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Telehealth as a Practical Alternative to In-Person Care

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Exploring a Virtual Care Option

During my time as Pennsylvania's Medicaid Director (2011 – 2015), I advocated that telehealth was an effective alternative to traditional physician office visits. At the time, our Medicaid program covered a telehealth option for some behavioral health services, which for several years, my colleagues in the behavioral health community used as a practical alternative to face-to-face clinical encounters with patients. These virtual encounters included routine as well as crisis health care management.

Why Grow Telehealth Access?

Increased use of telehealth options would not only improve health care access for Medicaid recipients, but also improve access for others who have more traditional barriers to care such as lack of transportation, inadequate childcare, or too few physician providers in their community.[1] It is encouraging that more health care organizations as well as patients view telehealth as equivalent to in person clinical interaction in a growing number of situations.[2]

How to Encourage Providers to Adopt Telehealth Strategies?

To further promote the use of telehealth, virtual clinical exchanges should be monetarily equivalent to in-person care for health care organizations. This can be done by updating and removing regulatory barriers that have delayed greater adoption of telemedicine strategies. Former CMS Administrator Seema Verma praised the previous Administration for "taking swift and bold action to give patients greater access to care through telehealth during the COVID-19 outbreak." Verma touted these regulatory changes as giving seniors the option to "communicate with their doctors without having to travel to a healthcare facility so that they can limit risk of exposure and spread of this virus" as well as giving frontline clinicians "greater flexibility to safely treat our beneficiaries."[3] Kudos to CMS and the previous administration for seizing this moment to truly improve the lives of the American public.

Tasks Ahead for Building Successful Telehealth Services

CMS and other federal partners will need to continue supporting the development of high-speed network infrastructure that is accessible to all Americans. This includes updates in infrastructure policy along with increasingly modernized broadband regulations that are helping expand the availability of 5G services.[4] Significant progress is also being made to expand reliable broadband access to low-income families, seniors, rural communities, and other vulnerable populations.[5] Consequently, taking advantage of the rapidly closing gap in access to high-speed internet service will require public-private partnerships along with related social policy changes to leverage the clinical power of telehealth services.

References

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