

# Rural Telehealth

Telehealth increases access to health care for rural patients by removing travel burdens and addressing provider shortages.

Telehealth is largely used in FQHCs and RHCs. Telehealth in these rural settings had a nearly 100-fold increase from a total of 9,000 telehealth visits in 2019 to more than 830,000 telehealth visits in 2020.

By 2023, telehealth use decreased in urban areas since the PHE, but was 5.1 percentage points higher in small, rural areas.

Rural FQHCs conducted about 4.9 million visits via telehealth in 2021.

Nearly 80% of these Medicare beneficiary telehealth visits were for behavioral health.



Rural hospitals are more likely to use telehealth to assist with providing radiology, emergency, and trauma healthcare services.

## Challenges



**Medicare flexibilities** put in place during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency will expire on **January 31, 2026** without congressional action.

**Medicare reimbursement** is commonly cited as a major challenge for telehealth programs, particularly for Rural Health Clinics which are paid outside of their All-Inclusive Rate for Medicare telehealth services.

**The physician licensure system** creates barriers for physicians to practice across state lines. Physicians must be licensed by the professional licensing board in **each state** where they are delivering care to patients.

**The broadband gap** between rural and urban areas leads to health inequities. In 2022, 28% of rural residents and 24% of Americans in tribal areas did not have access to fixed broadband services that met the FCC's minimal speed benchmark.

# NRHA Supported Legislation

## **S.2011/H.R.3884: Telemental Health Care Access Act**

*Sens. Cassidy (R-LA) & Tina Smith (D-MN) & Reps. Matsui (D-CA) & Balderson (R-OH)*

**Removes the statutory requirement that Medicare beneficiaries be seen in-person within six months of being treated for mental and behavioral health services through telehealth.**

## **H.R. 3419: Telehealth Resource Center Reauthorization**

*Reps. Valadao (R-CA) and Gray (D-CA)*

**Reauthorizes Telehealth Network and Telehealth Resource Center grant programs.**

## **S. 2709/H.R. 5081: Telehealth Modernization Act**

*Sens. Scott (R-SC), Schatz (D-HI), Hyde-Smith (R-MS), Gillibrand (D-NY), Tillis (R-NC), King (I-ME) & Reps. Carter (R-KS) and Dingell (D-MI)*

**Ensures access to telehealth services for Medicare beneficiaries by extending Rural Health Clinic (RHC) and Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) distant site status and implements payment parity through FY 2027. This legislation would also continue audio-only telehealth, remove originating site restrictions, expand practitioners eligible to furnish telehealth, and delay in-person requirements for mental health visits through FY 2027.**

## **S. 1261/H.R. 4206: CONNECT for Health Act**

*Sen. Schatz (D-HI) & Reps. Thompson (D-CA), Schweikert (R-AZ), Matsui (D-CA), & Balderson (R-OH)*

**Expands coverage of telehealth services through Medicare by making permanent COVID-19 telehealth flexibilities.**