

Broadening Push To Extend Medicare Telehealth Coverage Includes Amazon

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A push by a broadening coalition of telehealth providers from Amazon and Hims & Hers to major hospital systems is working to get the U.S. government to extend pandemic-era waivers that allowed Medicare telehealth coverage.

Legislation before Congress provides some relief for older Americans covered by Medicare health insurance who have come to rely on their physicians getting paid for virtual visits since such reimbursements began during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the payments to telehealth providers aren't permanent and were waivers granted merely a short-term extension late last year, which followed several earlier waiver extensions. The waivers, which expire at the end of this month, allow for providers to get paid for telehealth services delivered in any location, including a patient's home rather than just a doctor's office or hospital and certain other healthcare locations.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services first began to temporarily pay clinicians to provide telehealth services for Medicare beneficiaries on March 6, 2020. At the time, former CMS administrator Seema Verma said the changes allowed seniors "to communicate with their doctors without having to travel to a healthcare facility so that they can limit risk of exposure and spread of this virus."

The idea was to give physicians and other clinicians flexibility to treat Medicare beneficiaries, opening the door to an array of providers to enter and expand their telehealth platforms to more Americans. That flexibility, supporters of such coverage said, should remain as a way to improve health outcomes and help older Americans maintain access to care.

The coalition to extend the waivers or even make them permanent is led by a lobby and policy arm of the American Telemedicine Association known as ATA action. ATA Action's advocacy council member companies include: Amazon, which has expanded its telehealth services in the last year and telehealth providers Hims & Hers, Lifepoint Health, Teladoc Health, and Circle Medical, an affiliate of UCSF Health.

"With only a handful of days left, time is running out for Congress to send legislation to President Trump for signature, extending essential telehealth and digital health services for the Medicare population, as well as for the millions of Americans in rural and urban communities and those with chronic and acute conditions who have come to rely on these virtual care solutions," said Alexis Apple, deputy executive director, ATA Action and vice president of federal affairs at the ATA.

“Congress and the Administration have demonstrated longstanding bipartisan leadership and historic support for telehealth over the past six years, and the American people and their healthcare providers have embraced these tech-enabled solutions, which have proven to be lifesaving strategies for extending care delivery to patients everywhere,” Apple added. “We are counting on our government champions to find a permanent solution or at least to establish a long-term extension for these telehealth waivers. ATA Action, on behalf of our expanding membership, will continue to work closely with these decision-makers to end this cycle of uncertainty and firmly establish hybrid care as a cornerstone of healthcare delivery for the future.”

Telehealth provisions expiring at the end of January include:

- Removal of geographic/originating-site restrictions
- Expanded eligible practitioners
- Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) / Rural Health Clinic (RHC) telehealth authority
- Delay of the in-person mental health requirement
- Audio-only telehealth
- Hospice face-to-face encounters
- Extension of the Acute Hospital Care at Home program