Telehealth 101

California **Telehealth** Policy Coalition

What is telehealth?

Telehealth is the provision of health services through technology. Telehealth often makes it possible for patients to receive quality health care services at lower cost and with less disruption to their daily routines. Patients can avoid the expense and time involved in driving long distances for medical treatment, or possibly be treated at home. This can help patients avoid taking time off work or schedule a visit more quickly than in a doctor's office.

Telehealth is an opportunity to expand patient access and improve care quality while being cost-effective in addressing California's serious shortage of health care professionals serving rural communities, underserved populations and safety net programs.

What types of telehealth exist?

Video Conferencing: The use of secure, real-time video between a patient and a provider.

Remote Patient Monitoring: Continuous monitoring of a patient for a period of time with the provider in a different location.

E-consult: Provider-to-provider electronic communications to provide second opinions or referral advice that are documented in the patient's medical record.

Store-and-Forward: Patients and providers electronically share data, images and videos followed by a subsequent interpretation or response to the information, such as a medical/surgical consultation.

mHealth: Health care services or education delivered via mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets.

What are some of the services patients can receive with telehealth?

Telehealth can be used to provide many services. It can be used for a quick check-in with a health care provider or to follow-up on more complicated issues. Here are just a few examples of services that can be provided through telehealth:

- **Mental health:** A patient is able to request and receive a psychiatry appointment directly through an app.

- **Dermatology:** A primary care provider can take photos of a patient's skin condition and forward the photos to a dermatologist for a remote consultation.

- **Rheumatology**: With the patient present, a primary care provider teleconferences with a specialist to discuss recommendations for treatment.

- **Care coordination:** A patient's primary care provider is able to conduct follow-up visits via live video to ensure effective, ongoing care.

- **School-based care:** School nurses are able to teleconference with remote specialists while the student is present.

- **Dentistry:** Dental assistants at senior centers or nursing homes are able to teleconference with remote dentists to conduct regular teeth cleanings.

- **Emergency care and disaster response:** Fire victims are able to connect with specialists remotely over the telephone to ensure their care is managed during a fire.

Other telehealth services:

- Endocrinology
- Care Management
- Infectious Disease
- Occupational and Physical Therapy
- Ophthalmology
- Audiology and Speech Therapy
- Nutrition Counseling
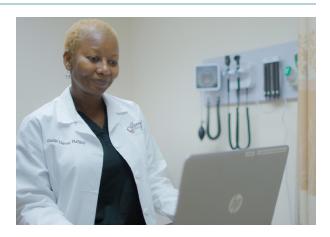- Other Specialties

Who is using telehealth?

Commercial and government payers are increasingly using telehealth for its convenience and effectiveness. In California, access to specialty care through telehealth for Medi-Cal enrollees lags behind many commercially insured populations. As of July 2019, Medi-Cal now covers live video and store-and-forward for all covered services. For more information on these recent Medi-Cal updates, see the Center for Connected Health Policy's Fact Sheet (www.cchpca.org).

How much does a telehealth visit cost?

Telehealth visits are often covered by commercial health insurance and Medicare Advantage plans. Medi-Cal also covers telehealth visits with no copay.

How can telehealth be used more broadly to improve access for safety net programs?

Financial sustainability has been the main barrier. Many community health centers struggle to find adequate staff time and the right workflows to integrate telehealth fully into daily operations, which keeps the number of telehealth visits low. Meanwhile, these community health centers face unique barriers to reimbursement. Working with Medi-Cal managed care plans and health centers across the state, the California Health Care Foundation is implementing the initiative, Sustainable Models of Telehealth in the Safety Net to overcome these challenges.

Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner, Khadija Hamisi, meets with Debbie, a patient in Riverside County.