

The Use of Telehealth Will Expand with the Ongoing Development of High-Speed Internet Technology

By Sophee Sanderson, ConnectLA

"We believe that patients' use of telehealth to receive primary care services will expand with the ongoing development of high-speed internet technology. High-speed internet technology will enable vulnerable populations to receive their news and other information from the internet, it will enable them to communicate with others through the internet and it will enable them to have improved access to healthcare, as well," Raegan Carter, Director of Health Policy and Governmental Affairs at the Louisiana Primary Care Association (LPCA), said regarding her thoughts on the importance of broadband services.

LPCA was established in 1982 as a non-profit organization. It promotes accessible, affordable, quality primary healthcare services for uninsured and medically underserved populations in Louisiana. It is a membership organization of Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), and its supporters are committed to the goal of achieving healthcare access for all.

Most of LPCA's health center members are providing visit services or receiving patient data through the use of telehealth. This includes medical and behavioral health visits and Remote Patient Monitoring (RPM). RPM is the monitoring of physical data, such as blood sugar readings, blood pressure readings and weight readings, on a regular basis through connected devices to support patient treatment and prevent exacerbation of associated chronic diseases.

"Government agencies must continue to work to make high-speed internet services available in all areas and to require that services are available at a rate that is either at no cost or is affordable to all populations," Carter said.

Although telehealth services come with many perks and benefits, there are still subsequent challenges. For example, high-speed internet service is not available to all patients, particularly in rural areas. In some cases, even when high-speed internet is available, patients may still be unable to pay for the service. When patients do not have access to critical primary care services, acuity levels are more likely to increase, directly resulting in higher costs associated with healthcare.

Many patients who are disadvantaged, impoverished or living on fixed incomes are not able to afford the technology for telehealth appointments, including behavioral health services. If the state is able to secure funding to assist populations with affordability concerns, especially those in rural areas, overall communication access related to healthcare will be improved.

One FQHC in particular has taken an innovative approach.

RKM Primary Care is a non-profit organization that has served surrounding communities since 1999. It provides quality, affordable health care, regardless of a patient's ability to pay. It is a network of non-profit FQHCs that operate patient-centered medical homes that provide coordinated care. Its services include medical, behavioral health, dental, school-based behavioral health, women's health, pediatrics, remote patient monitoring and mammograms. Its mission is to provide open access to quality, patient-centered healthcare in local communities, with the ultimate goal being for all residents to have access to affordable, safe, quality health and wellness services, heightening

quality of life for themselves and their families.

RKM Primary Care has been participating in telehealth projects since 2015. It began by purchasing telehealth equipment with the goal of connecting providers, especially specialists. At the time, it was a forward-thinking strategy; however, because technology had not yet reached rural areas, it became increasingly difficult to get everyone connected, particularly at a time when mental health suddenly became a large part of its volume.

When COVID-19 emerged, RKM Primary Care was in the process of upgrading its equipment. In less than three weeks, it got staff connected and working from home, as well as offering services for those who needed them. By then, about 50% of its volume was coming from telehealth on the mental health side.

"If anything good came out of COVID, it was the advancements with telehealth because we all had to figure it out and keep going," Christi Hunt, CEO of Primary Care Providers, said.

This is where broadband figures into the equation. There is still a large sector of people in rural areas who can't get through sessions because they lack cell service or data. Some patients have had to drive down their driveway or far out of their way to connect to WiFi, a major and pervasive struggle.

RKM Primary Care launched an RPM program in 2021, and it is still running strong today. This program allows physicians to see what happens on a daily basis. If a patient has a reading outside the threshold for hypertension, the system will notify the RKM Primary Care staff and they can intervene much more quickly, as opposed to a follow up appointment three months later. The RKM Primary Care Team can also look for patterns to help prevent patients from having to go to the hospital or emergency room.

However, if patients don't have access to or knowledge of Internet or data, using these services becomes a massive struggle.

"We have the ability to go far whenever we can treat chronic care management at home. Having data at your fingertips allows people to embark on their own conditions. It's very encouraging to see what advancements are out there. We just have to hope that it's affordable and that we can take advantage of grant funding or that the market place can make prices for technology reasonable," Hunt said.

The program has been extremely successful. RKM Primary Care's no-show rates for mental health services went from over 40% to less than 20%.

RKM Primary Care has also made changes and improvements for expansion by implementing RPM for patients with chronic diseases. RKM Primary Care's population of patients with controlled hypertension went from 52% to 73% in the last three years.

"It's challenging when people can't connect. It even goes down to education. If a kid has to drive to the local McDonald's to tap into WiFi just to do homework, that's a problem. It shouldn't be that way and Louisiana shouldn't be behind in that and we are," Hunt said. "Until you build the infrastructure to support the broadband and bandwidth needed, we will never get to where we need to be. I know ConnectLA recognizes that, and it's just a matter of continuing to advance the story. We have the

means, but it doesn't mean anything if 90% of the parish can't connect. Until we get these things fixed, we are going to stay behind, but it starts with infrastructure."

The biggest obstacle RKM Primary Care faces is getting providers to utilize the technology to offset no-show rates and to increase the capacity to provide access to clinic services. RKM Primary Care also struggles with patients who have difficulty accessing or using technology, as well as those who may not have access to a stable, reliable connection. Staff and providers also face further difficulties coordinating telehealth workflow, but the more they integrate these practices into their everyday operations, the more seamless the process becomes.

When asked if she had any advice for other providers, Hunt replied, "Plan, study, do, act." Securing funding and creating a plan for sustainability is the first place to start. Knowing your patients and their capabilities to use technology will ensure that you are meeting their technology needs and that you have the proper equipment for staff, patients and broadband capabilities. Getting feedback through patient surveys can help navigate areas of improvement and areas where your program is running efficiently.

ConnectLA is working on plans to address the acute primary care shortage that exists in Louisiana by providing broadband services to households, small businesses and community anchor institutions. Doing so will hopefully amplify the impact on our healthcare system, much like the impact broadband is having on RKM Primary Care.