

Telehealth waivers must be made permanent or access could be lost, experts say

As the end date looms for a provision in Gov. Andrew Cuomo's emergency declaration that expanded access to telemedicine services in the state, health care experts are calling on the governor to permanently waive telehealth restrictions.

Without making the temporary flexibilities permanent, it would be hard to continue leveraging telehealth services that proved to be useful during the pandemic, said Tom Hallisey, director of health information at the Hospital Association of New York State.

Cuomo on March 7 had declared a state of emergency, which included provisions lifting restrictions on patient and provider eligibility for telehealth as well as reimbursement parity for providers. The declaration is set to expire Sept. 7.

The surge in telehealth use when the restrictions were lifted really highlighted the inefficiencies before the pandemic, Hallisey said, noting that a July report from the nonprofit Fair Health observed telehealth claims in the Northeast increased to 20% in April, compared to 0.07% in the same period last year.

Before the pandemic, the patient and the provider had to already have had a relationship, and both parties had to be in a certified health facility before the telehealth session could take place. There were also limitations on what kind of health services could be conducted via telehealth, and reimbursement rates were lower than in-person rates.

It's likely telehealth usage rates will return to pre-pandemic levels if these waivers are not kept in place, and specialist visits will be especially affected, said Dr. Oliver Kharraz, CEO of Zocdoc, an online medical appointment booking service.

Mental health visits could be affected especially, said Kharraz. Before the pandemic, there was a shortage of mental health specialists available to meet the demand in urban centers, but being able to offer these services virtually increased the number of available providers, he noted. During the height of Covid-19, 70% of patients requesting mental health specialist services on Zocdoc switched to telehealth sessions, compared with 40% for primary care.

Removing the need to travel for specialist care helps improve mental health access as well as outcomes from a provider's perspective as the physician is able to assess the patient's home surroundings during a virtual consultation, Kharraz said.

Telehealth also benefits lower-income communities more as it lessens the pressures of needing to take time off to travel for an in-person visit, he added.

Payment parity must also be kept in place to incentivize providers to continue using telehealth, Hallisey and Kharraz said.

"It's hard to ask a doctor to provide the same service via telehealth if they're not going to be paid the same for in-person visits," Kharraz said.

Managed Medicaid and Medicare services achieved reimbursement parity during the pandemic, but there still exists some disparity for commercial insurance, Hallisey noted. Should Cuomo make the waivers permanent, there still needs to be efforts to ensure payment parity from commercial insurance too, he said.

"These waivers have been enormously successful, and the best use of resources moving forward would be to keep them in place," Hallisey said.