

New York School-Based Health Centers' Insights into Telehealth Utilization for Behavioral Health Services



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Introduction



In June 2024, a survey requesting information about telehealth services and delivery in New York School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) was developed by Apex Evaluation, in partnership with the New York School Based Health Alliance (NYSBHA).

The survey included questions about telehealth prioritization, dedicated resources and capacity to deliver telehealth services, and community engagement in implementation. The respondents had several opportunities throughout the survey to provide additional information in their own words.

67%

of SBHC medical sponsoring organizations in the state of New York responded to our survey about telehealth at their organization.

Through careful analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, several themes emerged including, but not limited to, the advantages and barriers SBHCs are experiencing with implementing telehealth patient service delivery.

The following pages highlight key findings from the survey.

Suggested citation:

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Letter from NYSBHA

August 2024



Dear School-Based Health Professionals and Supporters,

We would like to thank you for partaking in our recent survey focused on telehealth and behavioral health services across school-based health centers in New York State. This survey is part of the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access (PMHCA) grant funded through the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA). PMHCA promotes behavioral health integration into pediatric primary care by using telehealth to provide quality and timely detection, assessment, treatment, and referral for children and adolescents, with behavioral health conditions, using evidence-based practices and methods. NYSBHA has been fortunate enough to partner with the New York State Department of Health, Bureau of Child Health on this program to expand the capacity of school-based health centers to utilize telehealth as a service model for mental health services.

The enclosed report, expertly administered and summarized by Apex Evaluation, highlights findings from the survey reflecting the collective voices and experiences of SBHCs as they navigate the complexities of integrating telehealth into behavioral health services. Survey findings underscore the need to continue promoting telehealth as a tool to enhance access to behavioral health services; to improve communication between SBHCs, schools and families; and to encourage ongoing collaboration with community partners in the service of families, particularly new arrivals. This report serves as a valuable resource for advancing our collective efforts to bridge gaps and to foster more effective communication and coordination across all stakeholders, including the Alliance.

In the field of school-based health, coordination is not a buzzword, it is an essential strategy we embrace across all levels of care. Your continued commitment to this work is vital as we strive to enhance the health and well-being of the children and communities we serve.

As always, thank you for your partnership and dedication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah Murphy".

Sarah Murphy
Executive Director

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The Telehealth Landscape

The global COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst to providing health care to patients via telehealth, with behavioral health being the primary reason for a patient's visit.¹ Data collected through the Apex SBHC Data Hub, which collects visit data from participating SBHCs, also reveals that **behavioral health is the primary service accessed via telehealth** and accounted for 5% of all visits in 2022-23.

During the height of the pandemic, emergency declarations were put in place to help expand telehealth flexibilities for delivery of care, including telephone visits and video calls.² These provisions are coming to an end, which is causing concern for health care providers who have been able to reach patients in communities without many health care options.

Given this context, this was an important time for NYSBHA to understand SBHC provider experiences and reflections on telehealth over the past few years. Some of the issues facing our communities will be discussed in this report.

Survey respondents reported that “to a great extent,” in the past 3 years **expanding telehealth has been important to their organization.**

47% of survey respondents reported that **telehealth services for behavioral health has been a focus of expansion.**

56% of survey respondents reported that **their organization has focused on expanding telehealth overall.**



¹ Mulvaney-Day, N., Dean, D., Miller, K., & Camacho-Cook, J. (2022). Trends in use of telehealth for behavioral health care during the COVID-19 pandemic: Considerations for payers and employers. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 36(7), 1237–1241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08901171221112488e>

² Cummins, M. R., Ivanova, J., Ong, T., Soni, H., Barrera, J. F., Wilczewski, H., Welch, B. M., & Bunnell, B. E. (2024). Will the United States pass on telemedicine progress? *JAMIA Open*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jamiaopen/ooae016>

Advantages of Telehealth

There are many advantages to receiving clinical services through telehealth. In reflecting on the past three years, survey respondents shared that providing behavioral health telehealth services at their SBHC had many benefits including improved service availability, continuity of care, better utilization of providers, and decreased barriers for youth and families.

Improved Service Availability and Continuity of Care



- Services can be provided during the summer and holidays
- Patients have fewer missed appointments
- Parents can attend visits remotely
- Increased service availability for youth and families

“Families being able to attend sessions remotely as needed has helped with continuity of care.” ~ Survey Respondent

Better Utilization of Providers



- Telehealth makes it possible to reach locations that have limited access to health care
- Provider shortages are less of an issue
- Providers can more easily collaborate with colleagues to achieve better patient care

“We have utilized telehealth with our consulting psychiatrist (off-site) to join sessions (on-site) at the health center.” ~ Survey Respondent

Decreasing Barriers for Youth and Families



- Less need for families to find childcare
- Telehealth alleviates clinical space issues
- Telehealth decreases transportation issues

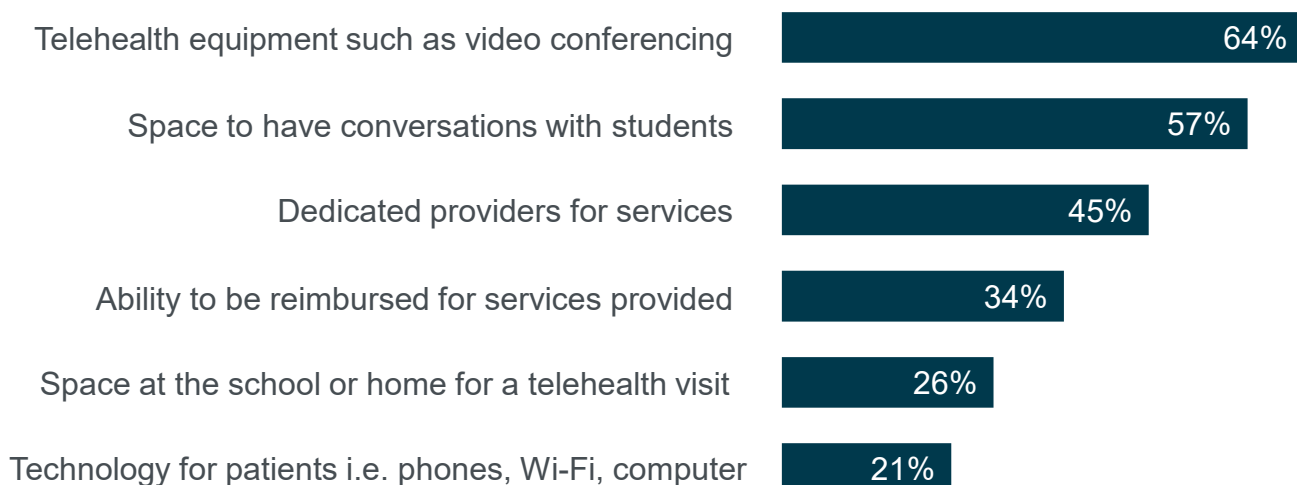
*“Considering some of the barriers related to transportation and childcare, telehealth services has alleviated some of those challenges.”
~ Survey Respondent*

Resources to Provide Telehealth



Having adequate resources to implement telehealth is paramount to the successful implementation of providing clinical care services through this modality.

Below is the percent of SBHCs who report that they have **access to resources** that enable telehealth service delivery “to a great extent.”



10% shared that their SBHC did not have dedicated providers for services at all and that patients lacked needed technology such as phones, computers or internet access.

28% reported that they were not sure about their ability to be reimbursed for services provided, which poses sustainability concerns for the telehealth program.

Taken together, these findings highlight that if telehealth services are to continue and aid in reaching communities who lack access to medical services, more intentional **investment in policy work, technology, and training is needed.**

Telehealth Promotion at SBHCs

Health promotion efforts by SBHCs have aided in awareness and expansion of telehealth services, but there is still a fair number of organizations that have identified that efforts to engage youth and the SBHC community are very little to none. SBHCs should continue to improve their communication with school community, families, and youth to increase service utilization.

The percent of SBHCs who report that they have **engaged with school community members** “to a great extent” to promote telehealth services is **low compared to the desire to provide this type of care.**

38%

engaged youth in discussing their behavioral health concerns or needs via telehealth.

28%

made the school community aware of telehealth services offered by the SBHC.

26%

engaged with school leadership about how to expand telehealth services for behavioral health.



When asked about their perceptions of student interest in receiving behavioral health services through telehealth, qualitative answers from survey respondents indicated that both parents and students appreciate having the option for telehealth care delivery, especially when facing issues with transportation, work and personal schedules, and the distance to a care facility; however, telehealth is not always the preferred method to receive care.

17%

of providers reported that students have expressed a strong desire to receive behavioral health service through telehealth (i.e. counseling, therapy, etc.).



40% Of providers reported that students have somewhat expressed a desire to receive behavioral health service through telehealth

Barriers to Providing Telehealth

Survey respondents also shared about some of the barriers they face in providing telehealth services, notably **issues with reimbursement for services delivered**.

Billing and Reimbursement Issues



- SBHCs report that they receive one-third reimbursement compared to an in-person visit, which leads to limiting telehealth services
- Medicaid rules require provider and patient to be in the same building to be billable (Article 28 Building)
- Rules regarding which communication system to use have changed; Telephonic services are no longer allowed which has decreased access to care*

“The biggest challenge now is the location of the provider/patient and our ability to bill, fully for services rendered via a virtual platform.” ~ Survey Respondent

Lack of Proper Telehealth Resources



- Limited or no internet at families’ homes and schools
- Lack of access to computers or tablets
- Inadequate confidential space in the clinic or school for behavioral health care visits
- Landline phones are the only option for communication for many, but this delivery method is no longer allowed

“Lack of resources is [limiting care for those] who are the neediest. These [patients] cannot be seen in-person, due to lack of transportation, money, gas, etc.” ~ Survey Respondent

Family Logistics Create Barriers



- Lack of private space at home for an appointment
- There is a need to create “safe words” to ensure patient confidentiality
- Available appointment times don’t meet patient needs

“Some students [who] have mental health needs are from a big household with several siblings around, single parent, living with grandparents.” ~ Survey Respondent

Care Choices Support Access



Many SBHC providers noted that while some youth and families enjoy having the option of telehealth visits, others prefer in-person delivery.

Undeniably, the flexibility in being able to choose in-person or telehealth appointments helps to ensure care is available in the most convenient way.

Telehealth Increases Access to Care



- Utilizing telehealth for follow up care after an in-person visit has worked well at some clinics
- Patients tell their friends and family about their positive experience with telehealth, which raises awareness and increases services
- Recent investments in technology has helped to enable telehealth services where it is greatly needed

“We have a shortage of behavioral health providers, and our organization is trying to limit barriers in any way possible.” ~ Survey Respondent

In Some Cases, In-Person Visits are Still Preferred



- Some parents have requested that their child be seen in-person rather than through telehealth
- Providing services for mental health in-person is preferable for some youth
- Some providers stated that in-person services are more appreciated by patients

“In our experience we have noticed that the younger population, elementary school age children, do not do as well on telehealth.” ~ Survey Respondent

Identified Needs & Advice

Survey respondents openly provided requests for help with implementing telehealth services and **offered advice to their colleagues on what made their programs successful.**

Identified Needs from SBHCs



- Advocacy to support telehealth policies and reimbursement
- Training on how to use telehealth systems and equipment
- Help with workflows and service delivery:
 - Outreach and engagement (multi-lingual)
 - Check-in and check-out procedures
 - How to build rapport with patients via telehealth

“We need to lobby for insurance reimbursements and have current updates related to allowable telehealth service delivery.” ~ Survey Respondent

Advice from SBHCs



- Develop or modify policies and procedures to support SBHC telehealth practices
- Have safety plans in place and ensure staff are comfortable helping those in crisis
- Inform patients about the value and limitations of utilizing telehealth for clinical care

“Be open about offering the services to the students so it comes to their mind when they feel limited or stuck at home without transportation.” ~ Survey Respondent



Key Insights & Recommendations

Telehealth is an important tool and **option to support patient access and continuity of care.** An area of improvement identified is **improving communication about telehealth availability**, benefits, and considerations with school leadership, families, and youth. SBHCs can also continue to leverage telehealth to **partner with other providers and community organizations to improve collaboration and coordinated care** for their patients.

About the Evaluation

Purpose and Goals

This evaluation aimed to seek out and document the perspectives of SBHC sponsor organizations and providers on behavioral health telehealth use, promotion, strengths, and barriers over the past several years. The overarching goal of this evaluation was to facilitate learning and support New York School-Based Health Alliance's (NYSBHA) understanding of what is needed to expand behavioral health services through telehealth delivery, as well as inform NYSBHA strategy and future advocacy efforts.

Apex Blend

The Apex Blend includes leveraging systems thinking and utilization-focused evaluation approaches. Apex aims to match the learning need with the method while considering the burden of data collection methods on participants. Finally, Apex aims to create processes and products that are accessible, meaningful, and insightful to support our vision of "evaluation that works."

Systems-thinking

Throughout the different phases of the evaluation, the Apex team worked closely with NYSBHA partners to understand the broader context and local landscape of SBHCs and telehealth services in New York. These conversations supported the development of evaluation activities and questions, as well as interpretation and sensemaking of the data.

Utilization-focused

Findings from this evaluation are intended to inform and guide NYSBHA decision-making, strategy, and advocacy efforts. Findings will also be shared with SBHC sponsor organizations and providers, funders, and policy makers to support building public awareness and understanding of the current availability, benefits, and barriers to behavioral health services through telehealth delivery at SBHCs in New York.

Methods

An online survey was sent to New York SBHC sponsor organizations through an email announcement from the NYSBHA in June 2024. They were asked to share the survey with their SBHC sites and behavioral health staff. A total of 80 respondents answered the survey, representing 45 (67%) SBHCs.

Survey form responses were analyzed using SPSS statistical software and Dedoose to perform descriptive and thematic analyses.

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Apex is a consulting and technology services company specializing in systems evaluation. We have been serving the public and nonprofit sectors for over two decades, providing program planning, evaluation, facilitation, and technical assistance, including technology for data collection and reporting.

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