Telehealth and Broadband Expansion

Importance of Telehealth

Telehealth is an essential tool in the delivery of healthcare that allows providers to engage with patients via video or audio technology without sacrificing access to quality care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to counsel patients virtually has been invaluable in ensuring continuity of care. Even before the pandemic, telehealth provided undeserved populations in rural communities with critical access to healthcare that was otherwise limited.

Wisconsin has already made significant strides in encouraging use of telehealth modalities. For instance, 2019 Act 56 allowed for all Medicaid services to be provided via telehealth and required that Medicaid services provided by telehealth be reimbursed at the same rate as if they were provided in person.

WAND members use telehealth every day to abide by social and physical distancing guidelines limiting the number of clinicians allowed on-site at one time. This requirement moved a large number of clinicians off-site or home. Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDN) have adapted to telemedicine and virtual care delivery modalities during the pandemic. This care delivery method has been very well-received by patients and has led to increases in patient volumes from March 2020 to March 2021. Presently, virtual encounter types are 75% of the total scheduled visits. Healthcare institutions have agreed that telehealth is not temporary but will be part of institutions’ virtual strategic plans moving forward. Reliable technology is crucial to expand and sustain equitable access to clinical nutrition services during the pandemic and after.

Challenges for WAND Members in Providing Telehealth Out-of-State

Registered Dietitian Nutritionists [RDN] and Dietetic Technicians [DTR] provide care for patients who reside in Wisconsin part of the year but move out of state during the winter. Additionally, residents from neighboring states often seek care in Wisconsin. Many times, RDNs and DTRs cannot continue providing care through telehealth due to a lack of practice reciprocity with other states.

Wisconsin requires state certification for RDNs. Many states require licensure, including Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois. These states require RDNs providing telehealth to individuals residing in these states to be licensed. Wisconsin’s current certification credential is a barrier to employment in providing telehealth in other states.

The problem has become so prevalent that Wisconsin healthcare providers are seeking licenses in other states requiring payment of $100-300 per person annually to so they can continue to provide essential healthcare services to out-of-state patients. This is true of many RDNs within WAND who during the pandemic were required to gain professional licensure in Illinois to ensure continuity of care for their patients. Changing Wisconsin’s certification credential to a licensure credential is the simplest way to address this growing issue.

Expand Broadband to Expand Telehealth

Nearly all telehealth services rely on access to the Internet. A reliable connection is necessary for both the patient and the provider. However, access to a reliable connection is not uniform throughout the state.

WAND is grateful for the robust discussion among policymakers on prioritizing broadband expansion. Between workgroups in the legislature, proposals in Governor Evers’ budget, and the Governor’s Taskforce on Broadband Expansion the issue is at the forefront for meaningful action.

The pandemic has proven telehealth is not only viable but effective, convenient, and crucial in providing equitable healthcare access for underserved populations in rural communities, urban settings, and tribal lands. In short, expanding broadband expands access to healthcare.

Ask: WAND urges the legislature and Governor Evers to include comprehensive policy to ensure broadband access for consumers, schools, small businesses, and healthcare delivery in the 2021-23 biennial budget.