

INTEGRATING TELEHEALTH INTO HIV SERVICES SYSTEMS CAN HELP TO SUSTAIN IMPROVED OUTCOMES

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CAUSED CLINIC CLOSURES AND INTERRUPTED CRITICAL HIV SERVICES. Many clinics and community-based providers rose to the challenge and rapidly adopted telehealth services as an emergency response. Now, policy makers, providers, and community stakeholders need to shift telehealth from a crisis response to an integrated and sustainable component of HIV prevention and care services delivery.

TELEHEALTH CAN IMPROVE OUTCOMES AND ENHANCE SATISFACTION

WHAT TELEHEALTH IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Telehealth services use electronic information and telecommunication technologies to support long-distance health care, along with health education, public health, and health administration. Telehealth offers an important tool for strengthening engagement in HIV care and prevention services, improving health outcomes, and increasing client and provider satisfaction.

KEY CHALLENGES

Regulation—Telehealth is regulated both at the federal and state level, and different programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, self-insured (ERISA) health plans, and fully-insured health plans are subject to different requirements. In the current public health emergency, the federal government relaxed enforcement of key requirements, but these emergency actions may not be appropriate for the long-term.

Reimbursement—Ensuring adequate and appropriate payment for the broad range of telehealth services is complex, and providers and insurers have competing interests. Some states require parity of reimbursement with in-person services provided in a clinic. Going forward, whether some or all telehealth services should be reimbursed at parity with in-person services or how to ensure that differential payment levels do not threaten the financial viability of clinics remains contentious.

Resource—Inequitable access to resources means that groups of people, such as low-income people, people in rural areas, and people of color, have less access to the technology needed for telehealth. Some people lack access to phones, have inadequate minutes or data on cell phone plans, or do not have reliable access to broadband internet. Services providers may also lack technical, financial, and other resources to implement telehealth.

POLICY ACTIONS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT TELEHEALTH SUSTAINABILITY

1. GIVE CLIENTS MORE CONTROL over where, when, and how to access services, and give providers more flexibility in responding to patients in ways that lessen the demands of a full patient panel

Telehealth services can help to overcome transportation barriers, they can allow individuals to access some services on-demand or outside of normal office hours, they can increase privacy, and they can reduce stigma resulting from negative encounters when coming to a clinic. Policies are needed that intentionally address barriers to care and better support providers to deliver telehealth services.

2. FOCUS ON PROMOTING EQUITY and intervene to address the Digital Divide and other barriers for individuals and organizations

While telehealth offers advantages, it also has the potential to increase inequities, challenge clinic capacity, reduce access to nutrition and other supportive services, exacerbate privacy concerns for some, and weaken the patient-provider relationship. Attention is needed to ensure equitable access to smartphones, broadband access, and other technology for both individuals and community-based organizations. Racial/ethnic minorities,

LGBTQ+ individuals, persons in rural areas, and immigrants require careful attention to ensure equitable access to telehealth services.

3. CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES for shared learning so that HIV providers and clinics can learn best practices and avoid common pitfalls

Model practices are emerging over how to introduce telehealth within a clinic. Many providers are requesting a common playbook for implementing telehealth and more opportunities to compare experiences and identify best practices.

4. INVEST IN RESEARCH to develop and evaluate innovative approaches for using telehealth technology

Continued investment in research is needed to 1) learn more about which services are most useful and desired by which patient populations; 2) establish best practices around in-person visit frequency; 3) develop differentiated care models that allocate more time and resources to a subset of persons with greater barriers to care; and 4) determine cost-effective approaches to telehealth services.