

How—and why—to use telehealth to combat mental health crisis

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Telehealth and other digital tools can help increase the overall impact of behavioral health integration (BHI) by expanding patients' timely access to behavioral health treatment and enhancing your practice's relationship with your patients, according to a recent report.

The AMA, Manatt Health Strategies and a group of health care experts outlined solutions for accelerating the adoption of BHI, essential to solving the nation's growing mental health crisis, specific to physician practices, employers, and policymakers, among other key stakeholders, in the report, titled "Accelerating and Enhancing Behavioral Health Integration Through Digitally Enabled Care: Opportunities and Challenges" (PDF).

The longstanding national mental health crisis has only grown worse as Americans have grappled with COVID-19's impact on their lives, including extended social and financial upheaval. BHI enables primary care physicians and their care teams to reach more peoples in need of behavioral health treatment, says the report.

"The demand for behavioral health services is significant and rising, but so is the potential for digital technology to support the integrated delivery of physical and behavioral health services," said AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, a South Carolina family physician.

"The AMA is committed to accessible and equitable treatment for behavioral and physical health needs, and appropriate use of digital health technology can drive behavioral health integration, particularly at time of increased psychological distress and trauma," Dr. Harmon said.

Patient advocates and experts from physician practices, large employers and health plans contributed to the final report.

Among other things, the report:

- Defines the opportunities and limitations to incorporating technology to advance BHI.
- Details the practical solutions stakeholders can pursue to advance digitally enabled BHI.
- Demonstrates how to use the AMA's Return on Health framework to measure the value of digitally enabled BHI models.

Practical solutions for stakeholders

Appropriately applied, technology—including digital tools for screening and intake, clinical decision support, and telehealth care delivery—can enhance patient management and treatment, support integration and limit fragmentation of care.

But disparities in access to technology such as broadband internet or smartphone-enabled devices can impede equitable digitally enabled BHI adoption.

Here are some of the practical solutions the report outlines for specific stakeholder groups.

Physician practices and health systems: Incorporate evidence-based digital health solutions and enabling technology into standard workflows to increase behavioral health diagnosis and treatment rates. Adopt and integrate standard measurement tools into provider and patient-facing technologies.

Health plans: Expand coverage for beneficiaries and provide fair payment with a margin for all stakeholders using the Collaborative Care model and other BHI models. Implement payment parity for behavioral health services delivered by video or audio-only. Minimize and, where appropriate, eliminate prior authorization and other utilization-management practices for BHI services to expand provider networks and improve access.

Policymakers: Provide long-term sustainable funding opportunities and fair payment rates with a margin for providers who deliver BHI services in federal and state coverage programs. Grow the behavioral health workforce by increasing federal funding for efforts such as loan forgiveness and new residency and training programs.

Employers: Cut employee out-of-pocket costs for care by evaluating how and when to apply cost-sharing such as copays and deductibles, including eliminating cost-sharing where appropriate for in-person or telehealth integrated behavioral health services. Increase the number of employees with regular, longitudinal sources of primary care by encouraging employees to attend annual wellness visits.

Private or publicly traded behavioral health companies: Develop new businesses and evolve current ones to address patient and physician needs, complement in-person care, support comprehensive care delivery, and enable asynchronous communication between patients and



providers. Work with BHI stakeholders to develop national BHI technology standards.

The report builds on the AMA's ongoing efforts to empower physician practices to sustain BHI adoption. The AMA established the BHI Collaborative with seven other leading physician organizations to catalyze effective and sustainable integration of behavioral and mental health care into physician practices. Learn more with the collaborative's "Overcoming Obstacles" webinar series.

Also, check out the BHI Collaborative's Behavioral Health Integration Compendium, which provides health care organizations with a proven pathway for delivering integrated behavioral health care and ensuring they have the most recent, actionable information at their disposal.