COVID-19’s Impact on Telehealth Usage in Rural Health Clinics across the United States

Christopher Marshall, BS, Whitney Zahnd PhD, Jan Eberth, PhD, Allie Silverman, MPH, MSW
University of South Carolina School of Medicine Columbia • Rural and Minority Health Research Center

Introduction

- Inadequate healthcare access in rural health communities has been a persistent and worsening problem.
- Telehealth has the potential to limit these disparities.
- Telehealth utilization significantly increased nationwide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic across different health care settings, such as Federally Qualified Health Centers, but disparities in rural areas persist.
- There is limited data that explores telehealth usage in Rural Health Clinics (RHCs) during the pandemic.
- Our objective was to describe the use of telehealth in RHCs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

- A survey of RHCs was developed to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer prevention, control activities, and telehealth usage.
- A systematic, stratified random sample of 1,900 RHCs were surveyed. Data come from a preliminary assessment of survey responses of 110 RHCs collected from April 1st to July 9th, 2021.
- Frequencies and percentages were calculated from these responses.

Results

- Of the RHCs surveyed, 66.97% were hospital-owned, 25.69% provider-owned, and 7.34% had unknown or other ownership structures (Chart 1).
- Before March 2020, 21.65% of RHCs reported having telehealth capabilities. There was a sizable increase in current capabilities, with 92.66% of RHCs now having telehealth capabilities (Chart 2).
- Of these clinics, 68.81% offered telehealth with video and phone capabilities, 11.93% solely offered via phone, and 9.17% offered telehealth by video only. For services offered via telehealth, 81.25% of the surveyed RHCs offered office or outpatient evaluation and management services, 17.86% offered mental health counseling, 35.77% offered preventative health screening, and <1% offered substance use treatment.

Conclusion

- Telehealth adoption among RHCs has more than quadrupled since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Mental health and substance use counseling/treatment offerings via Telehealth were limited.
- Significant increases in telehealth usage is encouraging, and it underscores the importance of continued regulations, reimbursement policies, technical assistance, and funding that facilitate telehealth services in RHCs.

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