

TELEMENTAL HEALTH TALKING POINTS

OVERVIEW

Telemental Health, the provision of mental health services using live, interactive videoconferencing, has a number of important benefits for patients, clinicians, provider organizations, and communities. The most important of these can be summarized succinctly:

Telemental health is a cost-effective way to improve access to specialty mental health services in rural and underserved communities. All mental health procedures that are delivered “face-to-face” can be delivered remotely via telemental health.

BACKGROUND

Rural and underserved communities often suffer from limited access to specialty mental health services. Provider organizations struggle to recruit and retain mental health specialists and often find it necessary to arrange for regular visits by a mental health consultant with considerable travel costs and limited on-site specialty clinician availability. Non-mental health providers are often placed in the position of serving patients with severe mental health problems with little or no specialty support. All of these factors reduce the quality of mental health services available to patients in rural and underserved communities, sometimes forcing patients to travel long distances to obtain mental health services, or forgo such services altogether.

BENEFITS OF TELEMENTAL HEALTH

Benefits for Patients

- **KEY BENEFIT:** Improved access to specialty mental health services for assessment and ongoing treatment
- **KEY BENEFIT:** Improved quality of mental health care.
- Better integration of specialty mental health services into the patient’s health care more generally.
- Reduced costs for accessing specialty mental health services (e.g., time, travel costs).
- Reduced wait time
- Improved continuity of care and follow-up

Benefits for Clinicians Working in Rural and Underserved Communities

- **KEY BENEFIT:** Improved access to mental health specialists for consultation
- **KEY BENEFIT:** Improved quality of mental health care for patients.
- Reduced professional isolation.
- Improved access to continuing medical education programs.
- Improved continuity of care and follow-up

Benefits for Provider Organizations in Rural and Underserved Communities

- **KEY BENEFIT:** Greater ability to offer specialty mental health services to patients in a more consistent and flexible manner than otherwise possible.
- **KEY BENEFIT:** Improved quality of mental health care for patients.
- Improved patient satisfaction
- Greater job satisfaction (and improved retention) for both rural non-specialty and non-rural specialty mental health clinicians.

Benefits for Specialty Mental Health Clinicians Providing Telemental Health Services

- Greater ability to serve rural and underserved communities even when living in large, urban areas without incurring the burden of frequent travel.
- Increased flexibility in work schedules.
- Ability to practice in states where licensed but not physically located.

Other Notable Facts Regarding Telemental Health

- High consumer and practitioner satisfaction.
- The technology is available now and can be easily tailored to program, practitioner, and patient needs.
- Telemental health communications are secure and confidential.
- Costs are typically reduced overall for patients and provider organization, even when including start-up costs for the necessary technological infrastructure.
- More and more federal, state, and third party payers have made telemental health services eligible for reimbursement.

TYPICAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING TELEMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Policy Barriers

- Regulations that preclude practice across state borders
- Regulations that require impractical service delivery models, such as requiring both the distant-consulting provider and the local-consultee provider be present during the telemental health session in order to invoice for it.

Program and Administrative Barriers

- Local clinicians and administrators who are wary of using technology to provide mental health services. Patients are often more supportive and comfortable with telemental health services than providers.
- Securing, maintaining, and enhancing the necessary equipment and information technology infrastructure.

Clinical Barriers

- Developing plans, policies, and procedures to provide services between telemental health sessions and to address urgent and emergent clinical situations.
- Developing clinical procedures to address patient needs during technology failures (which are typically infrequent and brief).

Novins DK, Weaver J, Shore J (2008) Telemental Health Talking Points. *Telemental Health Guide*, www.tmhguide.org.