



**Special Communication to City of Burlington  
Emergency Operations Center and Mayor  
Regarding COVID-19**

**To:** Brian Lowe, Luke McGowan

**From:** Barbara Shatara of City Analytics Team

**RE:** Telehealth Initiatives for connecting Vulnerable Populations to healthcare curing coronavirus

**Date:** March 26, 2020, 8:30pm

*Updated:*

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**Key Messages:**

- Few telehealth initiatives targeting low-income Americans and other vulnerable populations are currently in practice.
- In July 2019, the FCC proposed a \$100 Million Connected Care Pilot Telehealth program. The three-year pilot would bring telehealth services to low-income patients, veterans and areas lacking adequate health care.
- Telehealth usage has skyrocketed since early March 2020, putting a strain on providers and their technology infrastructure.
- Federal, State and Local programs address challenges faced by consumers and providers using telehealth during the COVID19 crisis. Telehealth is seen as a game changer for improving the response and prevention of infectious disease.
- Resources to help bridge the digital divide are available, but clients will need assistance to access them.
- Funding opportunities are available for telehealth initiatives for low-income rural residents. It is unclear what funding is available for urban telehealth initiatives.

**Key Resources**

- [FCC's Connecting Americans to Health](#)
- [Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment Telehealth & Nurselines](#)
- [Rural Health Information Hub – Program Clearinghouse](#)
- [RHI Hub: Telehealth Use in Rural Healthcare – Funding & Opportunities](#)

**Summary of Current Telehealth Practice**

COVID19 Changes to Telehealth Access

- Prior to the COVID19 crisis, each state had their own requirements/guidelines for telemedicine providers.

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- As of March 17, 2020, these [requirements have been relaxed and expanded by the White House](#). The changes allow more patients to use telehealth at home with a wider network of doctors and in most cases, at no cost to the consumer.
- March 11, 2020, Vermont Legislature [passed H.723](#) which allows for store-and-forward (asynchronous transmission of medical information) telemedicine and requires health insurers to reimburse providers for those services.
- These measures have been combined with state and local initiatives to expand health care coverage to the uninsured and reduce or eliminate COVID19-related health care costs.
- [California, Colorado, Ohio, Vermont](#)

### COVID19 Telehealth Usage

- Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, [76% of all hospitals used telemedicine](#). [Patient usage began increasing in 2017, with usage in urban areas increasing almost twice as quickly as in rural areas](#).
- AmWell, one of the leading telehealth platforms, hosted a webinar, [“The COVID-19 Outbreak: How to Use Telehealth as a Key Element of Your Infection Control and Prevention Strategy”](#) on March 6, 2020. It was their highest attended webinar. Focus was on scaling up marketing, increasing providers and IT systems to handle the influx of new telehealth patients.
- Use of telehealth platforms skyrocketed in March 2020, leading to issues already evident prior to the crisis – not enough clinicians to handle case load, computer systems unable to manage the digital traffic, lack of hardware.
- Overall there is a great deal of support for expanding telehealth.
  - Lisa Hedges, senior content analyst at Software Advice states “It’s worth noting that hospitals have varying capacities for deploying telemedicine right now, but those that are able to offer telehealth services to any degree are seeing benefits,” she said. “Even something as basic as using the online waiting room features keeps patients from piling up in close proximity to one another while they wait for their exams in person, so that’s all proving to be a great help in flattening the curve and alleviating the overall burden on all hospitals.”
  - [Telemedicine during COVID-19: Benefits, limitations, burdens, adaptation by Bill Siwicki, March 19, 2020 Healthcare It News](#)

### **Summary of Applicable Digital Divide Initiatives**

#### COVID19-related Technology Programs

- On March 13th, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai announced the [Keep Americans Connected Initiative](#). In order to ensure that Americans do not lose their broadband or telephone connectivity as a result of the pandemic. The Initiative asks telecommunications companies to take a 60-day pledge not to terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic; waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances; and open its Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them.
- Several Vermont companies signed on, including Burlington Telecom, Charter, and Comcast. More about what they offer [here](#).

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- On March 18<sup>th</sup>, the [FCC's Wireline Competition Bureau waived the gift rules](#) until September 30, 2020 to enable service providers to offer, and RHC and E-Rate program participants to solicit and accept, improved connections or additional equipment for telemedicine or remote learning during the coronavirus outbreak.

#### Income Dependent Technology Programs

- [Lifeline in Vermont](#) – apply through [Lifeline National Verifier](#). Lifeline is a federal program that lowers the monthly cost of phone and internet. Eligible customers will get up to \$9.25 toward their bill. You can only use Lifeline for either phone or internet, but not both.
- [Burlington Telecom](#) offers \$9.25 discount on either internet or phone service rates.
- [Consolidated Communications](#) offers a \$9.25 discount on their internet service rates. [Link](#)
- Other states offer greater Lifeline benefits.
  - [Massachusetts](#) Lifeline offers no or low-cost plans.
  - [Missouri](#) Lifeline offers discounts up to \$24.
  - [Wisconsin](#) offers free data plans and free smartphone.
- Other national programs
  - [TracPhone/SafeLink](#) – no and low-cost plans
  - [Internet Essentials](#) by Comcast - \$9.95 plans

#### **Other Sources**

[Telehealth, Medicaid and State Policies from Center for Connected Health Policy](#)

[Frontiers in Public Health. 2015; 3: 3. 2015 Jan 21. Telemedicine in Low-Resource Areas](#) by Richard Wootton and Laurent Bonnardot

[Broadband Communities Magazine. "Overcoming Barriers to Telehealth" by Masha Zager January/February 2020](#)

"THOMPSON, WELCH, JOHNSON AND SCHWEIKERT INTRODUCE BIPARTISAN AND BICAMERAL TELEHEALTH PACKAGE." States News Service, 30 Oct. 2019, p. NA. Gale OneFile: News, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A604261459/STND?u=vol\\_b92f&sid=STND&xid=6b549c9e](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A604261459/STND?u=vol_b92f&sid=STND&xid=6b549c9e). Accessed 25 Mar. 2020.

[Health Affairs Blog . "Health Justice Strategies To Combat COVID-19: Protecting Vulnerable Communities During A Pandemic" by Emily A. Benfer and Lindsay F. Wiley March 19, 2020](#)

[65 Am. U. L. Rev. 275 \(2015\) "Health Justice: A Framework \(and Call to Action\) for the Elimination of Health Inequity and Social Injustice" by Emily A. Benfer](#)

[STAT. "Telehealth overpromises during the Covid-19 pandemic" by Kirsten Ostherr. March 19, 2020](#)

[International Journal of Telemedicine and Applications Volume 2012 "How Do Low-Income Urban African Americans and Latinos Feel about Telemedicine? A Diffusion of Innovation Analysis" Article ID 715194 | 9 pages](#)

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