



Missouri Alliance for HOME CARE

2420 Hyde Park, Suite A, Jefferson City, MO 65109-4731 ▪ (573) 634-7772 ▪ (573) 634-4374 Fax

Policy Veers toward Expansion of Telehealth *(from NAHC Report, January 16, 2018)*

A recent decision by the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission (MedPAC) and moves by the Administration and leaders in Congress point to a future expansion in the use of telehealth, an important development for the home care community.

Telehealth is the expansion of health care and education using telecommunication technologies to deliver virtual medical and education services.

Recently, MedPAC voted unanimously to expand telehealth reimbursement for Medicare in a report required by the 21st Century Cures Act. The many advocates for telehealth or telemedicine believe it has the potential to increase the quality of care, while enhancing convenience, while saving money, a top priority in a time of tight budgets. For home care, telehealth has the opportunity to enable providers to expand their services to patients with remote monitoring technologies, while saving money and time on lengthy visits. The goal is to enhance in-person care rather than replacing it.

The MedPAC report suggests a cautious expansion of telehealth reimbursement and study of how the experiment proceeds, while noting that telehealth practices are already expanding in mental health care and certain other areas.

In particular, the MedPAC commissioners expressed appreciation for stroke telehealth, which involves cardiologists consulting with doctors in emergency room settings. Many hospitals are already adopting stroke telehealth and Congress is indicating an interest in the practice, as can be seen by the introduction of the FAST Act ([H.R. 1148](#)).

Telehealth could be particularly useful in rural areas, where long distances and remote locations make in-person visits difficult, time-consuming, and costly. President Trump has signed [an executive order](#) to expand broadband Internet into rural areas that lack connectivity. Meanwhile, Congress is expected to make a strong push to expand high-speed Internet access to rural areas. Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) plans to introduce [several pieces of legislation](#) in the coming weeks to remove barriers to broadband access for rural customers.

Broadband access is regarded by most policymakers as critical for economic development in rural areas. Currently, 39 percent of rural Americans, about 23 million people, lack access to broadband services, according to a report from the Federal Communications Commission in 2016. About four percent of Americans in urban areas lack broadband access.

Expanded broadband access in rural areas could make it far easier to expand telehealth services for home care agencies, allowing patients to be monitored and educated by health specialists who are physically far away. It would also enable swift and efficient sharing of medical test results and other patient information critical to superior care.