

VIEWPOINTS Telehealth

The Telehealth Initiative by The Physicians Foundation, American Medical Association, Florida Medical Association, Massachusetts Medical Society and Texas Medical Association



Program Overview

The Telehealth Initiative is a program designed to help physicians and care teams implement telehealth within their practice that was created by The Physicians Foundation, American Medical Association (AMA), Florida Medical Association (FMA), Massachusetts Medical Society (MSS) and Texas Medical Association (TMA). This 12-month trial program, which launched in January 2020, consisted of a cohort of 168 clinicians and 24 participating practices with specialties across Pediatrics, Family Practice, Internal Medicine and OB/GYN. The Telehealth Initiative fostered a community for peer discussion and support, access to leaders in the telehealth space and curated resources and tools to support telehealth implementation efforts.

Program activities included six webinars, two extended virtual bootcamps, two methods of measuring success and gathering feedback, and the creation of 100+ resources. Topics covered throughout the program included telehealth vendor evaluation and selection, designing telehealth workflows, engaging patients and addressing equity. As an outcome of the program, all participating practices recruited by the state societies reported adoption of telehealth despite the accelerated timeline forced by the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Telehealth in Practice

As part of The Telehealth Initiative, we aimed to understand the experiences participating practices were having using telehealth. A survey was administered between May 19 and June 22, 2020, to better understand the current state of telehealth use among participating practices. Highlighted below are key findings from the time of the survey:

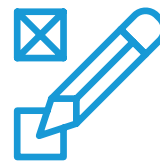
- Most survey respondents were currently practicing telehealth; 75% of which indicated that COVID-19 impacted their decision to implement telehealth sooner than anticipated.
- Most survey respondents were using live audio-visual interactive technology for a patient at home, as well as telephone visits to provide care.
- Respondents using audio-visual interactive technology indicated this modality is easy to use and brings high clinical value.
- Respondents using telephone visits indicated this modality is easy to use but brings low clinical value.



- There was low utilization of remote patient monitoring (RPM) technologies; Types of RPM most used include smartphone (cameras), body weight scales and blood pressure cuffs. Data is most often reported by the patient.
- There was interest in continuing to offer telehealth visits post COVID-19 especially for chronic disease management, mental/behavioral health, acute care, medical management, etc.
- Primary patient barriers to accessing telehealth included lack of patient access to broadband/internet and lack of digital literacy.
- It was anticipated that the biggest barrier to maintaining telehealth after COVID-19 will be low or no reimbursement.

Near the conclusion of the program, in November 2020, we conducted one-on-one interviews with various physicians participating in the program to collect program feedback and learn about plans for sustained and expanded use of telehealth within their practices. Before The Telehealth Initiative, in general, participants shared that they did not have telehealth established. While some did provide telehealth, it was rarely used by patients, and the platforms were often cumbersome. After The Telehealth Initiative, most were primarily using live audio-visual telehealth appointments to see patients, and some physicians reported to default to alternative platforms or audio-only phone visits if they or their patient was having technical issues accessing the video platform. Practices' percentage of telehealth visits varied over the first months of the pandemic and the majority are now conducting a mix of in-person and telehealth.

Physicians shared that increased connection to patients via telehealth has had a positive impact on patient health in the form of:



Convenience

Telehealth is more convenient for patients who work or have families; they can see the doctor without significantly disrupting their schedules.



Access to care

Patients who have transportation challenges or schedule limitations are more easily able to access care through telehealth.



Routine and preventive checks

Physicians report improved attendance at routine visits and better adherence because of improved convenience and access.



Avoiding putting off care

Physicians say many patients would have delayed or neglected care during the pandemic were it not for telehealth visits. Telehealth enabled them to be seen sooner and ultimately receive better care.

Interviewees generally felt telemedicine has had a positive impact on their practices. They were able to connect with their patients more effectively and safely during the pandemic and could see the potential for using other virtual attributes such as remote patient monitoring. It also was an important source of revenue, as in-person visits were significantly reduced.

“It seems like [telehealth is] allowing us to be a little bit more connected with people than we maybe were able to before. Because it’s one less barrier.”

Interviewees also identified ways in which telehealth negatively impacted their practices. One physician stated that the virtual experience is just not the same as an in-person encounter and found it less “joyful.” Several commented that the stress of adding televisits to their office schedule contributed to feeling burnt out. Some practices had a difficult time adjusting to the changes that came with the pandemic and incorporating telehealth, but with that challenge came innovation and adaptations of practice workflows, using new care protocols and team-based care.

“I think once things settle down, and we don’t feel like we have to use telehealth, we’ll be able to sit back and say ‘okay, now that we have a choice about how to use it, how are we going to integrate it?’”

Program Impact

The Telehealth Initiative program not only accomplished the goal of creating a diverse set of resources and helping practices implement telemedicine, it also provided a collaborative framework during a critical time. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an immediate need to transition to alternate methods of delivering care, and with telehealth experts and information sharing, The Telehealth Initiative was perfectly positioned to provide immediate practice support. In addition to the scheduled programming, the Initiative team expanded their scope of work, addressing the rapid expansion of telemedicine, patient access and care issues, regulatory and payment changes, and state based legislative efforts to accommodate the constraints to care imposed by the pandemic and how it should evolve in the future. In addition to valuable communication, physician insights were gathered to better understand the telehealth experience and help inform advocacy efforts.

Beyond The Telehealth Initiative, participating state medical societies, The Physicians Foundation, and the AMA remain committed to collaborating on future telehealth resources, advocating on telehealth-related issues beyond the pandemic both on a federal and state level, and continuing to stay coordinated on implementation support nationwide.

For more information, visit: <https://physiciansfoundation.org/the-telehealth-initiative/>

