



Increase Patient Access to Health Services Through Audio-Only Telemedicine

Background

Telemedicine is when physicians or other clinicians use audio and video technology to diagnose, consult, or treat patients. This care modality is a cost-effective and an efficient way to deliver care that leads to long-term improvements in health care outcomes. Our current laws recognize telemedicine's importance and require payers, such as Medicaid and commercial insurance, to reimburse for telemedicine services.

However, the state's current definition of telemedicine specifically excludes audio-only services for both service coverage and payment. This inhibits the use of a key care modality at a time when multiple forms of communication are needed to ensure patient care. This results in inequitable access to telemedicine across our state for rural communities, senior citizens, and low-income patients.

WSHA Position

WSHA supports requiring payment for audio-only telemedicine services by Medicaid, commercial insurance, and Public Employee Benefits Board/State Employee Benefits Board for patients who have an established relationship with their provider. Audio-only services should be paid at parity to in-person services, which ensures the long-term viability of audio-only telemedicine services.

Key Messages

- The COVID-19 pandemic required our state's health care system to shift rapidly to provide outpatient care through telemedicine. Data from the Commonwealth Fund indicates telemedicine use "continues to be well above the pre-pandemic baseline of very few telemedicine visits¹."
- The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the importance of audio-only services for patients who are unable to use visual telemedicine services. Adding audio-only telemedicine coverage to Washington's telemedicine laws will allow these patients to receive quality care through technology consistent with their resources and comfort with technology.
- The addition of audio-only telemedicine services as a care modality will create more equitable access to telemedicine, particularly for rural communities, senior citizens, and low-income patients.
- Payment parity for audio-only services recognizes the inherent value for patients, as well as the work of highly skilled providers to treat patients during audio-only telemedicine visits.

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¹ [Commonwealth Fund. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Outpatient Care: Visits Return to Prepandemic Levels, but Not for All Providers and Patients." October 15, 2020.](#)