Addressing Rural Health Needs: COVID-19, Equity and Access to Care

NIHCM Foundation

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NRHA is a national nonprofit membership organization with more than 21,000 members, made up of a diverse collection of individuals and organizations with the common goal of ensuring all rural communities have access to quality, affordable health care.

Our mission is to provide leadership on rural health issues.
The Rural Landscape
Fragile Rural Health Safety Net Pre-COVID-19

- Vulnerable populations
- Systemic workforce shortages
- Scattered populations with inherent access to care issues
- Limited resources for providers
- Inadequate Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance coverage
- Lack of Medicaid expansion and high uninsured populations
- Rural provider closures
Rural Hospital Closures

Number of rural hospitals closed since 2010.

138 Closures as of February 2022

Source: Sheps Center, UNC
Rural Hospitals Vulnerable to Closure

453 At-Risk as of February 2022

Medicaid Expansion State (implemented as of 12/31/19)
Population Health Disparity

Percentile Ranking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 65</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median HSHLD Income</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Primary Care</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Mental Health</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Where the Safety Net is Weakest

Rural Populations are Older, Less Healthy, Less Affluent and Have Limited Access Care

Source: iVantage Chartis Health Analytics
Digital Equity and Telehealth in Rural
Telehealth During COVID-19

• CARES Act provided the largest expansion of telehealth flexibilities in history for the duration of the public health emergency.
  • Medicare to pay for telehealth services provided by a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) or a Rural Health Clinic (RHC) (Sec. 3704).

• The administration, through the 1135 waiver process also enhanced telehealth access.

• Unfortunately, all notable telehealth provisions are tied to the end of the public health emergency.

• NRHA is adamant that telehealth provisions be extended beyond the duration of the public health emergency so rural providers and patients can continue an increased access to care.
Rural Utilization of Telehealth

• According to ASPE's 2021 report, "Black and rural beneficiaries had lower use of telehealth compared with white and urban beneficiaries, respectively. Telehealth use varied by state with higher use in the Northeast and West, and lower in the Midwest and South."

• Why is this?
  • Broadband accessibility;
  • Provider readiness and infrastructure.
The Digital Divide in Rural America

RURAL HOUSEHOLDS WITH BROADBAND SUBSCRIPTIONS

83% Metropolitan
73% Outside Metropolitan

Source: National Health Association, data from American Community Survey 2018-19 estimates.
Broadband Access and Health Outcomes

• High-speed internet access is the biggest obstacle to providing high-quality telehealth services.
  • Historic investment in broadband services this fall.

• Lack of broadband access during social distancing may have created additional health disparities in rural areas.

• According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, areas with limited broadband access also had higher rates of chronic diseases (obesity and diabetes) resulting in "a double burden."

• Limited broadband access could create further isolation, which could contribute to other adverse health outcomes.
Provider Readiness and Infrastructure

• Another obstacle is hesitation from providers to invest in telehealth services.
• Because all provisions are tied to the end of the public health emergency, we have heard from providers an uncertainty of the future.
• Congress must signal telehealth is here to stay.
• Capital investment funding should also be made available to help vulnerable providers acquire the technology they need to provide services to their communities.
• Audio-only is critical in rural communities.
Key Rural Telehealth Legislation

• CONNECT Act (S. 1512/H.R. 2903)
  • Comprehensive telehealth legislation that includes the extension of several CARES Act flexibilities. Included is the permanent extension of RHCs and FQHCs to serve as distant-site providers, with payment parity.

• Telehealth Modernization Act (S. 368/H.R. 1332)
  • Makes permanent CARES Act provisions with no modifications.

• Protecting Rural Telehealth Access Act (S. 1988)
  • Allows payment-parity for audio-only health services. Brings CAHs into the fold, and updates RHC and FQHC payment rates to consider geographic constraints.

• Telehealth Extension and Evaluation Act (S. 3593)
  • Two-year extension of telehealth services. Provides payment parity for RHCs and FQHCs. Brings CAHs into the fold.
Will telehealth flexibilities be extended?

- Federal government is operating under a continuing resolution (CR) through March 11.
- NRHA expects Congress to pass a full year spending bill at that time.
- Expectation is that this vehicle will be an Omnibus package. NRHA sees this as an opportunity to extend telehealth services beyond the public health emergency.
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