Teledentistry & Community Health Centers

Community Health Centers' Recommendations and Vision for Teledentistry

Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association
This brief provides an overview of Community Health Centers’, commonly called Health Centers, approach to teledentistry and lays out the key areas for continued provision of virtual oral health care post-pandemic. The Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association (WPHCA) has been closely engaged with the Wisconsin Division of Medicaid Services (DMS) regarding the continued and permanent use of telehealth for oral health care delivery and provides this brief to inform long-term decision-making regarding Health Centers and vulnerable patients.

In this brief “teledentistry” refers to “the use of electronic information, imaging and communication technologies, including interactive audio, video, data communications, as well as store and forward technologies, to provide and support dental care delivery, diagnosis, consultation, treatment, and transfer of dental information and education.” (American TeleDentistry Association)
Background

Community Health Centers' Oral Health Impact on Wisconsin

Health Centers deliver high-quality primary medical, oral health, and behavioral health care services in underserved areas and for underserved communities in our state. Health Centers provide care to everyone in their communities, regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay for care, and are an essential part of the health care safety net in Wisconsin and across the U.S.

In response to the disparities in oral health care access and high needs across the state, Wisconsin Health Centers have played a pivotal role in increasing dental services. In 2019, 57% of patients served at Wisconsin Health Centers were Medicaid members. Health Centers provided dental services for 147,340 patients, accounting for 37% of Health Center office visits in 2019 (HRSA UDS Data, 2019).
What is Working

Community Health Centers’ Current Use of Teledentistry

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oral Health Departments at Health Centers faced significant barriers to providing patient care. Challenges included limited supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), reconfiguring workflows and clinic space to reduce risks for patients and providers, and developing risk mitigation strategies for aerosol-producing procedures.

Throughout the pandemic, Health Centers have worked diligently and quickly to adjust their care delivery models to provide oral health services to as many patients as possible. By leveraging flexibilities per 2019 Wisconsin Act 56 and guidance regarding eligible services during the Public Health Emergency, Health Centers have been able to prioritize in-person visits for patients with urgent and acute needs. Teledentistry has allowed dental staff to triage care and remove barriers to access via virtual consultations using video, phone, and store-and-forward technologies. Health Centers’ adoption of a specified set of teledentistry services has resulted in valuable learning and demonstrated how virtual tools can improve and increase access to care.

Flexibilities in current ForwardHealth teledentistry policy have enabled Health Centers to adapt care delivery models to meet patient needs. Health Centers use teledentistry tools to:

- Rapidly respond and prioritize patient dental care needs via telehealth visits (including audio-only visits).
- Address pain management needs in advance of appointment to limit the need for an emergency room visit.
- Create opportunities to discuss patient needs and concerns, mitigate anxiety, and build trust and rapport between the patient and dental team prior to an in-person visit.
- Reduce barriers to accessing care.
Rapidly Respond and Prioritize Patient Dental Care Needs Through Telehealth

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Teledental visits have allowed Health Centers to quickly respond to and direct patients to the appropriate level of care based on information shared during virtual visits, including identifying urgent issues requiring in-person care. With an informed perspective on the need for the visit, dental teams can adjust schedules to prioritize patients and create appointments that more accurately reflect the time needed to address the concern during the visit. Oral health teams have also been able to leverage virtual visits to address minor concerns with patients to minimize the need for an in-person visit.
Health Center Example: Two Broken Teeth, Prioritizing patients with urgent oral health care needs for same-day access

A patient called a Health Center to seek care for two broken teeth that likely needed extraction. This patient had tried to access services with another provider in the area but went in twice for appointments and they were unable to help her. When the patient contacted the Health Center, the clinic was able to use teledentistry (combined photo + audio call) to quickly assess the complexity of the patient’s case and match the patient to a provider that was able to complete the service the same day. Triaging this call ensured that the patient was matched with a provider who was equipped to complete the needed services, eliminated unnecessary travel or in-person visits, and enabled the patient to be rapidly seen for their care need.
Health Center Example: Easing a Mother's Worry during Quarantine, Supporting patients to manage at-home care and minimize in-person visits

A mother reached out to a Health Center about her child who had been hit in the chin. Unfortunately, this family was in quarantine due to possible COVID exposure and wanted to avoid in-person care. Using phone and pictures, the dentist was able to establish that there was no immediate need for treatment and was able to walk the mother through what to watch for in the healing process. The teledentistry services helped with avoiding the need for childcare and eliminated the potential exposure from bringing the patient into the office.
Address Pain, Limit the Need for ER Visits

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Given the highly procedural-based nature of dental services, most triaged dental-related calls lead to an in-person visit to address the patient’s dental care needs. Nevertheless, virtual consultations allow dental teams to work with the patient to address immediate concerns, like pain management, and care strategies in the waiting period leading to an in-person visit. This has been particularly valuable as capacity for in-person visits has been limited. Based on a patient’s history, a review of the patient’s symptoms, and key indicators from images shared by the patient, Health Center dentists can more accurately assess patient needs, prescribe appropriate medications, and discuss care strategies to reduce pain to make patients comfortable until they are able to be seen in clinic. These upstream pain mitigation tools help reduce unnecessary emergency room visits and ensure appropriate patient care between visits.
Health Center Example:
Safety during the Pandemic, Bridging the gap between an urgent oral health need and the patient’s ability to be seen in-person for care

A patient called their Health Center early in the day for an appointment, but upon arrival at the clinic the patient presented with a high fever. To minimize the risk of COVID transmission, the Health Center asked the patient to conduct a teledental visit from their vehicle instead of remaining in the clinic. During the call, the Health Center’s dentist was able to diagnose the issue, prescribe medication from the Health Center’s in-house pharmacy and deliver medications to the patient in the parking lot. Once the patient’s COVID symptoms disappeared, the patient was able to get their tooth extracted. Without the virtual consultation, the dentist would not have had the information needed to prescribe the medication and the patient would have been left without pain management strategies as they waited for their COVID symptoms to subside.
Build Trust & Rapport Between Patient & Dental Team

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“I had a patient who expressed to me that she was so afraid of seeing the dentist because of negative experiences when she was younger. She loved the fact that she could connect with me in the comfort of her own home prior to meeting in person. She told me that she was much more willing to come to the clinic after the virtual visit.” – Dr. John Tran (Community Health Systems, Inc. in Beloit, WI)
Reduce Barriers to Accessing Care

Flexibilities in current ForwardHealth teledentistry policy have enabled Health Centers to adapt care delivery models to meet patient needs. Health Centers use teledentistry tools to: Reduce barriers to accessing care.

Telehealth has helped address three major barriers to accessing services among Health Center populations. These include transportation, childcare, and needing to take time off work. Prior to teledentistry, it was common that a patient would need to come in for an exam or consultation just to receive a diagnosis and treatment plan, which sometimes requires subsequent visits for treatment. Barriers to access would be multiplied by the number of visits needed. With the ability to assess patients remotely, dentists are sometimes able to eliminate an extra in-person visit and can be better prepared to efficiently address patient needs. Reducing the burden on the patient to come into the clinic for an initial consultation can be critical to facilitating access to care.
Telephone-Only Services

Telephone-Only Services supplemented by images sent via phone and/or secure messaging have been critical to extending access to teledentistry services. Telephone visits have created the flexibility that some patients need to overcome barriers in effectively utilizing video + audio platforms. Poor internet connectivity, patient preference for phone calls and/or difficulty navigating video platforms, and broadband access have been some of the most common barriers to patient engagement in video calls.

Throughout the pandemic, oral health teams have created options for photo sharing and coaching for patients in taking and sending images of their oral cavity, enabling provider teams to have the information they need to determine the best course of action. Some patients have been able to send quality images via store-and-forward methods (e.g., through secure email or via a patient portal, etc.) with limited support needed from the Health Center. Other patients have benefited from coaching and support on the phone, while working to get a clear image of the oral cavity/affected area for oral health team to evaluate.
Future of Teledentistry

Health Centers are eager to optimize and expand the teledentistry advances that emerged during the pandemic. Health Centers envision: **Integrating teledentistry services including triage, limited and problem-focused exams (D0140, D0170), into care delivery models into the future.**

**Expanding access to more comprehensive dental services into schools and community-based settings:** Many Health Centers partner with school districts to provide Seal-a-Smile programming in school-based settings. These programs provide children and families with access to preventative care, oral health education and skill-building, as well as referrals for patients to establish a dental home and/or access a higher level of services, when needed. Health Centers are eager to expand these programs using teledentistry modalities including:

- **Leveraging teledentistry tools to facilitate greater point-of-care access to dentists when a higher-level of care is needed:** Health Centers envision leveraging dental assistants and telehealth tools, such as intraoral cameras, to facilitate consultations with dentists who are remote or in-clinic. This exam type would allow school-based dental programs to provide a higher level of services and care where the child is located when a need is identified.

- **Identifying promising teledentistry practices and expanding programming to other populations** with identified needs, such as nursing homes, preschool/head start programs, assisted living centers, and beyond.
Providing more patient-centered options for providing care for patients with special needs and/or requiring accommodations: Rather than bringing patients into the clinic where conducting an exam may be difficult, Health Centers could develop a pathway for patients to do a visit from the comfort of their own residence, with the assistance of a caregiver.

Enhancing specialty access for Health Center patients: As technologies and infrastructure in teledentistry continue to grow, Health Centers are envisioning a future where they are able to serve as the originating site for their patients to access specialty service consultation, like oral surgery. In a state where specialty services may be concentrated in only a few locations, this could help reduce barriers stated above (transportation, time off, childcare) for a consultation visit with a specialty provider.

Integrating oral health care into primary medical care: Health Centers are working to leverage telehealth tools to provide comprehensive care to patients when they need it. Health Centers envision using telehealth tools to bring a hygienist or dentist into a primary medical care and/or behavioral health care visits to virtually assess the patient’s needs and connect them with the care they need. This strategy may be particularly valuable in supporting patients with dental anxiety or chronic diseases, including diabetes and substance use disorders by providing more comprehensive team-based care.
**Integrating electronic medical records and electronic dental records:**
Creating one holistic health record for the patient will enable Health Centers to fully integrate primary care, oral health, and behavioral health services and streamline patient-facing technologies. Some Health Centers have leveraged patient facing tools within their electronic medical record, including patient portals, to facilitate telehealth visits. By integrating the medical and dental records, patients would only have one system for navigating their healthcare and would gain access to more ways to connect to telehealth visits and share images with their provider. Additionally, electronic integration could potentially facilitate real-time oral health integration into medical visits. Oral health is a critical component of supporting a patient holistically. Health Centers envision integrating this technology into prenatal visits, chronic care management visits, and substance use disorder/behavioral health visits.
Permanent Teledentistry Policy

Recommendations, Concerns, & Considerations

1. **Continue coverage of video and phone-only visits with supplemental photos/visuals when needed to triage and address oral health care needs.** Trust providers’ judgement and decision-making on the modality needed to provide clinically appropriate, functionally equivalent care.

Throughout the pandemic, individuals have successfully accessed teledentistry services from their homes. Patients have used their resources and technology to take high-quality photos of oral cavities to send to Health Centers for their review and consultation. Requiring a clinical facilitator for this type of care would limit access to teledentistry services and is not necessary for all patients.

Nevertheless, as teledentistry in programs advance and begin utilizing a greater array of technologies, there will likely be a need for clinical facilitation to enable a higher-level of service delivery. For example, a dental assistant may utilize an intraoral camera to relay high-quality images to an off-site dentist from a school or community-based setting. To enable this type of service, Health Centers will need sustainable reimbursement to cover costs associated with the originating and distant site providers required to facilitate this visit.
Permanent Teledentistry Policy

Recommendations, Concerns, & Considerations

2. Cover a broad set of non-procedure-based codes (exams, assessments, education), including but not limited to limited exams (D0170 and D0140) and dental assistant assessment services (D0191), at Health Centers’ Prospective Payment System (PPS) rate.

Consider adding coverage for periodic oral examinations (D0120). This will allow Health Centers to leverage telehealth tools to provide more comprehensive dental services in school-based settings (and potentially beyond).

3. Create sustainable reimbursement pathways for teledentistry facilitators to support patients presenting at the clinic, to leverage clinical technologies to support visits with remote dentists, and/or as clinically appropriate. Do not require the involvement of the facilitator for all teledentistry services.
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The Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association

The mission of the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association is to improve health through the work of Community Health Centers and their partners.

We envision a future where all individuals and communities in Wisconsin achieve their highest potential.

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