

Why telehealth progress could be erased if Congress fails to act

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What's the news: Congress took swift and decisive actions to ensure that telehealth services would be available to all Medicare beneficiaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now the AMA and more than 70 health care organizations and associations representing medical professionals are urging congressional leaders of both parties to “prevent the sudden unavailability of virtual health options for Medicare patients” after the national public health emergency has ended.

Key parts of the first three COVID-19 relief packages allowed the Department of Health and Human Services to cover live voice and video interactions between Medicare patients and physicians outside of rural areas and to the home for the first time.

This expanded access to telehealth technology is temporary and will expire at the end of the public health emergency. That great access to telehealth should be made permanent, says the letter from the AMA, American Heart Association, Premier Inc., and many others.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act enacted a general waiver provision enabling the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to temporarily waive outdated “originating site” and geographic restrictions on Medicare's coverage of telehealth enabled services. Prior to this action, Medicare physicians were prohibited from offering most telehealth services outside of rural areas, and Medicare beneficiaries in rural areas were not able to receive most of those services in the home, they had to travel to a health care facility.

The relief packages also allow for Medicare covered telehealth services to be provided by federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and rural health centers (RHCs).

Learn how?after COVID-19, \$250 billion in care could shift to telehealth.

Why it's important: These and other steps have helped “remove barriers so Medicare patients—a population that is particularly vulnerable to COVID-19—can use telehealth and remote patient

monitoring,” notes the letter.

The statutory and legal changes have enabled patients to use “digital health platforms, tools and services to consult with caregivers in greater numbers as clinicians seek to treat their patients at home and avoid calling them into an office or hospital where they could risk exposure or exposing others to the novel coronavirus.”

Telehealth use has skyrocketed thanks to the changes.

“Without question, the broadened availability of digital health technologies, such as telehealth video calls have proven to be a key in limiting the spread by keeping people at home,” says the letter.”

But Congress needs to act before the public health emergency ends, or coverage and payment for telehealth services will end for seniors outside rural areas and to the home.

“Pulling these expanded digital health capabilities away from Medicare patients—whether they are receiving care from a FQHC, an RHC, or another provider—at the end of the PHE would be a grave mistake for patients, providers and government,” says the letter.

Learn more: The AMA’s Physicians Grassroots Network has called on Congress to permanently lift the geographic and site restrictions on telehealth technologies so all Medicare beneficiaries have access to telehealth services, including from home, regardless of where they live.

The AMA’s telehealth quick guide supports physicians and practices in expediting the implementation of telemedicine, so care can continue to be provided to those who need it most.

Stay current on the AMA’s COVID-19 advocacy efforts and track the pandemic with the AMA’s COVID-19 resource center, which offers resources from JAMA Network™, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Health Organization.