

Rural Telehealth



Telehealth increases access to health care for rural patients by removing travel burdens and addressing provider shortages.

Telehealth visits for rural Medicare beneficiaries increased from 2004 to 2013 at an annual growth rate of 28%.

Rural hospitals are more likely to use telehealth to assist with providing radiology, emergency, and trauma healthcare services.

Nearly 80% of rural beneficiary telehealth visits were for behavioral health.

Challenges

Medicare flexibilities put in place during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency will expire on December 31, 2024 without congressional action.

Medicare reimbursement is commonly cited as a major challenge for telehealth programs, particularly for Rural Health Clinics which are paid outside of their All-Inclusive Rate for Medicare telehealth services.

The physician licensure system creates barriers for physicians to practice across state lines. Physicians must be licensed by the professional licensing board in each state where they are delivering care to patients.

The broadband gap between rural and urban areas leads to health inequities. Many rural communities do not currently have access to internet connection speeds that support the use of telehealth.

NRHA Supported Legislation

CONNECT for Health Act (S. 2016/H.R. 4189)

Senators Schatz (D-HI) & Wicker (R-MS), Reps. Thompson (D-CA), & Schweikert (R-AZ)

Expand coverage of telehealth services through Medicare and making permanent COVID-19 telehealth flexibilities.

Protecting Rural Telehealth Access Act (S. 1636/H.R. 3440)

Senators Manchin (D-WV), Ernst (R-IA), Moran (R-KS), Shaheen (D-NH), & Reps. Pappas (D-NH), McClain (R-MI), LaTurner (R-KS), Molinaro (R-NY), Mooney (R-WV), Nunn (R-IA)

Permanently allow audio-only telehealth appointments and add RHCs and FQHCs as distant site providers.

HEALTH Act (H.R. 5611)

Rep. Thompson (R-PA)

Expand coverage to include audio-only telehealth services. Permanently allows FQHCs and RHCs to serve as the distant site provider for telehealth services.

ReConnecting Rural America Act 2023 (S. 1642/H.R. 4227)

Senators Glenn (D-VT) & Marshall (R-KS), and Rep Nunn (R-PA)

Expand access to high-speed broadband in rural communities, where broadband access is severely limited.

EASE Act (H.R. 7149)

Reps. Steel (R-CA), Lee (D-NV), Salinas (D-OR), Kelly (R-PA), Davis (D-NC), Chavez-DeRemer (R-OR), Bacon (R-NE), Caraveo (D-CO), De La Cruz (R-TX).

The Equal Access to Specialty Care Everywhere Act (EASE) Act would use existing Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation funds to test a virtual specialty network dedicated to providing a range of virtual modalities (including telehealth in partnership with primary care providers in underserved and rural communities including Federally Qualified Health Centers, Rural Health Clinics, and Community Health Clinics).

Telehealth Modernization Act of 2024 (H.R. 7623)

Reps. Carter (R-KS) and Blunt Rochester (D-DE)

Will ensure permanent access to telehealth services for Medicare beneficiaries and extends these flexibilities to Rural Health Clinic (RHC) and Federal Quality Health Center (FQHCs) distant site status and FFS reimbursement levels. This legislation would continue flexibilities related to as well as audio-only telehealth, which is critical for rural beneficiaries without access to broadband or high-speed internet.