

# 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 healthcare 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 plays a crucial role in breaking down barriers for Medicare beneficiaries since it does not require proficiency in using a smartphone, webcam, or broadband connection.** A nationwide survey of health center patients revealed that a significant proportion of those over 65 (83%) used audio-only telehealth, compared to the overall sample (50%).
- However, the expiration of the current telehealth extension will have severe consequences. America's seniors on Medicare will lose access to most telehealth services if **"distant sites" (location of the provider) restrictions and "originating site" (location of the patient) restrictions are reinstated. This will disproportionately affect health center patients who lack easy access to broadband and smartphones, potentially leading to a significant decline in healthcare access.**
- **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.** Currently, Medicare reimburses health centers for telehealth services at less than half the in-person rate for most visits. This disparity limits seniors' access to telehealth.

## 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 Telehealth Modernization Act (H.R. 7623).** This bipartisan legislation extends telehealth flexibilities for two years and requires Medicare reimbursement for telehealth visits to be equal to in-person visits, protecting seniors' access to telehealth flexibilities. In May, the Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee advanced this bill by a vote of 21-0.