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Report Highlights Value of Expanding Access to Telebehavioral Health Care, Calls for Sustaining Progress Made during Pandemic

Policies implemented in response to COVID-19 led to broad adoption and the prospect of reduced barriers to behavioral health care

BOSTON (July 14, 2020) – The [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation](#) today released a new report, in collaboration with Manatt Health, showing that Massachusetts is well positioned to expand access to behavioral health care and that state policymakers, providers and payers can facilitate a “huge leap forward” by formally adopting new telebehavioral health policies and programs that were temporarily instituted at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis to connect patients with providers by telephone or video.

The report, titled [Expanding Access to Behavioral Health Care in Massachusetts Through Telehealth: Sustaining Progress Post-Pandemic](#), provides an in-depth analysis of current barriers to adoption of telebehavioral health, details the attributes of optimal delivery models, and presents opportunities to expand and promote access among providers and consumers. The research began prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and was finalized during the early stages of the health crisis, when state and federal governments revamped telehealth regulations to rapidly scale adoption amid quarantine and social distancing rules.

According to the report, Massachusetts led the nation in rapidly deploying progressive new policies to temporarily expand access to telehealth across payers and providers during the pandemic – prompting exponential growth in the use of telehealth, including telebehavioral health. Temporary policy changes included payment parity for all covered, in-network services via telehealth and prohibiting specific requirements on the types of technologies that can be used to deliver telehealth services.

“The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has made clear that telebehavioral health has the unique ability to improve access to behavioral health services in Massachusetts,” said [Audrey Shelto](#), president of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation. “This is especially true for populations with particularly challenging access barriers, such as individuals who are low income, homebound, or who live in rural areas of the state, where there are typically fewer available behavioral health providers.”

Telebehavioral health care – such as a visit between a patient with a substance use disorder and a clinician conducted virtually through a video platform or telephone – can lower cost and other logistical barriers for low-income individuals by reducing or removing the need for transportation, child care, or a flexible work schedule.



The report acknowledges that temporary policies, if made permanent, could help sustain the state’s progress in expanded adoption of telebehavioral health. It also highlights additional recommendations for policies and programs to address remaining barriers, such as connectivity issues and lack of necessary technology that impact low-income and rural populations in particular.

Prior to the pandemic, the use of telehealth services was low in Massachusetts as compared to other states. When telehealth was used, [it was most frequently for behavioral health services](#), with over half of Massachusetts telehealth insurance claims from 2015 to 2017 recorded for mental health services.

“As behavioral health conditions continue to affect individuals and communities in Massachusetts, it is critical for the state to reduce barriers to behavioral health care through telehealth technology and services,” said [Patricia Boozang](#), senior managing director at Manatt Health. “We were honored to work alongside the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation to identify and highlight the means by which the state can continue expanding its telebehavioral health care offerings, both during the current public health crisis and beyond.”

The telebehavioral health report builds on the [Ready for Reform](#) report, released in January 2019 by the Foundation and Manatt, which urged policymakers and stakeholders to move beyond incremental improvements and take a transformational approach to the state’s fragmented, difficult-to-navigate behavioral health care system. The changes related to telebehavioral health implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect a significant and positive step toward ultimately improving access to behavioral health services across the Commonwealth.

About the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation

The mission of the [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation](#) is to expand access to health care for low-income and vulnerable individuals and families in the Commonwealth. The Foundation was founded in 2001 with an initial endowment from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. It operates separately from the company and is governed by its own Board of Directors.

About Manatt Health

Manatt Health integrates legal and consulting services to better meet the complex needs of clients across the healthcare system. Combining legal excellence, firsthand experience in shaping public policy, sophisticated strategy insight and deep analytic capabilities, Manatt Health provides uniquely valuable professional services to the full range of health industry players. Manatt Health’s diverse team of more than 160 attorneys and consultants from Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, and its consulting subsidiary, Manatt Health Strategies, LLC, is passionate about helping our clients advance their business interests, fulfill their missions and lead healthcare into the future. For more information, visit www.manatt.com/Health.

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