

COVID-19 Reveals the Power of Virtual Visits in Home Health Care

From its onset, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the delivery of care for home health agencies. In-person visits quickly became a safety concern while telemedicine protocols and reimbursement were still being refined. Providers, like Excelsa Health Home Care & Hospice, needed to reimagine the delivery of care to ensure safety and success for patients as well as clinicians.

“Home health agencies essentially need to build a relationship with patients quickly in order to provide what they need,” says Erica Shaffer, vice president of post-acute care services for Excelsa Health. Creating that comfortable atmosphere and becoming a team with the patient remotely has been a challenge during the pandemic.

A joint initiative between Highmark Blue Shield and HM Home & Community Services (HMHCS) offers strategy and support for providers using telemedicine and virtual home visits. But implementing an alternative approach to home health care is not a simple undertaking.

Rethinking the Role of Telehealth in Home Health Care

Prior to the pandemic, most home health providers only relied minimally on telemedicine. In-person visits allowed clinicians to build patient relationships, provide hands-on care, and get reimbursed easily. Now, in response to COVID-19, telehealth is taking center stage.

As government agencies created flexibility for the reimbursement of telehealth, payers worked to help providers implement new strategies for home health care. “Many payers started with remote monitoring, but we took a different approach,” says Chris Cycak, manager of network performance operations at HMHCS. “We wanted to figure out how to take a skilled nursing visit (or a visit from a therapist or social worker), turn it into a virtual visit, and still provide reimbursement.”

To overcome barriers associated with telemedicine and home health, the HMHCS team worked with providers to develop a plan for successful virtual delivery of home health care.

Designing a telemedicine initiative

To make sure providers participated and used virtual visits, HMHCS turned to their provider network and relied on those relationships for feedback. “With the introduction of telemedicine through virtual care, it was crucial

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to ensure this initiative was designed to be effective and make an impact for Highmark Inc. members and participating providers,” Cycak says. “Gaining provider input is usually the first step in anything that we do, quite honestly.”

Together with Highmark Inc., the HMHCS team used provider input to design a telemedicine initiative. The goal of the initiative is to help providers overcome barriers to remote home care delivery by:

- Working with providers to create guidelines for virtual visits
- Supporting the provider network during implementation
- Establishing the technology to be used
- Promoting observation, training, and education for interdisciplinary teams including nurses, rehabilitation services, and social work
- Defining new reimbursement protocols

Reimbursing for virtual care

The input of the provider network proved especially critical when facing the challenge of reimbursing for telehealth services.

“We went to our network and asked, ‘What do you think is a fair compensation for a visit when we’re asking you to do X, Y, and Z?’” Cycak says. “Then we had to determine that amount and figure out how the providers can bill us, because we’re limited to certain codes that are available for providers to use.”

To receive reimbursement for virtual visits, contracted providers send a claim after completion of the visit. The majority of the network is on a fee-for-service methodology. Cycak explains that there are some providers who are compensated on more of an episodic methodology, where they get paid a certain rate for X amount of days. Those providers are not specifically reimbursed for the visits, but it is included in the cost of that episode.

Virtual Visits in Action at Excelsa Health

From the provider perspective, Excelsa Health determined that reimbursement was not the main hurdle. The bigger challenge was finding a way to maintain patient visits. During the pandemic, people have been reluctant to go to hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, or personal care homes. At the same time, patients are afraid to let clinicians in, delaying care in the home.

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Fortunately, Excela Health's home care team are finding that patients who initially decline an in-person visit are often open to accepting a virtual visit. "These telehealth visits help us create a comfortable atmosphere and establish trust," Shaffer says. "If we can then set up an in-person visit, the combination of the two lets us wrap our arms completely around that patient at home."

Excela Health has successfully delivered 318 virtual visits (mostly conducted by RNs) to their eligible Highmark members during the course of the pandemic. "Our virtual visits are more than just a check-in," Shaffer says. "They are true assessments, not only physical but mental, to ensure that patients can sustain their health and independence in their own home."

The Future of Home Health Care Delivery

Both Cycak and Shaffer expect telemedicine and virtual visits to continue to play a substantial role in home health care. Assuming government regulations remain in place for telehealth reimbursement, HMHCS will work toward expansion and refinement of telemedicine and virtual visits within their provider network. Their goals include:

- Understanding outcomes, through data collection and provider feedback to identify the impact of telemedicine in home health care
- Incentivizing the Virtual Visit Program, to possibly transition it to a component of a pay-for-value program
- Securing affordable technology, by contracting with a vendor on behalf of network providers
- Increasing use of remote monitoring, by supporting providers who want to incorporate this additional telehealth modality

To learn more about telemedicine and virtual visit utilization in home health, reach out to Chris Cycak at christopher.cycak@hmhcs.com.

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