

Emerging Strategies to Ensure Access to Health Care Services

Virtual Care Strategies



The AHA Task Force on Ensuring Access in Vulnerable Communities examined ways in which the access to and delivery of care could be improved. Virtual care strategies, or telehealth, would allow hospitals to help maintain or supplement access to health care services in vulnerable rural and urban communities that have difficulty recruiting or retaining an adequate health care workforce.

Telehealth is the provision of health care remotely by means of telecommunication technologies. Through videoconferencing, remote monitoring, electronic consults and wireless communications, it expands patient access while improving patient outcomes and satisfaction. Telehealth offers a widerange of benefits, such as:

- ➔ Immediate, around-the-clock access to physicians, specialists and other health care providers that otherwise would not be available in many communities;
- ➔ The ability to perform remote monitoring without requiring patients to leave their homes;
- ➔ Less expensive and more convenient care options for patients; and
- ➔ Improved care outcomes.

This strategy can be used to fill the need for critical services in a variety of specialty areas and across diverse patient populations. Facilities may establish their own programs or become part of an established telehealth network. Many vulnerable communities currently utilize telestroke, telepharmacy and telepsychiatry to make available services otherwise unavailable in a community. As technology advances, the modes in which telehealth services can be provided will increase. For example, smartphones, tablets or computers may be used to connect patients and physicians directly.

Examples of Telehealth Services¹

- **Primary care and specialist referral services** involve consultation with a patient or a specialist assisting the primary care physician to render a diagnosis.
- **Remote patient monitoring** uses devices to collect and send data remotely to a home health agency or a remote diagnostic testing facility for interpretation.
- **Consumer medical and health information** includes the use of the internet and wireless devices to obtain specialized health information and online discussion groups to provide peer-to-peer support.
- **Medical education** provides continuing medical education credits for health professionals and special medical education seminars for targeted groups in remote locations.



Federal Policy Solutions to Pursue

While this strategy does not necessarily require federal legislative or regulatory changes to be implemented, there are policy changes that would lead to more effective and widespread adoption.

Coverage and Reimbursement. Reimbursement for telehealth services differs by payer and, for many, broader reimbursement policies are needed to adequately compensate health care providers for the costs associated with developing and maintaining this strategy. Medicare coverage of telehealth services is particularly restrictive with limits on the geographic locations, sites of service, types of technology and specific services that are covered. **In order to increase patient access to services in more convenient and efficient ways and make these strategies work for vulnerable communities, Congress should eliminate the geographic and originating-site requirements and remove restrictions on covered services and technologies. In addition, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should include telehealth waivers in all its demonstration programs and adopt a more flexible approach to adding new telehealth services to Medicare.**

Interaction of Federal and State Laws. In general, the provision of telehealth services requires compliance with a wide array of federal and state rules, including coverage and payment; health professional licensure; credentialing and privileging; online prescribing; medical malpractice and professional liability insurance; privacy and security; and fraud and abuse. **More uniformity among federal and state laws and regulations in these areas would help facilitate adoption of virtual care strategies.**

Access to Broadband. Many communities do not have sufficient and reliable broadband access, which significantly hinders their ability to utilize virtual care strategies. The Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Rural Health Care Program supports broadband adoption, but it is administratively burdensome and provides an insufficient level of funding. **The FCC should lower participating providers' burden and increase the funding cap to ensure the program meets its goal of ensuring that all rural communities have the broadband access they need.**

Federal Research. Policymakers have cited concerns that increased access to telehealth would lead to increased spending. However, research and experience under the Medicare program suggest that these concerns may be overstated, particularly when weighed against the potential benefits in quality, patient experience and efficiency. Currently, there are insufficient studies on the cost-benefits of telehealth outside of a limited number of services, such as telestroke. **Congress or CMS should provide funding for more and better research to determine the cost-benefit of telehealth using larger sample sizes, diverse geographies, and a broader range of conditions and services.**

Hospital and Health System Actions to Deploy

In order to utilize this strategy, hospitals will need to invest time, effort and financial resources. As such, hospitals may wish to review grant programs, including those on AHA's [website](#), to help defray costs.

In considering how to utilize telehealth, hospitals may wish to consider *innovative solutions* that others have adopted, many of which are highlighted in AHA's Telehealth: Delivering the Right Care, at the Right Place, at the Right Time [report](#).

In addition, hospitals may wish to engage in discussions with key community stakeholders, including patients, boards and clinicians, to assess the need for and delivery of specific telehealth services. AHA has developed a Community Conversations [Toolkit](#) to help hospitals as they engage in discussions related to the services needed in their community.

More resources related to telehealth and the work of AHA's Task Force on Ensuring Access in Vulnerable Communities, including its report, are available at www.aha.org/Telehealth and www.aha.org/EnsuringAccess.

1. American Telemedicine Association. Services Provided by Telemedicine. Accessed at <http://www.americantelemed.org/main/about/about-telemedicine/services-provided-by-telehealth>.