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Mary's Center, Washington, DC

Telehealth at Community Health Centers: Improving Patient Access to Primary Care

Patients at Community Health Centers (CHCs) rely on telehealth to access primary and preventive care.

CHCs pioneered the use of telehealth technology to expand access to comprehensive services, especially behavioral health, in hard-to-reach rural and underserved communities. Over the last five years, CHCs greatly expanded telehealth services and **99% now use telehealth or virtual care to meet patients where they are**. Telehealth brings care to patients who cannot travel, reduces missed appointments, and boosts staff retention, benefiting CHC patients and staff.

- **Patients value the quality and flexibility of telehealth:** More than 90% of CHC patients are satisfied with telehealth care and agree that it improves access to needed services and saves time traveling to receive care.¹
- **Telehealth expands access to primary care and behavioral health services,** facilitating 18 million visits in 2023, with 40% of those visits addressing mental health needs.²
- **Over 40% of CHCs are in rural communities,** and **97%** of rural CHCs have adopted telehealth to bridge gaps in access due to geographic barriers.
- **Audio-only telehealth is essential for seniors** and those who have difficulty using a video-enabled device, like a smartphone or tablet. **83% of CHC patients over 65 rely on audio-only services,** compared to 50% across all age groups.

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Congressional action is needed to protect patient access to telehealth at CHCs:

Fair Reimbursement for Audio-Only Visits: Medicare reimbursement for telehealth services, including audio-only visits, must match in-person rates to ensure equitable access for patients. Currently, CHCs are reimbursed for telehealth visits at less than 50% of in-person rates, creating an unsustainable model that restricts seniors' virtual care options.

Extend Medicare Telehealth flexibilities: Support an extension through 2026 for Medicare telehealth flexibilities, including modernizing Medicare policy by removing geographic restrictions, continuing audio-only care, and ensuring payment parity between in-person and virtual visits.

Sources:

¹ NACHC. Assessing Patient Satisfaction with Telehealth at Community Health Centers. <https://www.nachc.org/resource/assessing-patient-satisfaction-with-telehealth-at-community-health-centers-a-policy-brief/>

² Health Resources and Services Administration. Uniform Data System. <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/data-reporting/program-data>