



AIR and IMPAQ Develop Telehealth Resources for the COVID-19 Pandemic

AIR and its subsidiary IMPAQ are rapidly responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by evaluating the use of telehealth to address health equity. Telehealth services provide the unique opportunity to eliminate barriers to in-person care, such as finding childcare, potential for lost wages due to work absences, and lack of available transportation.

While telehealth can enhance the future of health care delivery, dramatic disparities in access, quality, and patient experiences cannot be overlooked. Today's COVID-19 morbidity and mortality outcomes echo longstanding racial and ethnic health disparities in the United States. It is critical to ensure that telehealth expansion both connects vulnerable patients to much-needed care now and advances health equity in the long term. Through webinars, issue briefs, blog posts, and an innovative Twitter scraping tool, AIR and IMPAQ's telehealth resources inform today's most pressing program and policy decisions.

AIR and IMPAQ Address the Digital Divide During COVID-19

The significant increase in telehealth adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a level of convenience and safety for many individuals and providers. However, barriers to telehealth such as limited access to affordable and available broadband, mistrust of technology solutions among some patients, and low reimbursement from some payers may create and further health inequities.

COVID-19 & Telehealth Blog Posts

Telehealth Access, Value, & Equity: COVID-19 and Beyond

- Analyzes how regulatory factors have contributed to the utilization of telehealth before and during the pandemic
- Presents the case for audio-only telehealth to improve the equitable delivery of telehealth care for rural, older, and less-connected patients

Defining the Role of Telemental Health During & After the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Evaluates the proposed changes by CMS concerning the delivery of telemental health care
- Highlights the role of school-based telemental health in supporting students, families, and staff members

New Telehealth Executive Order & Rules: What are the Long-Term Implications?

- Details proposed changes to the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule for CY 2021
- Considers the sustainability of telehealth in light of potential regulatory changes

CMS Telehealth Expansion in Response to COVID-19: Potential Impacts on Medicare's Quality Payment Program (QPP)

- Examines how the temporary expansion of Medicare Telehealth may affect the Merit-based Incentive Payment System
- Identifies the need to prioritize the development of telehealth quality measures

In July, IMPAQ partnered with the American Telemedicine Association (ATA) to [lead a roundtable discussion](#) with nationally recognized experts on how payers, providers, and policymakers can use telehealth to advance health equity.

Over 250 attendees listened in as IMPAQ President **Dr. Adaeze Enekwechi** and our collaborators from ConsejoSano and Navicent Health examined how to increase telehealth access for marginalized groups, steps for navigating regulations that impede health equity, and recent lessons in increased access to telehealth. The discussion provided four key takeaways on how to address issues in health equity through the deployment of telehealth.

- **Broadband Access.** Broadband internet must be expanded for telehealth to reach those who could benefit the most from these services.
- **Payment Structures.** Provider and payer flexibilities are needed for the equitable delivery of telehealth services.
- **Payment Structures.** Interventions must place equity at the forefront to ensure that disparities are not widened.
- **Regulatory Changes.** Permanent policy solutions are needed to ensure gains made during the pandemic are not lost.

AIR and IMPAQ Promote Equity Considerations for Telehealth

Stakeholders

Advancing health equity must be carefully considered in the design of all policies, especially in the deployment of telehealth services. Stakeholders should take deliberate steps to ensure that the telehealth services can overcome the unique challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

Health policy researchers from IMPAQ and AIR have been tracking and analyzing the rapid advancements in telehealth delivery and accessibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. This [issue brief](#) informs policymakers, providers, and payers on how to:

- Increase access to telehealth for diverse patient populations
- Navigate issues of digital literacy
- Expand broadband access
- Shift toward a health care system that incentivized both value and equity

Exhibit 1. Sample of Telehealth Recommendations



Policies & Actions for Consideration

To bridge the digital divide, policymakers must:

1. **Reform the FCC's Lifeline program**, which currently provides a monthly discount of only \$9.25 on phone and internet service for qualifying low-income households. This reform should increase the discount rate as well as improve marketing efforts to reach eligible participants.
2. **Amend the statutory language of The Communications Act** to allow funding for home connectivity through the E-Rate program. The E-Rate program currently only subsidizes school and library broadband infrastructure development. With remote learning and health care delivery at the forefront of the pandemic, the program's language should be amended.
3. **Prioritize broadband deployment and funding to economically depressed areas**, instead of relying only on measures of population density.

