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## **MCHD works to expand access to telehealth appointments**

MOBILE, Alabama — Telehealth is a major benefit to patients who face difficulties in accessing needed health care because of barriers. These include a lack of transportation or requirements to spend time away from work or family obligations to get to appointments at distant locations.

The importance of telehealth to the Alabama Department of Public Health has been emphasized by the creation of a separate Office of Telehealth located in Field Operations. According to Office Director Michael Smith, telehealth provides a local resource that allows the patient convenient access to important health care that they greatly need, but which they otherwise may have difficulty accessing because of its distance from their home.

The Office of Telehealth works to promote telecommunications technologies for administrative, educational, telehealth and telemedicine services throughout the state. With this technology, patients can simply go to their county health department to have a medical appointment with a healthcare clinician who may be located hundreds of miles away. Patients receive the same level of care without distant trips for medical appointments.

The Mobile County Health Department (MCHD) is among those organizations serving as partners with the Office of Telehealth. The cart is located at the Keeler Memorial Complex at 251 North Bayou Street in Downtown Mobile.

“Telehealth is a vital program for patients that have long-distance providers,” said Sara Kenny, MSW, MPH, LICSW, a Social Work Manager for MCHD. “Not only does it save patients the cost of travel, but it saves them time that they can instead spend with their families.”

The telehealth carts are equipped with a high definition video camera and codec, a computer, two 24-inch monitors, a Bluetooth stethoscope, and a handheld examination camera with three lenses. All telehealth sessions are HIPAA compliant and encrypted. The Office of Telehealth deploys to train and support staff on proper use of the custom-built carts.

“We have one telehealth cart located on the first floor of the Keeler building,” Kenny said. “If a patient has a distant provider that utilizes the telehealth program, their staff will coordinate with us to schedule a telemedicine appointment. All the patient has to do is come to MCHD and they are able to have their appointment with the distant provider without having to travel.”

Kenny said all current appointments are with the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). MCHD has also worked with AIDS Alabama South in the past.

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A county public health nurse or social worker will assist and follow the provider's instructions for these telehealth appointments. ADPH Nursing and Social Work Protocols have been developed to provide specific guidance to ADPH staff what will be required for these specialized telehealth appointments. As necessary, telemedicine examinations facilitated by a nurse may include the use of additional specialized equipment such as a Bluetooth stethoscope or handheld examination camera. This is done under the direction of the distant provider.

“One of our registered nurses, Angela Alexander, takes the vitals and performs any other tasks the provider might need like using the Bluetooth stethoscope or the handheld camera,” Kenny said. “The cart can also be used for trainings and meeting.”

ADPH began the telehealth network in 2015 with four locations and presently has services available in 55 county health departments. The department received funding from several grants including the Appalachian Regional Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to expand the program.

In addition to ADPH staff utilizing the technology, numerous external medical organizations including University of South Alabama, AIDS Alabama, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Alabama Health Action Coalition, Auburn University, Birmingham V.A. Medical Center, Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System, Children's of Alabama, Medical Advocacy & Outreach, and UAB's Medical Center and Genetics Department. These entities collaborate to provide services including behavioral health, diabetes education, genetic counseling, maternal-fetal medicine, neurology, cardiology, family planning, HIV/AIDS, nephrology and rheumatology.