

Congressional Momentum Builds for Telehealth Expansion

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The Alliance for Patient Access (allianceforpatientaccess.org), founded in 2006, is a national network of physicians dedicated to ensuring patient access to approved therapies and appropriate clinical care. AfPA accomplishes this mission by recruiting, training and mobilizing policy-minded physicians to be effective advocates for patient access. AfPA is organized as a non-profit 501(c)(4) corporation and headed by an independent board of directors. Its physician leadership is supported by policy advocacy management and public affairs consultants. In 2012, AfPA established the Institute for Patient Access (IfPA), a related 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. In keeping with its mission to promote a better understanding of the benefits of the physician-patient relationship in the provision of quality healthcare, IfPA sponsors policy research and educational programming.



Legislation to expand access to telehealth services is likely to pass Congress this year, but what exactly will it entail?

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The [Telehealth Extension and Evaluation Act](#), for example, calls for only a two-year extension of all waivers. (1) This waiver would allow time for a study of telehealth service delivery that gives policymakers more information before making telehealth permanent. If this is the chosen path, maternal health advocates hope poli-

cymakers take a closer look at [expanding the scope](#) of permitted and reimbursed telehealth services. (2) Doula support, prenatal risk assessment, postpartum depression screening, and childbirth education are critical services that could be provided remotely but are not uniformly covered under current rules.

In contrast, the [Telehealth Extension Act](#) would permanently remove certain site-based and geographic restrictions that limit where patients can receive services. (3) The bill’s sponsors say there is already broad support to eliminate them. Research has found that the loosening of these restrictions during the pandemic has improved access to care and attendance at prenatal appointments, especially for an expectant mom who lives in rural communities or who needs frequent yet routine monitoring.

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A Patient-Centered Approach

The bills include some other differences, but regardless of which one ends up moving forward, policymakers need to approach the issue from a patient-centered perspective. Telehealth is a valuable complement to in-person care, not a substitute for it. With this goal in mind, the ideal telehealth policy would:

- Create payment parity, so providers get paid the same whether they see patients in-person or via telehealth
- Ensure policies do not limit the ability to get in-person care
- Allow providers to see patients across state lines, which reduces patients’ travel burden
- Ensure “low-tech” audio-only visits are allowable and paid at the same rate as an appointment with an audio and video connection
- Support the infrastructure necessary to get more Americans access to the broadband internet that allows “high-tech” telehealth visits.

Expanding Access to Broadband

This last issue – addressing access to high-speed internet – has long been a problem, but the pandemic laid bare how America’s digital divide affects access to equitable health care.

[Nearly a quarter](#) of Americans still do not have high-speed internet at home, though there are movements afoot for insurers [to pay for broadband access](#). (4,5) In addition, certain state Medicaid programs are promoting the Affordable Connectivity Program to

those they serve. It provides \$30 internet subsidies for the poorest households, plus a \$100 one-time credit for a connected device.

While the Biden administration is pushing for expanded broadband connections, it is also pledged to [take a closer look](#) at the effectiveness of telehealth in serving all Americans. (6) The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy launched a series of roundtable discussions examining which pandemic-driven telehealth innovations are worth keeping and which might reinforce existing disparities in healthcare access.

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There are still many questions about the long-term role of telehealth. However, momentum for expanded telehealth services is building. If done correctly, policy changes should bode well for Americans’ maternal health and postpartum care.

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