

Rural Oral Health Telemedicine

The issue

Americans living in rural areas face significant health disparities in comparison to their non-rural counterparts, and oral health is no exception. While rural Americans account for roughly 20 percent of the U.S. population, more than 50 percent of individuals in [dental health professional shortage areas](#) are in rural or partially rural areas. A [report](#) by the South Carolina Rural Research Center found that four times as many rural residents have to travel 30 miles or more for medical or dental care compared to urban residents. Considering these oral health care disparities, teledentistry has emerged as a promising way to deliver care to rural communities.

Barriers to access

Teledentistry allows oral health services to be provided virtually, addressing key issues impacting access to care for rural patients, such as geographic isolation and oral health workforce shortages. [Existing teledentistry programs](#) have shown promising results in improving access to both primary and specialty dental care for rural and underserved populations. A [systematic review](#) shows that teledentistry and face-to-face care have comparable diagnostic accuracy for dental caries, which are a significant and preventable oral health problem for rural residents. This modality of oral health care is believed to be efficient and cost-effective. The rising interest in the use of teledentistry to address unmet needs in rural populations has resulted in program advancements.

However, there continues to be significant policy and reimbursement barriers to rural teledentistry. These include restrictions in scope of practice for allied oral health professionals and reimbursement systems that do not cover services performed using teledentistry. Some states have addressed these issues with temporary flexibilities during the public health emergency (PHE); however, few states have fully supportive policy environments that will remain in place after the PHE. These policy issues must be addressed, especially by public payers, if teledentistry is to achieve its potential improvement in access to care. Some states have already taken legislative action to reconcile reimbursements through Medicaid, grants, and direct payments.

In addition to the policy issues described above, broadband access in rural areas must be addressed for teledentistry to be successful. The [2018 Broadband Deployment Report](#) released by the Federal Communications Commission shows 30.7 percent of the rural population lacks access to fixed terrestrial broadband speeds of 25 Mbps/3Mbps, the minimum benchmark set by the FCC for high-speed broadband internet. Moreover, compared to 83 percent of urban residents, only 71 percent of rural residents owned a smartphone in [2019](#).

Recommended action

NRHA sees the expansion of telehealth programs as one of the cornerstones of equitable care moving forward. NRHA encourages expanding the authority of the Office for the Advancement of Telehealth within the Department of Health and Human Services to include the ability to:

- Advise the Secretary on telehealth issues including the effects of current policies and proposed statutory, regulatory, administrative, and budgetary changes in the programs established under titles XVIII and XIX that affect appropriate use of telehealth and

telehealth-related technologies to improve access to high-quality health care services and help to broaden the use of the health care workforce.

- Create and staff an HHS Telehealth Advisory Committee to make recommendations to the Secretary related to telehealth policy and program efforts across the department.
- Administer grants, cooperative agreements, and contracts to fund demonstration projects, provide technical assistance, and support other activities as necessary to advance the use of telehealth broadly.

Including and outlining teledentistry standards will go a long way in advancing access to rural populations. We encourage the expansion of definitions to include teledentistry in the following bills:

- [H.R.4650](#) - Medicare Dental Coverage Act of 2021
- [H.R.4311](#) - Medicare Dental, Vision, and Hearing Benefit Act of 2021

Resources

- [NRHA's National Rural Oral Health Initiative](#) is the combined effort of the National Rural Health Association and the CareQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement to improve oral health disparities in rural America. Efforts focus on policy, communications, education, and research.
- [Case Studies of Six Teledentistry Programs: Strategies to Increase Access to General and Specialty Dental Services](#) reports on the effectiveness of teledentistry, provides suggestions for implementing successful programs, and addresses challenges in teledentistry including reimbursement for oral health services.
- The Health Resources and Services Administration offers a multitude of [telehealth programs](#) to fund and improve services in rural areas. While these programs do not specifically address oral health, they may be applied to teledentistry.
- The Universal Service Administrative Company's [Rural Health Care Program](#) funds two types of services: the Telecommunications Program, which provides reduced rates on voice services and telecommunications for rural health care providers, and the Healthcare Connect Fund Program, which provides a discount on broadband connectivity expenses for rural health care providers.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's [e-Connectivity @ USDA: Broadband Resources for Rural America](#) document highlights USDA programs that can be used to fund development, construction, research, and activities relating to e-connectivity. The USDA has also offered funding opportunities to support increased broadband access, such as the [Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee](#) and [Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program Grants](#).
- [Capitol Dental Care's Virtual Dental Homes](#) is an example of a school-based program that used teledentistry to provide care to more than 900 students in Oregon.

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