



OHIO
CHILDREN'S
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ISSUE BRIEF

Issue: Telehealth and Mental Health

Addressing Critical Mental Health Needs through Telehealth

Mental health is vital to overall health and long-term success. Without early diagnosis and treatment, children with mental health conditions can experience problems at home, in school, and in building relationships. Taken together, these can inhibit children's long-term development, and can extend into adulthood. Social distancing policies, uncertain school and child care arrangements, and the economic downturn have had important implications for the health and well-being of Ohio children. However, the pandemic is only exacerbating an already-existing challenge. A 2019 national study found that **1 in 6 children have at least one mental health disorder, although only about half of them receive mental health treatment.** As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to change the way we live our daily lives, we need to ensure that children can receive uninterrupted mental health care. Telehealth is revolutionizing health care delivery and can dramatically improve access to mental health care for children. Now is the time for the State of Ohio to invest in our telehealth infrastructure and mental health resources to equip children and families for success.

Policy

Telehealth delivery has seen exponential growth as a direct result of COVID-19, and projections indicate that the industry is only going to grow even after the crisis is over. Ohio is recognizing that telehealth delivery is the way of the future, and expansion efforts are underway. On October 19, 2020, the Joint Committee on Agency Rule Review (JCARR) made the temporary expansion of telemedicine services as a result of COVID-19 in the Ohio Medicaid program permanent. The rule changes to Ohio Administrative Code §5160-1-18 include expanding the definition of telehealth, including behavioral health practitioners, decreasing restrictions on patient and practitioner site locations, and expanding the list of Medicaid-covered telehealth services including expanded behavioral health services.

The Ohio Legislature also took up legislation in the 133rd General Assembly to expand the existing telehealth laws to ensure private insurance and Medicaid covered more providers, including certain behavioral health providers. The bill would also permit community mental health service providers and community addiction service providers certified by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) to provide services through telehealth.

On the state level, more than 200 telehealth-related bills were introduced in the 2020 legislative session



Challenge

While the expansion of telehealth services seems to be widely accepted, issues such as cost sharing and standards of care have not been determined. These considerations will help to shape the future of telehealth availability and quality. Moreover, the legislation does not address barriers to access.

One significant barrier to access is an inadequate workforce. Behavioral health services, particularly through telehealth delivery, are especially vital in mental health deserts. Infrastructure and technology remain concerns as well. More than 300,000 households (equating to close to 1 million Ohioans) do not have access to high-speed internet. Additionally, many low-income homes cannot afford technological devices or internet subscriptions to participate in telehealth services.

Opportunity

Policies to increase access to behavioral health services and facilitate access to supports for families with children can help address some of the consequences children are currently facing. Ohio can remain on the forefront of children's behavioral health service delivery, but in light of the new challenges presented by COVID-19 we must ensure behavioral health access and quality telehealth options.

We need a plan to ensure that children have access to behavioral health services. Our state leaders must continue to invest in behavioral health services and find comprehensive solutions to address the workforce shortage. We also need to ensure that children and families have access to quality telehealth delivery. This includes the need ensure stabilization of the finances of providers and support of telehealth capabilities. It also includes addressing the "digital divide" through increased infrastructure and technology for providers and families.

Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendation

We recommend that the administration and the legislature work together to take the following actions to better address children's behavioral health needs:

- Create a legislature-led stakeholder group to create a Mental Health Workforce Development Plan by October 2022. The plan would include information on how to increase the number of qualified mental health professionals across the continuum, how to ensure robust training and education, and ways to improve workforce retention.
- Establish a one-time \$20 million dollar grant to spur innovation in community behavioral health. Competitive innovation funds would be used for software and hardware infrastructure, internet connectivity, technology resources for families, and training.
- Continue to increase state investment in Broadband development and expansion.

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