



NACHC Best/Promising Practices Challenge

Rapid Implementation of Telehealth in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the first COVID-19 case in Maine was reported on March 12, 2020, new cases of COVID-19 have continued to grow in our community and over 100 people in the state have died. Cumberland County is the epicenter of the outbreak in Maine and has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the state. A state-wide stay at home order was issued in mid-March, temporarily closing schools, public buildings, workplaces, the majority of businesses, and many service providers. This change put an added stress on all in the community, especially the vulnerable populations we serve. As a community health center, Greater Portland Health provides primary medical, behavioral, and dental health services to the most vulnerable in the greater Portland community including low-income individuals and families, the homeless, immigrant/refugee/asylum-seekers, children, elderly, and the un- and underinsured.

There has also been known COVID-19 spread in the Portland homeless community, the population we work closely with at our 63 Preble and 234 Oxford Street locations. Practicing social distancing and following prevention guidelines is especially difficult for this population. Most lack access to permanent shelter necessary for quarantine, rely on local service providers for food, shelter, and other basic needs, and have underlying health conditions that make them more vulnerable to complications and hospitalizations from COVID-19 infection.

According to the CDC, certain individuals including the elderly, those living with HIV, and those with existing health conditions such as asthma, COPD, and diabetes are more susceptible to hospitalization and complications due to infection with COVID-19. It is necessary to offer such vulnerable patients safe access to the care they need through virtual telehealth appointments to reduce their risk of contracting the virus. We expect vulnerable patients such as these to continue to rely predominantly on virtual appointments to access essential healthcare services through the end of the epidemic.

During the epidemic, all patients at Greater Portland Health continue to need safe access to primary healthcare services. In addition, GPH staff need to be protected from COVID-19 while they provide essential services in the community.

Telehealth Overview

Following the implementation of a state-wide stay at home order by the governor in mid-March, GPH quickly closed all four School Based Health Centers and our two Public Housing

sites to all in-person visits. Our locations at 180 Park Avenue, 63 Preble Street, and 100 Brickhill Avenue remained open for limited in-person visits. Over the course of 72 hours we pivoted to offering telehealth for the majority of appointments, a service we previously had not offered.

The majority of medical and behavioral health providers were transitioned to working from home. In mid-March GPH providers began offering virtual appointments through the videoconferencing program, Zoom. Implementation of the new telehealth program required training staff on using the new technology, new billing codes, and new workflows. To ensure patients had access to the new mode of care, GPH staff developed telehealth technology training materials for patients and conducted real-time education for patients during virtual appointments. In addition, laptops and tablets were purchased for both providers and patients to use to conduct telehealth appointments.

Services Offered via Telehealth

Through the use of telehealth, patients have been able to continue accessing essential services virtually including:

- Suspected COVID-19 consultation
- Chronic Disease Management (Diabetes, Asthma, HIV/AIDS, etc)
- Primary Care Well Visits
- Psychiatry
- Mental Health
- Substance Use
- MAT
- Medication Refills & Management

Objectives

Our primary goal has been to remain fully operational with our entire team so that we can continue to support our patients. We have over 12,600 patients enrolled, and we are committed to caring for them through COVID-19 walk-in testing, acute visits and telehealth. Because we care for many of the most vulnerable individuals in greater Portland, it is paramount that we continue to support them throughout the pandemic.

Budget

Despite transitioning appointments to telehealth and our efforts to keep three sites open for in-person visits, the number of patient appointments dropped by 70% in only a week's time due to the impact of the pandemic. The decrease in patient visits greatly reduced our health center revenue. With supplemental funding from the Health Resource and Services Administration (HRSA) and revenues through billable telehealth visits, we were able to bridge a portion of this gap. Within a few weeks of implementing telehealth and increased patient outreach, patient visits increased to 80% of pre-COVID-19 visit numbers.

The main expenses of implementing our telehealth program were Zoom subscriptions for providers conducting telehealth appointments, laptops and tablets, webcams, and telehealth medical equipment.

Timeline

After the first case was reported in Maine in mid-March and the subsequent stay at home order was declared across the state, GPH leadership quickly developed a plan to begin offering a telehealth option to patients as soon as possible. Over the course of a weekend, Zoom subscriptions were purchased and telehealth processes were put in place. We expect to offer telehealth to our most vulnerable patients through the end of the pandemic to protect them from infection with and complications due to COVID-19. When the pandemic is over and we are able to operate at full capacity with our traditional in-person model, we will likely continue offering telehealth in addition to face-to-face appointments to increase access to healthcare services.

Outcomes

1. Patients, GPH staff and the greater Portland community were protected from the spread of COVID-19.

Telehealth appointments are a safe alternative to traditional in-person appointments. Virtual appointments promote social distancing and protects staff and patients from the spread of the virus. Staff conducted 2,859 telehealth appointments in April and 2,836 telehealth appointments in May. We greatly reduced the number of patients and staff members physically coming into our sites, effectively reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19 between patients, staff, family members, and other community members. A reduced number of individuals in our health center created a safer environment for those that required in-person visits for services such as well checks for infants, vaccines, and medication administration.

2. GPH providers and clinical staff provided continued support and healthcare services to patients during the pandemic.

Greater Portland Health serves some of the most vulnerable in the greater Portland community including individuals experiencing homelessness, those with substance use issues, and those with mental health needs. These individuals rely on continuous support from GPH providers, and there was risk of serious consequences if care were to be interrupted during the pandemic due to restrictions on face-to-face interaction. Following the implementation of telehealth in mid-March, our health centers saw 4,522 and 4,036 patient visits in April and May respectively both in-person and via telehealth. By transitioning care from in-person to virtual telehealth visits, we were able to continue supporting our patients and safely provide essential primary medical and behavioral health care services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Innovation

Development of our telehealth program in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was an innovative solution because we acted quickly, utilized a technology new to GPH, and displayed collaboration and flexibility among staff members and community partners. Portland's shelter in place order was quickly put into action in mid-March after community spread was identified. In short succession, schools were closed and the majority of the local workforce was sent home, which resulted in a dramatic reduction in appointments for our health center. Over the course of a week, we had to close six sites, and our regular appointments dropped by 70%. We exercised resourcefulness by pivoting to telehealth, a platform we had not yet used, in less than 72 hours to care for our community.

Our patients, staff and community members have shown tremendous courage and flexibility throughout the pandemic. A great amount of teamwork was required to get the telehealth program up and running. Providers quickly adapted to the new technology and the challenges of providing services remotely. Administrative staff and the billing team provided significant support to develop billing and EHR processes, adjust schedules, and create educational materials for staff and patients. The success of the telehealth program evidenced by the return of patient visits to near pre-outbreak levels was due in a large part to the collaboration and dedication of GPH staff.