A Sustainability How-To Guide for Providers of Telehealth

The GHPC COVID Collection

In response to COVID-19, many organizations are rapidly pivoting to telehealth in order to respond to the needs of their patients and clients. Many overcame the initial challenges of adopting and implementing telehealth and report benefitting from the increased flexibility around Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and reimbursement requirements, which enabled providers to rapidly accommodate patients' needs.

With this rapid uptake of telehealth by both providers and patients, as well as uncertainty around the length of the pandemic and whether the policy changes will be sustained post-pandemic, provider entities need to plan for how to continue telehealth services under various scenarios (e.g., if hospitals, clinics, and schools can resume in-person services fully, partially, or not at all in the near and distant future).

Embracing an Uncertain Environment

When thinking through these various possible scenarios, contingency planning requires developing strategies for the anticipated and unanticipated events that occur within organizations and local communities and in state and federal policy and payment contexts. Undertaking sustainability planning can help organizations reflect on the need and demand for services, evaluate the efficacy of services and provider learning, assess the policy and payment environment, and chart a path forward for sustaining expanded telehealth offerings.

> *Sustainability* is defined as when programs or services continue because they are valued and draw support and resources. Sustainability does not necessarily mean that the programs or activities continue in the same form as originally conceived, funded, or implemented.

During times of uncertainty, programs often evolve to adjust to changing levels of available resources and fluctuating needs of the community. Organizations may start with one approach, but end up sustaining a different model of service provision after testing it in within their organization, testing it with the patients and clients they serve, and adjusting for macro-level changes in regulations and payment.

Developing a Sustainability Plan

Decisions about how to move a telehealth program from initial "response mode" into a longer-term plan has implications for the patients and clients served, as well as the staff and partners. The process of creating a sustainability plan clarifies the importance of the telehealth program for the provider organization and for the patients served. It also allows providers, leadership, and other stakeholders to make informed decisions about the future of the program. The sustainability planning process engages partners in assessing the continuing need, evaluating the program design and impact, and identifying ways to support the program for the long term.

A sustainability plan is a tactical necessity. It will help you determine which program activities should continue, and connect the operating costs of those activities to funding strategies. It may also inform how providers can continue to offer telehealth services under the various pandemic scenarios, ranging from full stay-at-home orders to a virtual return to normal. Sustainability planning can be viewed as the culmination of telehealth work to date, and it requires data, resources, and strategies to guide future progress.

Questions to consider for thinking through sustaining telehealth services

Assessing Continuing Need

- ☐ What led you to develop the program?
- ☐ What factors indicated a need for the program? Has that need changed?
- ☐ Are the circumstances in the community, at your organization, or in the policy environment different now than when you began?
- ☐ Is the need less or more intense?
- ☐ Based on your current understanding of the need, is there a reason to continue the current program as is, or should changes be made in the way services are being implemented?

Evaluating Program Outcomes

- ☐ To what extent were you able to accomplish what you planned to do?
- ☐ Were we able to implement the services as envisioned? If yes, what has contributed to your success? If not, why not?
- ☐ Are you having positive outcomes? If yes, what has contributed to this success? If not, why not?
- ☐ What makes you most proud about what you have done?
- ☐ What lessons have you learned?

Telehealth as the "New Normal"
Assessing the policy context and planning for multiple scenarios

- ☐ If this pandemic response continues or is needed again in the future, what elements of the telehealth services can you continue to support?
- ☐ Which elements of telehealth work and which do not work for your patient population?
- ☐ What additional supports do your staff and providers need to offer for high-quality care?
- ☐ In a situation where remote services are ideal, what telehealth services and funding resources can be leveraged?
- ☐ How can you continue to keep abreast of developments in regulations and policies related to telehealth? How can you incorporate new information and new opportunities into planning and programming?
- ☐ What data can you use to encourage stakeholders and potential funders to support telehealth services across the various scenarios?

As you consider your telehealth program and its effectiveness over time, it is important to think about what might be needed for the positive outcomes to endure.

Identifying dedicated resources (including financial, human, and other) to support the program:

- ☐ What ongoing training will be required to maintain staff capacity, including when there are changes in personnel?
- ☐ Will someone need to continue to facilitate meetings to continue the coordination of services?
- ☐ Will expanded telehealth offerings require new staffing models with additional personnel?
- ☐ How will equipment be maintained and serviced over the long term?

Looking Forward

Answering questions like these will help you get a clear picture of the overall cost of implementing your expanded telehealth services. Sustainability planning will also require you to identify what funding sources are available to you and what might be leveraged under different scenarios (e.g., if telehealth billing and reimbursement expansion is extended). Overall, this will illuminate how telehealth services can continue to be supported financially to meet the emerging needs of your patients and providers.

A sustainability planning process that includes contingency planning for multiple scenarios, an assessment of outcomes and experiences to date, and consideration of available funding and other supports needed can help providers build telehealth services that can sustain and thrive in a rapidly evolving health care and policy landscape.