth Act (HR 366) and the CONNECT for Health Act** (when reintroduced). These bills modernize Medicare policy by recognizing health centers as both "distant and originating sites", so that health centers will be reimbursed for telehealth coverage wherever the patient or provider is located.
- Support legislative and regulatory efforts to ensure **permanent policy changes to Medicare and federal Medicaid matching funds** to states, for **audio-only telehealth services and that health centers are reimbursed at rates equal to an in-person visit.**