



Advancing Access to Telehealth in California

Recommendations for Health Plans

Telehealth helps the health care system expand capacity and gives Californians greater access to care. Overwhelmingly, Californians praise telehealth for its convenience and its ability to build connection and trust between patients and their providers.¹

California has made significant progress in expanding telehealth's availability. Policy changes have allowed patients to receive telehealth services at home or in other locations of their choice and have made payment for telehealth equivalent to payment for in-person services. Health systems have invested in technologies and operational changes that enable telehealth to be delivered effectively. However, work remains to be done. Disparities in telehealth utilization show that California's digital divide persists; for example, older adults and people with limited English proficiency are less likely to engage in telehealth.²

Telehealth has the potential to support equitable access to care for all Californians by increasing the availability, convenience, and timeliness of care. To maximize telehealth's impact, health plans are encouraged to take the steps below, which were developed based on a review of literature on California's telehealth evolution as well as interviews with 27 experts.

Goal: Focus Telehealth Efforts on Meeting the Needs of Patients Who Face Significant Barriers to Accessing Care

The Opportunity

People who have been underserved by the health system — including those with low incomes, those living in rural areas, those with inflexible work schedules, and those with mobility limitations or barriers to transportation — may have the most to gain from the widespread availability of telehealth. However, these people often have the least access to telehealth. Many patients are not aware of their options for accessing care via telehealth and do not have access to the technology, connectivity, or practical support needed to access telehealth services, especially video telehealth.³

Recommendations for Health Plans

1. Develop digital strategies that provide a range of telehealth and in-person care options to all members.

- When determining what services are available to members, health plans can work to ensure they are offering patient-centered care solutions. This may include:
- ▶ Providing (or reimbursing for) digital navigation support for patients who require assistance with technology or language access
 - ▶ Investing in solutions that are informed by patient needs and desires related to technology access, digital skill-building, and language access

- ▶ Monitoring patient experience and satisfaction with telehealth services to inform future options

2. Communicate with members about the options available to them. Research suggests that patients are not fully aware of the services that are available to them, which limits their use of telehealth. Health plans have a role in informing their members of their options for receiving care, including telehealth, in a comprehensible and culturally and linguistically appropriate format.

Goal: Identify and Spread Promising Telehealth Practices

The Opportunity

To realize its promise to increase access to care, telehealth must be effectively integrated into the clinical safety net. Using telehealth where patients with low incomes already obtain health care has the potential to increase the ease and timeliness of access while protecting against the fragmentation of services.

Safety-net providers see many of the patients who would benefit most from the convenient access to care afforded by telehealth. However, these providers also experience challenges securing the resources needed to make operational changes and build their telehealth infrastructure. They describe payment, billing, and regulatory challenges as barriers to investing further in their telehealth offerings.

Recommendations for Health Plans

1. Incentivize promising uses of telehealth that result in increased access to care and/or efficiencies in health care delivery. To encourage telehealth's adoption across provider networks, health plans can offer payment incentives or provide other forms of implementation support,

such as grant programs, partnerships, quality improvement coaching, or technical assistance. For example, since there is strong evidence that adopting eConsults improves access to specialty care and expands health system capacity to meet specialty care needs, health plans could incentivize the use of eConsults before making a specialty care referral. Health plans could also identify practices that have not yet adopted a telehealth strategy and support them in doing so.

2. Make billing easy and consistent. Differences in rules across payers are challenging for practices to navigate and require administrative resources that are not always available in resource-scarce environments. Health plans should clarify telehealth billing requirements and partner with other plans to encourage billing uniformity so that confusion around billing does not disincentivize practices from offering telehealth.

Endnotes

- 1 Jen Joynt, [Telehealth Experiences and Preferences Among Californians with Low Incomes](#), California Health Care Foundation (CHCF), May 2023; and Jen Joynt, Lucy Rabinowitz, and Rebecca Catterson, [Listening to Californians with Low Incomes: How They Experience the Health Care System and What It Means for the Future](#), CHCF, May 2021.
- 2 Shira H. Fischer et al., "Use Of And Willingness To Use Video Telehealth Through The COVID-19 Pandemic," *Health Affairs* 41, no. 11 (November 2022): 1645–51; Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE), [Connected Care Accelerator Equity Collaborative Final Evaluation Report](#), CHCF, December 2023; Lacey Hartman, [Telehealth Use and Experience Among California Adults](#), CHCF, September 12, 2023; [Biennial Telehealth Utilization Report](#) (PDF), California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), April 2024; Vivian Hsiao et al., "Disparities in Telemedicine Access: A Cross-Sectional Study of a Newly Established Infrastructure during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Applied Clinical Informatics* 12, no. 3 (2021); Madjid Karimi et al., [National Survey Trends in Telehealth Use in 2021: Disparities in Utilization and Audio vs. Video Services](#), Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, US Department of Health and Human Services, 2022; Julia Shaver, "The State of Telehealth Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Primary Care* 49, no. 4 (Dec. 2022): 517–30; Lori Uscher-Pines et al., "Changes in In-Person, Audio-Only, and Video Visits in California's Federally Qualified Health Centers, 2019-2022," *JAMA* 329, no. 14 (April 11, 2023): 1219–21; Jorge A. Rodriguez et al., "Disparities in Telehealth Use Among California Patients with Limited English Proficiency," *Health Affairs* 40, no. 3 (Mar. 2021): 487–95; Michael A. Kyle et al., "Telehealth Use and Satisfaction among U.S. Households: Results of a National Survey," *Journal of Patient Experience* 8 (Oct. 2021): 23743735211052736; and Sadiq Y. Patel et al., "Variation in Telemedicine Use and Outpatient Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States," *Health Affairs* 40, no. 2 (Feb. 2021): 349
- 3 Carmen Ma et al., [Landscape Assessment of Digital Navigation in the California Safety Net](#), UCSF SOLVE, 2024; and CCHE, [Final Evaluation Report](#).

About the Authors

This report was developed by Natasha Arora, MS, evaluation and learning associate, and Maggie Jones, MPH, director, at the Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE), with support from Trang Le, MPH, Lauren Baba, MPH, and Lina Piñero Walkinshaw, MPH at CCHE.

CCHE designs and evaluates health-related programs and initiatives across the United States. CCHE is based in Seattle and is part of Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute.

About the Foundation

The [California Health Care Foundation](#) (CHCF) is an independent, nonprofit philanthropy that works to improve the health care system so that all Californians have the care they need. We focus especially on making sure the system works for Californians with low incomes and for communities who have traditionally faced the greatest barriers to care. We partner with leaders across the health care safety net to ensure they have the data and resources to make care more just and to drive improvement in a complex system.

CHCF informs policymakers and industry leaders, invests in ideas and innovations, and connects with changemakers to create a more responsive, patient-centered health care system.