

COVID-19 Accelerated Telehealth in Medi-Cal

The COVID-19 public health emergency allowed Medi-Cal providers and patients to access a broader array of telehealth options.

In the early days of the pandemic and sheltering-in-place, in-person clinic visits plummeted. By quickly expanding telehealth offerings, Medi-Cal providers ensured ongoing access to care, protecting patients and frontline workers and helping to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Pre-COVID: Telehealth in Medi-Cal

Medi-Cal telehealth policies generally covered video visits, but not audio-only phone visits

Telehealth for Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) has been more restricted than for other providers. Per Department of Health Care Services' (DHCS) rules:

- FQHCs are only able to serve patients via telehealth whom DHCS considers to be 'established' patients of the FQHC
- Due to "four-walls" limitations, FQHCs can only provide video visits when the provider is in the clinic and the patient is in another clinic or provider office (not at home)

During COVID: Telehealth in Medi-Cal

DHCS received flexibility through an 1135 waiver and emergency State Plan Amendment:

- Allowing Medi-Cal providers to offer audio-only phone visits
- Ensuring that telehealth visits are reimbursed at parity with in-person visits

In addition, special restrictions on FQHCs were lifted:

- Allowing FQHCs to serve both new and established patients via telehealth
- Waiving the "four-walls" requirement to pay for visits via video and phone when the patient and provider are both in their homes

The Phone: Lifeline Amidst the Digital Divide



Audio-only phone visits are critical, especially for patients without internet and computers at home, or who have limited data plans. Other barriers to video visits include varying levels of digital literacy and comfort with technology.

To ensure equal access to care, it is critical that we maintain Medi-Cal patients' access to audio-only phone visits.

We urge the Legislature to adopt budget trailer bill language to allow temporarily authorized Medi-Cal telehealth flexibilities, including audio-only phone visits, to be extended permanently.