



Rapidly Expanding Telehealth During COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth utilization rates were low—mainly due to uncertainty, discomfort and unfamiliarity on the part of both clinicians and patients, as well as government restrictions on reimbursement for it. However, the rise of COVID-19 generated a series of events: clinics and doctors’ offices closed, patients were under stay-at-home orders, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) eased restrictions on reimbursement. All this helped clear the way for patients and clinicians to turn to telehealth as a viable alternative to in-person appointments.

CHALLENGE

In response to COVID-19, VUMC temporarily suspended in-person clinic visits, increasing interest in telehealth to maintain care. Though many patients and clinicians were unfamiliar with using telehealth in lieu of a clinic visit, the reality of COVID-19 mandated telehealth use

SOLUTION

Extend reach of telehealth by rapidly deploying equipment, implementing updates to eStar to allow for use by all VUMC clinicians, providing extensive patient education, enabling and training clinicians, and reinforcing critical resources for end user support

OUTCOMES

Provided necessary care to patients, improved telehealth acceptance for both patients and clinicians, increased amount of completed telehealth visits to quickly achieve record levels, and enhanced overall patient experience

Though some pockets of VUMC were already using telehealth, several platforms needed to be modified for broader usage. Teams implemented updates to eStar (VUMC’s EHR) to ensure all clinicians could use telehealth. They also reinforced and updated integrations between eStar, My Health at Vanderbilt (MHAV) and Zoom. For MHAV, HealthIT teams simplified the process for pediatric and adolescent sign-ups and ensured the platform could accommodate a surge in new account activations.

Many clinicians were unfamiliar with the telehealth technology and uncertain about how they could use it to effectively care for patients in a virtual environment. To help them, Telehealth and support teams developed robust resources to educate clinicians on how to conduct a telehealth visit, such as tip sheets, live and on-demand learning modules, workflow walkthroughs, and information on general technical, documentation and coding requirements.

To put these new skills to use, training and technology experts configured new workflows in

special environments so clinicians could practice end-to-end telehealth visits. Clinicians also had access to bi-weekly information sessions and a dedicated help desk.

IT teams assisted clinicians in ensuring they had the right equipment to deliver telehealth, including updated laptops and webcams. Teams also included instructions on maintaining device security and getting critical system updates while working from home.

Likewise, some patients also needed to scale a technology curve: installing a MHAV account and learning how to use Zoom. To help patients learn to use these tools, teams produced patient-facing materials such as videos, web content and a page dedicated to frequently asked questions. A help desk was also available to guide them through the process.

Recognizing the need to ensure health equity and improve access for unserved groups, patient telehealth education materials were translated into Spanish and Arabic.

“It’s amazing to recall the collaboration that occurred to scale our telehealth workflow throughout the organization. While telehealth was a key component in VUMC’s response to COVID-19, we fully expect telehealth will continue to be an option for our patients.”

—Amber Humphrey

Additionally, Vanderbilt medical students proactively contacted more than 5,000 patients to help prepare them for telehealth visits.

The collaborative effort of HealthIT, the Telehealth department and multiple VUMC departments resulted in several positive outcomes:

- Provided necessary care to approximately 2,000 patients during the initial surge of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Eased comfort with telehealth for both clinicians and patients
- Enabled VUMC to attain its “reach” goal of activating 568,000 MHAV accounts
- Normalized use of telehealth at VUMC to exceed VUMC’s annual goal of more than 200,000 telehealth patients
- Enhanced patient experience by allowing them to access health care services from comfort of their own homes
- Broadened the reach of VUMC’s services to help ensure equitable access for more patients

