Telehealth and Telemental Health:

Innovations from the School Health Services National Quality Initiative

As part of the School Health Services National Quality Initiative, the School-Based Health Alliance (SBHA) and the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH), with guidance from the Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau, worked with states to increase state policies and programs that promote quality, sustainability, and growth of school-based health services, specifically school-based health centers (SBHCs) and comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHSs).

We hosted a three-year, quarterly learning community of 24 states, the District of Columbia, and the Bureau of Indian Education and Indian Health Service. Participants included representatives from state departments of education, health or public health, and mental/behavioral health; Title V/Medicaid; other state-level agencies or organizations such as SBHC state affiliates and managed care organizations; and family organizations, youth, and other leadership.

This document highlights shared policy or practice innovations, lessons learned, and resources related to telehealth and telemental health.

SBHCs: School-based health centers complement existing school health services by facilitating access to primary care and often behavioral health, vision, and other services through school-community partnerships for children and youth nationwide who experience barriers to accessing care because of discrimination, their family income, or where they live.

CSMHSs: In strategic partnership between schools, families, and communities, comprehensive school mental health systems use a multi-tiered system of support framework (MTSS) to promote positive school climate, social and emotional competencies, and mental health and well-being, while reducing the prevalence and severity of mental illness.
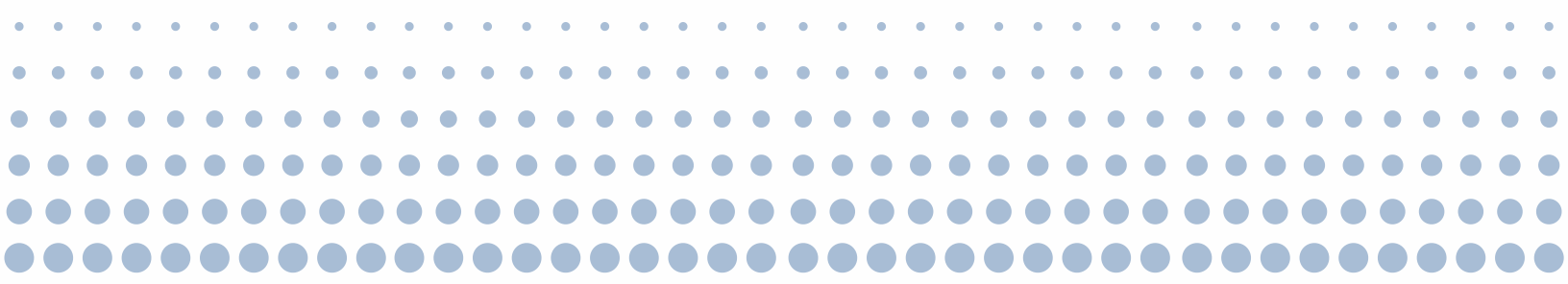
Topic Overview

Telehealth is a powerful technology to increase access to health and mental health services and support. While pockets of excellence in telehealth were in place before the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures and social distancing accelerated innovations in practice and calls for policy change. With benefits of telehealth, such as increased access to care and family engagement, being recognized, SBHCs and CSMHSs are considering how best to integrate telehealth into daily practice in schools.

During the pandemic, telehealth was a critical strategy for delivering continued care. In SBHA's 2020-2021 National Survey of School-Based Health Centers (National Survey), more than 80% of respondents reported that they provided some telehealth services. This is a significant increase from 2016-2017 when 19% of SBHCs engaged in telehealth.

Over 60% of National Survey respondents began offering primary care, mental health services, or both via telehealth in the 2020-21 school year. Half improved technology to expand pre-pandemic telehealth services. The following case examples demonstrate telehealth innovations that increased access after the pandemic began.

Innovations Spotlight

Pennsylvania
Creating a Behavioral Health Care Provider Pipeline in High School and College

Like SBHCs nationwide, most SBHCs in Pennsylvania transitioned to providing services via telehealth in the spring of 2020. Despite pandemic-related closures and challenges, students continued to have access to primary care, behavioral health, and other services. SBHC-based community health workers in Pennsylvania provide coaching and health education related to asthma, diabetes, nutrition, substance use, and risk reduction. They also support students and their families through other services, including liaising with community-based social services that address social determinants of health. During the pandemic, they moved these services to Zoom or Google Meets. The ease and convenience of telehealth increased the use of SBHC services across the state.

Most SBHCs in Pennsylvania are typically open only when the school operates. That leaves students without access to care after school hours and especially during summer break. Continued use of telehealth beyond the pandemic will reduce barriers for students by allowing them to have continued access to their regular SBHC services when school facilities are closed.
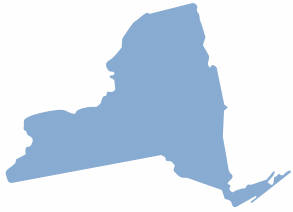
Learn more about community health workers from the National Association of Community Health Workers.

> "Everyone has felt like it's been kind of a lifeline to their families, and you know, we need to continue it on some level beyond the pandemic."
>
> **Julie Cousler Emig,**
> **Pennsylvania School-Based Health Alliance**

New York
Leveraging Telehealth Data for Advocacy

Telehealth was a topic of interest among SBHCs in New York before the pandemic. Still, many hesitated to implement telehealth due to existing barriers to reimbursement. Knowing that telehealth would be an integral part of care delivery moving forward, the New York School-Based Health Alliance (NYSBHA) examined the transition to telehealth in New York SBHCs, anticipated the future of telehealth in SBHCs, and identified areas of opportunity for using telehealth in SBHCs. NYSBHA's early work on telehealth services helped it quickly navigate pandemic-related challenges and collect data about telehealth during the pandemic to inform legislative priorities.

The December 2020 report Caring for New York's School Children: The Potential of Telehealth explores New York SBHCs' transition to telehealth. It shares data that NYSBHA used for advocacy, including the percentage of SBHCs offering various services via telehealth and findings from interviews with stakeholders. Along with recommendations for SBHCs, this data allowed NYSBHA to share with legislators that SBHCs used the latest telehealth technology to connect with students and their families.

> " Telehealth offers a unique solution for SBHCs to continue to provide needed care for an underserved population during a global pandemic. Successful implementation of telehealth will allow the opportunity to better serve students and engage parents when schools are not in session.
>
> **Sarah Murphy,**
> **New York School-Based Health Alliance** "

The report highlights reimbursement and billing and coding issues, barriers to access, suggestions for evaluating telehealth implementation, opportunities, and next steps. It calls for advocacy to prioritize continued Medicaid telehealth coverage and reimbursement parity after the pandemic public health emergency ends to support expanded access to SBHCs and specialists by New York youth.

Pennsylvania
Promoting Telehealth through a Student Assistance Program

The Pennsylvania Student Assistance Program (SAP), a collaboration between the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, the Department of Education, and the Department of Human Services, is a systematic team process that aims to identify challenges related to alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and mental health faced by students. All schools in Pennsylvania are required to have SAP teams that include trained school staff members and SAP Liaisons from community behavioral health agencies. During the pandemic, the temporary suspension of telehealth restrictions broadened the options for liaisons regarding billing, technology, and providers that can use telehealth.

The Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance Services supported SAP liaisons during the pandemic by hosting regular virtual networking meetings to share resources and ideas for practice and developing a guidance document about conducting tele-screenings or assessments. It also partnered with mdlogix, a behavioral healthcare software design firm, to do telehealth screenings through its bhworks platform. In a poll of the SAP liaisons, 70-80 percent planned to integrate telehealth into their services and supports long-term. Since returning to in-person services, SAP liaisons have been discussing their successes, strategies, and processes as they've tried to combine the innovations from the pandemic with their SAP services. In particular, parent engagement has been an unexpected benefit of telehealth. Parents have reported that telehealth gave them greater flexibility to provide input and participate in sessions with their children.

Lessons Learned

The COVID-19 pandemic hastened telehealth adoption across much of the school-based health services field. Through telehealth implementation, the field found benefits beyond the pandemic for improving access to school-based health services when school buildings are closed and connecting youth to specialty services. School-based telehealth reduces barriers and supports family engagement in care.

State leaders are well-positioned to evaluate adoption across their states, share knowledge about the implications of state telehealth policies, and explore opportunities for supplementing school-based health services with telehealth to promote health and well-being among children and adolescents.

Resources

>>> [Telehealth & Medicaid: What's Next? A Roadmap for Medicaid Telehealth Policy Beyond the Pandemic](#)

This webinar from the Center for Connected Health Policy brings together leading Medicaid experts for a panel discussion about the future of telehealth policy in Medicaid. High-level administrators and policy staff from the Medicaid and CHIP Payment Access Commission (MACPAC), the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System, the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing, and the Oregon Health Authority discuss telehealth policies before, during, and post-pandemic.

>>> [School-Based Telehealth Playbook](#)

SBHA's School-Based Telehealth Playbook guides the design, implementation, and operation of a telehealth program that meets the needs of children and adolescents. It includes essential components for starting school-based telehealth, key considerations from health centers across the country, and amendable resources for every planning stage. While this playbook speaks to health centers, the resources, guides, and tips are helpful for most health systems.

>>> [Medicaid & State Telehealth Policy: School-Based Telehealth Webinar](#)

This webinar from the Center for Connected Health Policy focuses on using telehealth to deliver services in a school-based program. It highlights how Medicaid and education departments work together to ensure children receive necessary healthcare. Speakers include representatives from SBHA, the New Mexico Human Services Department, the Connecticut Association of School-Based Health Centers, and the Ohio Department of Medicaid.

>>> [Telehealth Toolbox for School Personnel: Getting Started](#)

This handout, part of the Telehealth Toolbox for School Personnel from the SAMHSA-funded Mid-America Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, offers school mental health providers a practical and concise guide to getting started with telehealth. It emphasizes four key components: how to navigate privacy and technology, how to engage your team, how to connect with families, and how to decide essential services.

Suggested Citation

>>> School-Based Health Alliance & National Center for School Mental Health. Telehealth and telemental health: Innovations from the School Health Services National Quality Initiative. Washington, DC: School-Based Health Alliance. May, 2023.