

Telehealth Makes Inroads to Connect Patients With Providers

Telehealth technology has been gaining momentum, and growth has accelerated since the Office of Telehealth within Field Operations was created in 2018. A significant development is that Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama soon will begin reimbursement for all telehealth encounters if a specialty is presently covered.

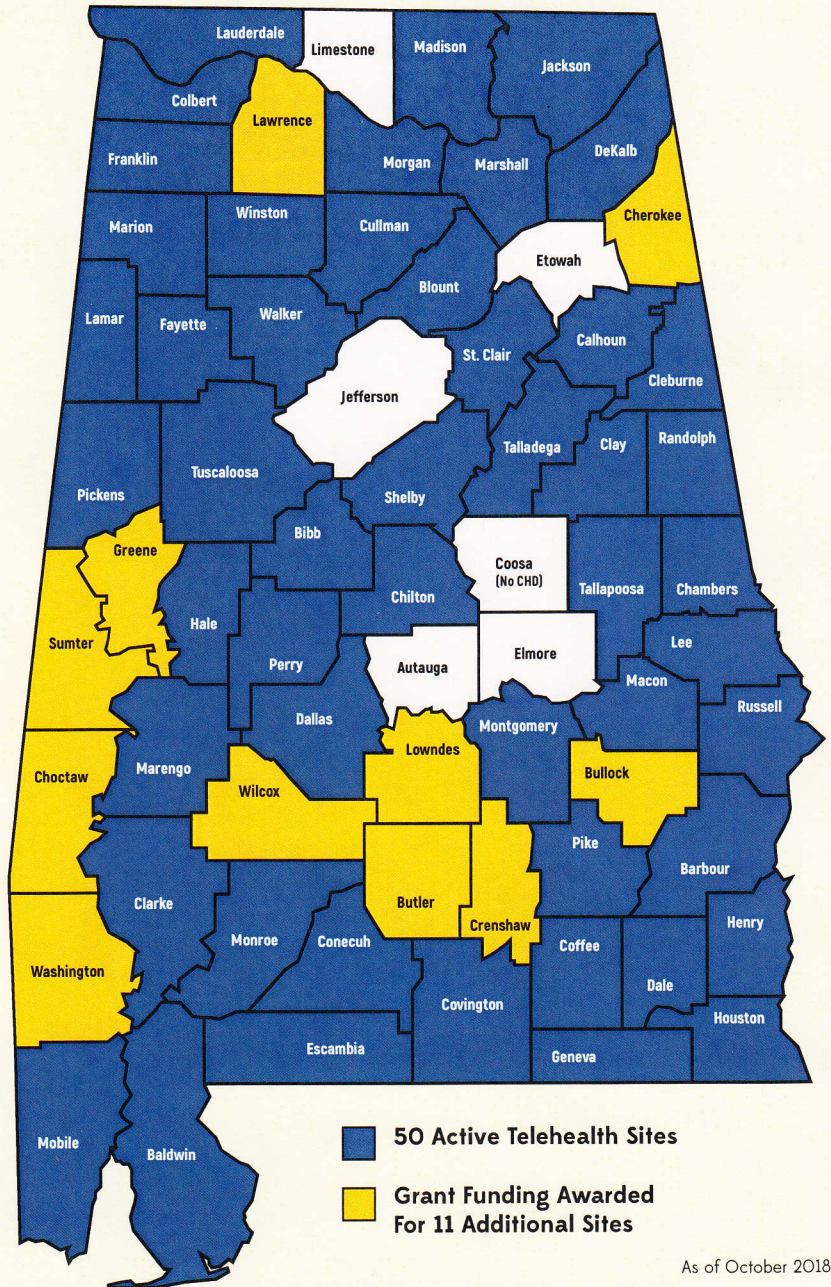
“This opens up whole new opportunities,” Michael Smith, director of the Office of Telehealth, said. “Effective November 1, providers will no longer have to check to determine whether a service is covered. This means telehealth can be financially sustainable for providers.”

In addition, Governor Kay Ivey has convened a workgroup to develop recommendations for proposed telehealth legislation by January 2019. Medicaid current spends more than \$8 million annually on transportation, and telehealth could not only help surmount geographic barriers for those patients living in rural, medically underserved areas but reduce costs.

Three years ago, the first telehealth carts were deployed to county health departments. With cart installation in Blount County, now 50 of the 67 counties in the state have this capability. The Office of Telehealth continues to expand its network and grants are enabling expansion to 10 additional counties.

The Office of Telehealth staff has a great deal of expertise. In addition to Smith, the staff consists of Dr. Jessica Hardy, clinical consultant, Ron Davis, Information Technology systems specialist, and April Golson, who was recently welcomed as program manager. Dan Metzger, broadcast engineer with the Video Communications Division, installs the carts.

An active Telehealth workgroup meets monthly to update activities, introduce new partners, keep others informed about grant status, and discuss a wide range of other activities and ideas.



As of October 2018

A grant began October 1 with partners in the Department of Mental Health and Children’s of Alabama. Telehealth can provide behavioral health services to adolescents. Local pediatricians are using the technology and may come to county health departments for more advanced work.

“This new grant will empower rural providers with telehealth encounters, especially those involving nurses and social workers in case management,” Smith said. An important difference between telehealth encounters at county health departments and

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commercial video services is that visits are encrypted and HIPAA compliant.

Within ADPH, telehealth partners include the STD Division, the Bureau of Family Health Services and the Bureau of Clinical Laboratories. Discussions are also underway to expand biomonitoring services now done by the Bureau of Home and Community Services.

Employees can find a wealth of helpful telehealth protocols, forms, supply lists and training materials, including patient surveys, in the document library in Lotus Notes. IT network support and guidance are available to users.

As with most new technology, adjusting to a new system is sometimes challenging for public health staff members, but the rewards are great for the people served: improved access to services, better health outcomes, and reduced costs.

An employee who is finding telehealth to be especially beneficial to her program is Ashley Megelin, senior microbiologist at the State Lab in the Quality Management Division. Ms. Megelin's work as a technical consultant ensures that all clinical laboratory testing in the state's county health departments meets federal regulatory standards under the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments, CLIA. Thanks to 2019 grant funding, the lab will be able to buy 95 new microscopes; 75 will go to the state's county health departments. The additional microscopes will be kept at the Bureau of Clinical Laboratories to train ADPH nurses to perform laboratory methods that require a microscope.

"There are many different microscope models at our county health departments, and each microscope has different capabilities and all are of different complexity. Most have been in use a very long time, so we are excited to replace them all with a single updated model," she said. She has developed a work plan for new microscopes to be fitted with a high-definition video camera that will both upgrade the quality of care and cut travel time and costs for technical consultants as they will interface with the telehealth carts for video conferencing.

CLIA requires technical consultants to observe analysts while they run certain laboratory test methods to assess their skill, or competency, in that method. This is traditionally done in person, but video cameras can be attached to the microscopes to

aid in these assessments in addition to being able to provide training updates using the telehealth carts. A camera will attach to the microscope via a third eyepiece while a USB cable connects the camera to the telehealth cart. A few training updates have already been conducted using the telehealth carts, and county health department staff have stated that the trainings have been extremely helpful. Technical consultants are eager to expand the use of the telehealth carts to include the microscope method, as well.

In addition to departmental programs, partners include the following agencies, educational institutions, and organizations:

- AIDS Alabama
- Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services
- Alabama Health Action Coalition
- Auburn University
- Birmingham Veterans Affairs Medical Center
- Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System
- Children's of Alabama
- Medical Advocacy and Outreach (Partnering since 2011)
- UAB Department of Genetics
- UAB Medical Center
- University of South Alabama

Another exciting growth in telehealth is an expansion to the number of subspecialty services offered via telehealth by the Medical Center at UAB. The partnership currently includes nephrology visits and consults for dialysis patients, transplant nephrology consults, with plans to add these subspecialties soon: pediatric nephrology; genetic counseling; epilepsy; rheumatology; maternal and fetal medicine; stroke follow-up; general neurology; infectious diseases; geriatrics; and pediatric neurology.

The UAB School of Medicine is conducting a study that utilizes telehealth for home dialysis patients. Dr. Eric Wallace, UAB nephrologist, stated, "My hope is that telehealth will provide the patient less time caring for their disease and in turn improve quality of life."

The department encourages the use of telehealth technology to facilitate staff meetings, training and educational programs for efficiency and cost savings. For the latest information about the ADPH Telehealth Network, visit www.alabamapublichealth.gov/alphntn.