

Telehealth



Ensuring Patients Have Access to Virtual Care

Almost all (99%) of Community Health Centers utilize telehealth to meet their patients' needs. **Telehealth services help address geographic, economic, transportation, and linguistic barriers to healthcare access while boosting staff retention and decreasing no-shows and missed appointments.** Health Centers are pioneering the use of telehealth to **expand access to high-quality health care services, especially behavioral health services, in high-need areas and reach their more than 31 million patients.**

The Facts

- In 2022, Congress passed legislation to extend **key telehealth flexibilities from the COVID-19 pandemic through December 2024.**
- Telehealth has been critical in delivering comprehensive primary and preventive health care to health center patients. In 2022, health centers provided **20.6 million virtual visits.** While most were for primary medical services, **one in three visits were for behavioral health services.**
- Telehealth programs are especially critical in rural areas (including over 40 percent of health centers), where many residents can face long distances to see a provider. **Nearly one-quarter of rural health centers use telehealth to communicate with specialists to coordinate patient care.**
- **Audio-only telehealth is particularly important to reducing barriers to Medicare beneficiaries' access to care since it does not require proficiency in using a smartphone, webcam, or broadband connection.** A nationwide survey of health center patients showed a greater proportion of those over 65 using audio-only telehealth (83%) than the overall sample (50%).
- After the current extension ends, America's seniors on Medicare will no longer be able to access most telehealth services if **"distant sites" (location of the provider) restrictions and "originating site" (location of the patient) restrictions are reinstated.** Ending these geographic flexibilities and audio-only protections will severely impact many health center patients **who do not have easy access to broadband and smartphones.**
- **Health centers must also be able to be reimbursed for all telehealth services, including audio-only services, at a rate equal to in-person care.** Preserving adequate payment is essential for health centers to continue to meet their mission.

How You Can Help

- **Support legislative and regulatory efforts to ensure telehealth permanency** to provide certainty for health centers and their patients.
- Support the **CONNECT for Health Act (H.R. 4189/S. 2016)** and the **HEALTH Act (H.R. 5611).** These bills modernize Medicare policy by recognizing health centers as "distant sites" and removing "originating site" restrictions, allowing telehealth coverage wherever the patient or provider is located. The CONNECT and HEALTH bills also reimburse telehealth services equal to an in-person visit. The HEALTH Act also includes coverage of audio-only care.
- Support the soon-to-be reintroduced **Telehealth Modernization Act.** The legislation would remove distant and originating site restrictions and allow all practitioners to furnish telehealth services. As a result, it would expand the types of providers eligible to provide and be reimbursed for telehealth, increasing patient access to vital healthcare services.