Building a Strong Foundation for Telehealth Transformation
Many forward-thinking organizations found ways to implement unique telehealth initiatives years ago, especially in specialties such as dermatology and radiology. But, while the technology to support care of patients and remote monitoring initiatives have existed for quite some time, adoption has been fairly slow. Reasons range from regulations and reimbursements to processes and organizational culture.

To fully harness telehealth’s potential, healthcare organizations need to carefully assess their needs and capabilities and ensure they have ample connectivity to sustain telehealth platforms both today and into the future.

Theresa Dudley, Manager of Healthcare Programs at Spectrum Enterprise, describes connectivity as the “long pole in the tent.” It was a key differentiator in the hospitals and health systems that were able to quickly stand up telehealth services in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. That kind of infrastructure will be just as essential as game-changing new telehealth innovations are developed and implemented in the future.

“Telehealth is here to stay and it’s only going to get better,” said Dudley. “But, unless you have a strong IT foundation, allowing you to create that link between the patient and provider, your organization will risk being left behind.”

In this eBook, we highlight multiple resources to help healthcare IT decision makers build a strong foundation for telehealth transformation.
Facing a pandemic with telehealth

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced hospitals to limit non-emergency and routine patient care, many provider organizations found themselves needing to deploy remote services to continue to serve their at-risk populations. That led to a significant acceleration in implementation and use of telehealth.

“In the United States, telehealth accounted for approximately 0.1 percent of all visits before the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Robert Havasy, Senior Director at HIMSS and Managing Director of the Personal Connected Health Alliance (PCHA). “At the first peak in the United States, tele-visits accounted for around 14 percent of total encounters.”

Cliff Dinwiddie, Senior Director of Vertical Programs at Spectrum Enterprise, said there was a clear difference in organizations that were able to stand up telehealth rapidly and those that could not.

“Some health systems were able to roll out telehealth quickly. They made it look easy. But, they would tell you it was not easy at all,” said Dinwiddie. “The underlying connectivity was the key to their success. That’s what allowed them to effectively and efficiently roll out these platforms.”

Dudley added that many of these organizations likely had some sort of telehealth service delivery model in place already, too. But, without the broadband and cloud connections in place, scaling out those models would have been much more difficult.

“This isn’t just about software, devices or even mobilizing staff, although those aspects are an important part of the story,” she said. “You need to have the right infrastructure so you can scale up those models when needed.”
Telehealth and the patient experience

As technology continues to advance and permeate our daily lives, patients increasingly demand a more consumer-centric healthcare experience, from prior authorization through the entire care encounter. Patients want to experience the same sort of ease and convenience with healthcare transactions as they do with other types of businesses.

“Patients want to access certain types of care at a more convenient time or place without physical travel. They want convenient communications via their preferred channels. They want healthcare to be easy to access,” Havasy said. “And, they view telehealth as a step in that direction, allowing them to speak with a doctor for a simple problem without having to drive, park and wait 30 minutes in a waiting room to do so.”

Dudley added that patients want more control, not only over their patient health information and ability to make their own healthcare decisions, but also in how they consume their regular care experiences.

“A big part of what telehealth delivers is self-service applications,” she said. “It allows patients to make appointments on their own time. It also allows them to collaborate with their healthcare provider, providing information about their health in real-time instead of having to wait and then try to remember everything during their next appointment.”

While many health systems pivoted to telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce exposure risks, it’s clear that telehealth is here to stay. “Even after people are no longer avoiding their provider facilities because of the virus,” Dudley stated, “they are going to continue to want the convenience and access telehealth offers.”
Industry experts expect the use of telehealth applications, including tele-visits and remote monitoring capabilities, will continue to grow. In fact, Frost & Sullivan estimates a seven-fold growth in the next five years, as both providers and patients increasingly see the value in being able to make use of such remote capabilities.¹

The maturation of telehealth adoption and the demand for virtual care solutions, including real-time remote examination, consultation and monitoring, offer health systems unprecedented opportunities to expand access to healthcare. Yet, to be successful in these endeavors, provider organizations require a strong, reliable broadband network to support them. It’s time to do a bandwidth checkup to get a clear picture of how well-equipped your organization is for telehealth.

“To ensure you are providing a good patient experience, to ensure that these critical interactions between patient and provider are free from technical difficulties, robust bandwidth will be required,” said Dinwiddie.

Prior to the pandemic, many healthcare organizations were at a standstill about adopting telehealth. Given the barriers to entry, there was little reason to push for large implementations. But, the COVID-19 crisis became a primary driver for healthcare organizations to improve their fiber connectivity to increase remote capabilities.

“This is the time to take a long, hard look at your network infrastructure,” Dinwiddie added. “Can you support not only telehealth services but also other mission-critical data and cloud-based applications? If not, this is a good time to break through that inertia to bring about the changes needed to support that.”

Is your network ready for telehealth?

The rapid growth of telehealth services requires that providers ensure they have the network capacity and performance to ensure high-speed, reliable and low-latency telecommunications services. Some may not be ready. But, that doesn’t mean they have to stay that way.

Having a strong network is key, but many questions need to be answered before determining whether a health system’s infrastructure will be able to support its specific telehealth needs. Havasy recommends asking these questions:

1. What’s the staff’s willingness and ability to use telehealth?
2. Will they allow providers to work from home?
3. Will that require the provision of new equipment to staff?
4. Which providers have sufficient digital literacy to form effective doctor-patient relationships over a telelink?
5. What are the appropriate modalities for different encounters – for example, voice alone or voice and video?
6. Which of their payers will support these types of programs?

“Only after you can answer these types of questions can the technical ‘how’ type discussions begin,” advised Havasy.

This is where having a trusted connectivity partner can help you determine not only where your network is at this moment, but also where it needs to be to continue your telehealth journey.

“When you have the right partner, you should expect them to be a driver of innovation and change within your organization so you can be ready for the future,” said Dinwiddie. “Leverage that partnership to expand what you can do and expand collaboration with your providers and patients regarding telehealth.”

Cliff Dinwiddie
Thinking Ahead

The acceleration of telehealth and telemedicine services also offers opportunities for healthcare organizations to truly democratize care, placing hospitals and health systems in a position to address and manage social determinants of health (SDOH) and other well-established care inequities.

“Too often, we see socioeconomic disparities in care, as well as those based on geography,” said Dinwiddie. “Telehealth has a democratizing effect. Telehealth means that a patient in a rural area can meet with a specialist in any city (near or far) on a regular basis. It means someone in the city without transportation can still attend that appointment. It means that doctors can provide truly preventive care, instead of waiting until someone comes in when they are already sick. It means that every patient, regardless of their location, has the same access to quality care. It is an application that can expand a healthcare organization’s reach to a much broader community.”

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established the Rural Health Care (RHC) Program, as well as other stimulus and grant programs, to help eligible rural healthcare providers build out the necessary network infrastructures to support telehealth applications.

“There is growing recognition from the FCC and Congress that we need to expand broadband across the country,” said David Gray, Senior Manager of Government Relations and Connected Health Policy at HIMSS. “Having broadband connectivity plays an integral role not only in supporting telehealth initiatives, but also in the delivery of good healthcare more generally to populations who may have had difficulty accessing it before.”

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Cliff Dinwiddie
Telehealth, today and tomorrow

Telehealth is here to stay and will continue to evolve in innovative and perhaps unexpected ways over the next decade. Healthcare organizations of all shapes and sizes will need to put a strong network infrastructure in place to support digital health transformation, in all the various forms it may take. They need a resilient network that is ready for tomorrow.

“Hospitals have now learned there is a lot they can do online to help provide care for their patients. They aren’t limited to encounters within the four walls of the hospital,” said Havasy. “Even before the pandemic, both providers and patients were feeling a lot of burdens about the way healthcare was delivered. But, there are opportunities to relieve some of those burdens by using technology. But you need that connectivity piece in place before you can even start to consider what that might look like.”

That’s why it’s so critical for hospitals and health systems to partner with a trusted information and communications technology (ICT) vendor to help them understand and then deploy that essential broadband foundation.

“Healthcare organizations don’t need to take this on alone,” Dinwiddie said. “Hospitals are in the business of providing care for patients. They are not in the business of building networks. But, by creating a strong and significant relationship with an ICT vendor, organizations can put themselves in a position where they can successfully support telehealth. They can find new ways to innovate. You want to have the kind of network that gives you the ability and agility to transform care. That’s what a good network does.”

For additional information on how Spectrum Enterprise can help healthcare organizations create a strong foundation for telehealth, cloud-based applications and digital healthcare transformation, visit enterprise.spectrum.com.

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About Spectrum Enterprise:

Spectrum Enterprise, a part of Charter Communications, Inc., is a national provider of scalable, fiber technology solutions serving America’s largest businesses and communications service providers. The broad Spectrum Enterprise portfolio includes networking and managed services solutions, Internet access, Ethernet access and networks, Voice and TV solutions. Spectrum Enterprise’s industry-leading team of experts works closely with clients to achieve greater business success by providing solutions designed to meet their evolving needs. More information about Spectrum Enterprise can be found at enterprise.spectrum.com/healthcare.

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