

Behavioral Health via Telehealth:

Improving Access to Care through New York School-Based Health Centers

The New York School-Based Health Alliance (NYSBHA) has been partnering with School-Based Health Centers in New York to help expand access to clinical services via telehealth. Survey findings show that **telehealth utilization remains a priority for care providers** who want to expand services to communities and patients who have difficulties accessing care. **Behavioral health services remain the highest utilized service for telehealth care.**

This brief shares highlights from a longer report, including key themes uncovered by NYSBHA and Apex Evaluation during their exploration of telehealth services, the advantages of offering care through this modality, barriers and challenges experienced, and requests for help to ensure this valuable service is available to communities in New York.

Advantages of Telehealth

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*

Barriers & Recommendations for Expansion

Implementing telehealth creates challenges for clinics, most notably, survey respondents identified **issues with reimbursement for services delivered**. When asked about assistance clinics need for expanding telehealth, many respondents requested **advocacy to support improved policies and reimbursement for services provided**.

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

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

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.

A note about the data source for this report:

In June of 2024, a survey requesting information about telehealth services and delivery in School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) was developed by Apex Evaluation *in partnership with the New York School-Based Health Alliance with funding from the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access (PMHCA) grant funded through the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) and in partnership with the New York State Department of Health Bureau of Child Health*. We received eighty responses from SBHC providers who represented 67% of the sponsoring organizations who operate SBHCs in the state of New York.

* Providers noted that this change went into effect on 6/24/2024