

Best/Promising Practice Description

Fear of exposure to COVID-19 escalated throughout Marion County, Florida in March 2020 and primary health care appointments at Heart of Florida Health Center plummeted. Prior to the pandemic, HFHC only offered behavioral health through telehealth technology. Health center leaders recognized that to keep patients and providers safe, the existing telehealth program had to be expanded to include primary care. The behavioral health telehealth program also required expansion from clinic to clinic “visits” to include the option for patients to receive their care in the safety of their own home. A quick response team that included administration, clinical, finance and IT was assembled to develop and deploy the new service using existing technology. The following was put into action:

Technology needs and solutions were evaluated for implementation. Required considerations included selecting the best virtual platform that was HIPAA compliant and easy for providers and patients to use. Heart of Florida’s EHR eClinical Works Healow app was selected for use. When rules were amended for telehealth, the option to use password protected Zoom for Healthcare became available. Some patients were more familiar with ZOOM and preferred this platform.

Medical provider, behavioral health and support staff were trained on use of both platforms, conducting televisits, documenting consent and the appropriate codes for billing before expanded telehealth services went live.

Finance investigated billing and reimbursement for telehealth visits and advised providers and administrators on the newest telehealth reimbursement rules and rates.

And within two weeks of recognizing the need for expanded telehealth services, primary care telehealth and expanded behavioral health care were available to Heart of Florida patients. Within three weeks of launching the expansion, patient visits were back at pre-COVID levels with a 30% increase in visits over the previous month.

Telehealth has opened the door for a variety of patient visit options. Providers whose circumstances require that they work from home are able to see patients in clinic or conduct a televisit at the patient’s home. Providers in clinic are able to complete visits with patients at clinic and with those who remain at home. Not all patients are comfortable with the video and/or use of technology aspects of telehealth. To accommodate these patients, a telephone visit has been made available as an alternative.

Expanding Heart of Florida’s telehealth services has increased access to safe quality health care while reducing exposure to the virus for staff and patients and reducing the use of PPE and infection control supplies.