

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 health access while boosting staff retention and decreasing no-shows and missed appointments.** Health centers pioneered the use of telehealth to **expand access to high-quality healthcare services, especially behavioral health services, in high-need areas and reach more than 32 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 healthcare to health center patients. Health centers provided **18 million virtual visits.** While most were for primary medical services, **almost 40% of 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. In 2023, **97 percent of rural health centers** reported using telehealth to care for patients.
- **Audio-only telehealth plays a crucial role in breaking down barriers for Medicare beneficiaries who may struggle with technology 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%).
- The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recently proposed a **short-term administrative fix** that will continue enabling health centers to provide telehealth services for seniors. **Congressional action is necessary for a permanent solution that provides long-term certainty for senior health center patients.**
- **Health centers must 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 at least a two-year extension to Medicare telehealth flexibilities as part of a year-end health package. Key legislation includes the **CONNECT for Health Act (H.R. 4189/S. 2016)** and the **Telehealth Modernization Act (H.R. 7623).** 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, and **harmonizing payment between in-person and virtual visits.**
- Additionally, the **Telehealth Modernization Act includes coverage of audio-only care.** This bill was voted out unanimously from the House Energy and Commerce Committee earlier this year.