

# Telemental Health: Technical Assistance and Resource Guide

November 2010

Telemental health, a quickly growing field of service delivery in the United States, has the potential to dramatically expand patients' access to health services by linking them to providers via videoconferencing or other types of electronic communications technology. This technology may be especially beneficial to community behavioral health agencies because of the challenges to service delivery that result from lack of integration of physical and behavioral health care and shortages of behavioral health providers in many parts of the country.

**This issue brief provides an overview of resources and research related to telemental health, with links to additional helpful information.** Topics include federal and state payment policy, grants and funding opportunities, and best practices/lessons learned.

## *Federal and State Payment Policy*

### **ATA Resource on Medicare Reimbursement for Telehealth**

The American Telemedicine Association has published a [fact sheet](#) with information on Medicare reimbursement for telehealth. Medicare allows reimbursement for telemedicine consultations, office or other outpatient visits, individual psychotherapy, medication management, and psychiatric diagnostic interview examinations. The services must be provided to patients who present to an eligible facility outside an urban area. Eligible facilities include physician offices, rural health clinics, federally qualified health centers, and community mental health centers. The reimbursement for the health professional providing the service is equal to the amount he or she would have received for the same service provided face-to-face. In addition, Medicare allows for a fee to be paid to the facility where the patient receives the service.

### **State-by-State Data on Coverage of Telehealth Services in Medicaid**

The Center for Telehealth and E-Health Law website includes a section for [Medicaid reimbursement](#). This website includes an overview of telemedicine within Medicaid as of 2009. According to the Center, at least 27 states have acknowledged they offer reimbursement for some services provided via telemedicine. The website also includes helpful links to state-specific information about telehealth coverage in Medicaid. Each state's page explains current reimbursement practices for telehealth and links to the relevant section of the state's Medicaid statute.

### **Barriers to Telehealth Reimbursement in Medicaid**

In its [2004 report](#), "Innovation, Demand, and Investment in Telehealth," the U.S. Department of Commerce evaluates reimbursement issues that present barriers to the adoption and utilization of telehealth. Because

Medicaid is a joint federal-state program, no two states have the same policies on telehealth coverage, and the types of covered services vary widely. However, past studies have shown low rates of utilization even in states that reimburse for telehealth services. The report also discusses Medicare reimbursement and outlines models for leveraging available resources.

### **Working with Your State’s Medicaid Agency to Gain Telehealth Reimbursement**

In its white paper “Medical Assistance and Telehealth: An Evolving Partnership,” the American Telemedicine Association outlines strategies for state advocates to gain Medicaid reimbursement for services provided via telehealth. The white paper includes information on legislative initiatives, regulatory action, executive order, third party collaborations, and other areas of pursuit. It also includes four case studies with examples of successful strategies to gain reimbursement for telehealth services. The [full report](#) is available online.

### **Private Insurance Reimbursement Survey**

A [2006 survey](#) of health facilities offering telehealth services found that in the vast majority of cases where services are reimbursed, there is no difference in payment levels between private insurance and Medicare. However, private payers do not universally reimburse in all 50 states, and the same survey found that only 55 percent of survey respondents reported receiving reimbursement from private insurers. Furthermore, only 17 percent said they charge private payers a facility fee when their site is the originating facility. The survey found that although only five states mandate private insurance reimbursement of telehealth, insurers across the country voluntarily pay for such services.

### **Telehealth in State Substance Use Disorder Services**

A [2009 report](#) by the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors (NASADAD) evaluates the extent to which states have incorporated telehealth services into their substance abuse and/or mental health programs. The report analyzes survey responses from 37 states, 29 of which are currently using some form of telehealth. The report describes specific types of telehealth technology being used and discusses regulatory issues related to telehealth adoption.

## ***Grants and Funding Opportunities***

### **Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants**

The Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) Program, offered through the US Department of Agriculture, is designed to fund projects that meet the educational and health care needs of rural America through the use of advanced telecommunications technologies. Grants of \$50,000 to \$500,000 are available for organizations that currently deliver or propose to deliver telemedicine services for the term of the grant, which must be at least two years. The DLT program is focused on sustainability and does not provide funding for planning studies, research projects, and short-term demonstration projects. [Additional information](#) about this program is available online.

### **Office for the Advancement of Telehealth**

The Office for the Advancement of Telehealth, established as part of the Health Resources and Services Administration in 2002, offers grants for the development of telehealth programs. Available grants may vary at any given time, but past grants have included the Telehealth Network Grant Program, Telehealth Licensure Grant Program, Telehomecare Grant Program, Telehealth Resource Center Grant Program, and Rural Telemedicine Grant Program. [Additional information](#) about this program is available online.

### **Rural Health Care Program**

The Federal Communications Commission established the Rural Health Care Program to assist organizations with the costs associated with telecommunications services used for the delivery of health care. This program provides reduced rates to rural health care providers for telecommunications services and Internet access charges related to the use of telemedicine and telehealth. Eligible providers include community mental health centers. [Additional information](#) about this program is available online.

## *Best Practices and Lessons Learned*

### **A Guide to Getting Started in Telemedicine**

“Telemedicine Technical Assistance Documents: A Guide to Getting Started in Telemedicine” is designed to provide readers with a better understanding of the steps necessary to develop a successful and sustainable telemedicine network. It addresses 12 different applications of these technologies and offers recommendations based on the real-life experiences of programs that often have been pioneers in the development of telehealth services for underserved communities. The [report](#) includes a section on mental health.

### **American Telemedicine Association Guidelines and Standards**

The American Telemedicine Association has embarked on an effort to establish [practice guidelines](#) and technical standards for telemedicine to help advance the science and to assure the uniform quality of services to patients. As part of this initiative, the following helpful resources are available:

- **Evidence-Based Practice for Telemental Health**

The American Telemedicine Association has recently published a [document](#) outlining evidence-based practices for designing and running a telemental health program. This publication includes information about the research base for a variety of mental health services provided on a wide array of technology.

- **Practice Guidelines for Videoconferencing-Based Telemental Health**

These [guidelines](#) are designed to aid in the development and practice of coherent, effective, safe and sustainable telemental health practices. The guidelines focus on two-way, interactive videoconferencing as the modality by which telemental health services are provided.

- **A Blueprint for Telerehabilitation Guidelines**

This [document](#) contains the key administrative, clinical, technical, and ethical principles that should be considered in the course of providing telerehabilitation services. They are based primarily on the American Telemedicine Association's Core Standards for Telemedicine Operations, and describe additional considerations that are present across applications within telerehabilitation and its related fields.

**Clinical Telehealth Across the Disciplines: Lessons Learned**

In [this article](#) in the September 2008 issue of *Telemedicine and e-Health*, authors from the University of British Columbia review the scientific literature on telehealth adoption to assess key strategies for organizational readiness and technology adoption. Areas of analysis include the development of a change management and user training plan, understanding program cost and remuneration issues, development of organizational protocols for system use, and strategies to promote interprofessional collaboration.

*For more information, please contact Chuck Ingoglia, Vice President, Public Policy, National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, at [ChuckI@thenationalcouncil.org](mailto:ChuckI@thenationalcouncil.org) or 202.684.7457 ext. 249.*