

Expanding telehealth will take more education and permanent changes to reimbursement

By [Tracey Drury](#) – Reporter, Buffalo Business First

A proposal by Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) would expand access to telehealth and extend policies introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The proposal, still under development, is expected to address reimbursement incentives and outdated regulatory prohibitions and introduce training programs to reduce technical “unease” among patients and providers.

Providers breathed a collective sigh of relief as questions have lingered on whether restrictions on location and reimbursement would return once the crisis subsided.

Child & Family Services was among dozens of area health-care providers that continued to reach patients and expand care using telehealth. President/CEO [Elizabeth McPartland](#) said the pandemic allowed for a live pilot phase for “telemental” health services that demonstrated it was safe and effective and allowed family members to interact better with their child’s treatment team.

“The proposal will allow adults as well as families with children who need mental health services to decide the optimal method of receiving those services, either through remote access in their home or via in-person visits with their providers, or a combination of both,” she said.

At BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York, telehealth claims were up 8,277% compared to 2019. Dr. [Thomas Schenk](#), senior vice president and chief medical officer, said the health plan had been moving in that direction before the pandemic though patients and doctors were somewhat hesitant.

“For at least the last three years, it’s been possible for providers to do those kinds of services, they just weren’t part of the model people were using,” he said. “You run your business a certain way ... but this forced people to try new things.”

Univera Healthcare said it’s seen a “dramatic shift to telemedicine” since last spring with an increasing number of members using the technology, and physician practices adopting the technology. Independent Health said claims have gone up among patients and providers as well.

“Unfortunately, telemedicine was slow to be widely adopted, until the pandemic hit when video conference and telephonic interactions between physicians and other providers and patients increased significantly,” said Dr. [Anthony Billittier IV](#), chief medical officer at Independent Health. “Although there has been a slight drop in telemedicine interactions since the beginning of the pandemic, utilization is still at least 20 times above pre-pandemic levels.”

The state will partner with the Reimagine New York Commission to expand access to physical and mental health, as well as substance use disorder services. That includes developing inter-state licensing reciprocity with other Northeast states to allow access to specialties, allow certain unlicensed staff to deliver services and extend behavioral health services into skilled nursing facilities.

RECOMMENDED

On the reimbursement side, the proposal will require commercial health insurers to offer telehealth programming and require disclosures online.

Insurers will be required to offer e-triage or virtual emergency department platforms and streamline the statewide electronic health records platform to increase access among health care providers.

The New York Health Plan Association has supported the expansion. [Eric Linzer](#), president and CEO, said the technology has helped New Yorkers connect to their providers, especially those who were afraid to pursue care at bricks-and-mortar locations. Telehealth services should strengthen, not replace, a relationship with a primary care provider.

“Telehealth and telemedicine have had their moment as a result of or in response to the current pandemic,” he said. “The goal is to make sure the patients get the services they need.”