

New government funding spurs

TELEHEALTH INNOVATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



“Innovation, diversity of ideas and people, and new concepts don’t need to be imported to rural communities – they’re already there. Rural entrepreneurs and community leaders have always, by necessity, been innovative.”

–Chris Harris, Senior Program Officer, Entrepreneurship at the Kauffman Foundation¹

Rural and community hospitals serve approximately 46 million residents of rural areas in America and 175 million people living in suburban and small metro areas.² They are an essential fabric of these communities. And often, due to tight budgets, they have excelled at finding innovative solutions to improve and deliver care.

Now, with over \$8.5 billion in the American Rescue Plan available to rural hospitals, some of those funds designated toward telehealth, there is an opportunity for rural healthcare providers (HCP) to modernize their IT infrastructure to support innovative telehealth initiatives.

To help spark your own ideas, here’s a brief look at how some rural providers are innovating to further enhance the care they provide to their patients.

New avenues for access to specialized care

In a recent study on the access to specialty care in rural versus urban populations, researchers found that for rural communities, “access to specialty care is an important and ubiquitous problem.”³

Historically, rural patients have had to travel long distances to seek care. However, a variety of telehealth programs are now not only giving patients greater access to specialized care but shortening time-to-access.

The use of telehealth in ER departments has been shown to reduce the in-door to physician time by 21 minutes. It has also helped avoid 700+ potential patient transfers, given local practitioners the ability to collaborate with colleagues on tough cases and provided access to care innovations being developed at other healthcare facilities.⁴

Telehealth services are also increasing specialized care to elderly populations who reside in long-term care facilities in rural areas, saving patients time and money, while providing successful treatments to patients. For instance, one telehealth program implemented by a South Dakota non-profit allows specialists to provide acute care evaluations for long-term residents in their home facilities, eliminating the need for residents to travel.⁵ At another post-acute rehabilitation and assisted living facility, access to telehealth for wound care and psychological services eliminated an hour of travel time for patients and staff, saving not only time, but also significant costs.⁶

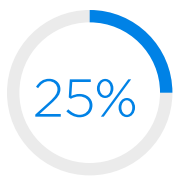
Better care management for chronic conditions

The Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) has found that the use of telehealth interventions can have a positive impact by increasing medication adherence and improving clinical outcomes (such as blood pressure control) and dietary outcomes (such as eating more fruits and vegetables).⁷ This gives rural HCPs the opportunity to use innovative telehealth programs to improve care for patients with chronic conditions.

For one rural healthcare provider, home monitoring of patients between medical visits has helped keep people out of the ER and better manage their conditions at home. It has also allowed them to facilitate earlier hospital discharge so that the limited beds available can be used for the most critically ill patients. The provider gives patients enrolled in its remote monitoring program equipment like blood pressure cuffs and pulse oximeters to collect patients’ vitals data as well as a tablet to video conference with providers.⁸

Telehealth improves outcomes

- ICU telemedicine patients are 18% less likely to die than other rural patients.¹⁷
- 24/7 telehealth patient monitoring cuts down patient ICU stays by 2 days.¹⁸



decrease in 30-day readmissions is made possible through telehealth language interpreting services.¹⁹

Increased access to mental health expertise

The use of online therapy and remote counseling has helped link rural residents with urban behavioral health and mental counseling services. In Hawaii, an online platform allows rural individuals, who might experience time constraints, financial burdens and transportation barriers, the ability to talk to licensed professionals about mental health and substance use concerns at no charge. The program was selected for the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Connected Care Pilot Program and received \$320,535 in funding to support their efforts.⁹

Ability to address retail pharmacy shortages

Rural pharmacies are closing at a rapid pace. The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis reported that from March 2003-2018, more than 1,200 rural pharmacies closed — more than half of these served as the rural community's only retail pharmacy.¹⁰

Telepharmacy allows a pharmacist to remotely supervise a pharmacy tech preparing prescriptions. This means rural patients don't have to rely solely on internet and mail-in pharmacy services. Instead, they have access to the delivery of safe, high-quality pharmacy services through a licensed pharmacist at their local healthcare facilities and community pharmacies.¹¹

In one telepharmacy collaboration in North Dakota, approximately 80,000 rural citizens have had their pharmacy services established, retained, or restored.¹²

School-based access to pediatric care

School-based telehealth care centers can provide students access to healthcare that they might not receive otherwise. Care can include integrated mental health care, social services, vision care, dentistry and health education.¹³ This gives students with chronic conditions an opportunity to manage their care while in school and enables schools to identify students dealing with behavioral health issues and connect them to the right resources through a virtual visit platform.¹⁴

Improved overall care and outcomes

Two healthcare systems that are using telehealth technology to provide 24/7 intensive care unit (ICU) monitoring of rural patients have seen that patients who've received ICU telemedicine are 18 percent less likely to die. In addition, patients monitored 24/7 through telehealth services were released from the hospital an average of 2 days sooner than patients who received traditional ICU care without round-the-clock-on-site intensive care.¹⁵

Similarly, rural patients with limited English proficiency (LEP), also have better outcomes with telehealth translation services. Using on-demand audio or visual technology for patients who speak limited or no English has improved communications between patients and providers, resulting in better outcomes. In one study involving almost 2,000 LEP patients, there was nearly a 25 percent decrease in 30-day readmissions for patients who received language interpreting services via telehealth.¹⁶



Supporting better outcomes through telehealth with federal funding

The use cases for improving healthcare access and outcomes are almost limitless. Yet, despite the advantages, rural hospitals are less likely to adopt any telehealth services compared to metro-area hospitals, primarily due to implementation costs.²⁰

But financial constraints don't need to be the limiting factor when considering where and how to expand telehealth services. The U.S. Government is investing heavily in helping rural healthcare expand its telehealth services, including the following opportunities:

- **The Health and Human Services Department (HHS)**, as part of the American Rescue Plan, made \$52 million from the American Rescue Plan available to train new rural health care providers and expand telehealth.²¹
- **The U.S Department of Agriculture (USDA)** is using \$500 million in American Rescue Plan funding to create the Emergency Rural Health Care Grant Program. The program provides at least \$350 million to help rural hospitals and local communities increase access to COVID-19 vaccines and testing, medical supplies, telehealth, and support construction or renovation of rural health care facilities. In addition, the USDA is providing up to \$125 million in grants to plan and implement models that help improve the long-term viability of rural health care providers, including health care networks that allow rural providers to collectively address community challenges and develop innovative solutions.²²
- **The Universal Service Administrative Company's (USAC's) Rural Health Care (RHC) Program**, which has an annual budget of over \$600 million, provides funding to eligible HCPs to obtain broadband networks that serve rural and underserved communities.²³ Its Healthcare Connect Fund (HCF) provides discounts of up to 65 percent off broadband services.
- **The Federal Communications Connected Care Pilot Program** made \$100 million from the Universal Service Fund available over a three-year period for selected pilot projects to help reduce the cost of providing telehealth services for eligible health care providers, with a particular emphasis on providing connected care services to low-income and veteran patients.²⁴

Telehealth technology has been shown to improve outcomes, save lives and allow for better and more frequent care from providers. Don't miss the opportunity to leverage federal funding to support innovation in your community.

Spectrum Enterprise is committed to helping rural and underserved communities improve the quality of healthcare and expand telehealth services by enabling you to make the most of program funds. Schedule an appointment with a rural healthcare solutions expert today.

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