

# Telemental Health Services for Youth in Rural Areas: Meeting Service Gaps and Best Practices

## Literature Review Summary

Delivery of mental health services in Minnesota and across the nation largely and rapidly transitioned to online platforms as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some providers were already incorporating telemental health into their practice, more intensive therapeutic sessions for youth and families held outside of residential treatment facilities were still primarily delivered face-to-face, often in the family home or another community setting. The adoption of telemental health services has brought both benefits and challenges. This summary presents the key findings from the full literature review about the value of telemental health services in closing service gaps for youth in rural areas, best practices to address common challenges and ensure successful implementation of telemental health services, and strategies to encourage the expansion of telemental health services in rural areas.

## Benefits of telemental health services

Telemental health services may help meet mental health service gaps in rural areas and improve the provision of services generally. In addition to research indicating the efficacy, acceptability, feasibility, and cross-cultural applicability of telemental health services, this delivery format:

- **Eliminates geographic and transportation barriers common in rural areas.** Services can be more easily and conveniently scheduled around youth and caregiver school and work schedules and can reduce transportation costs.
- **Facilitates the inclusion of caregivers or other stakeholders in a client's care.** Family members, school staff, peers, and other stakeholders can provide and receive information about the client's care without the need to attend in-person sessions.
- **Improves access to specialty providers.** Telemental health services can improve access to specialty providers with specific expertise, such as substance use, psychiatry, anxiety disorders, autism, eating disorders, and trauma.
- **Improves access to culturally responsive services.** Telemental health services can help increase access to culturally responsive services, reduce language barriers, and allow the pairing of clients with providers based on a shared language, ethnicity, race, or cultural background.
- **Facilitates provider coordination, consultation, and education.** Providers can more easily coordinate and consult with one another; share information; and receive supervision, training, or education, which may be especially beneficial for providers working in rural areas with fewer opportunities.

- **Reduces concerns regarding privacy and stigma.** Stigma and privacy concerns are common barriers for youth seeking services, particularly in smaller communities; telemental health may be less stigmatizing and may help prevent inadvertent disclosures.
- **Reduces agency costs.** Although the implementation of telemental health services requires some start-up costs, it can lead to cost-savings for agencies, particularly those associated with travel.

## Best practices for providers

Despite the benefits of telemental health, challenges also exist for providers who offer telemental health services. Best practices for addressing challenges include:

- **Consider client resources, abilities, and characteristics that may affect their experience.** Clients need consistent access to reliable internet, a device, and the ability to navigate online platforms. Privacy may be an issue for clients receiving services from home, and some clients may have a strong preference for in-person sessions.
- **Provide an introduction to telemental health services.** To help acclimate clients to telemental health services, discuss why the delivery format is being used and how it works.
- **Adjust strategies to develop therapeutic alliance and engage clients.** There are several strategies providers can use to develop a therapeutic alliance via telemental health, such as minimizing distractions, adjusting communication style, and maintaining eye contact.
- **Adapt to cultural differences.** Communication styles vary across cultures regarding tone, pace, eye contact, and use of silence, and these may pose more of a challenge when providing telemental health services; providers should consider and adapt to these differences.
- **Anticipate and adjust to technology-related challenges.** Maximize audio and video quality, develop a plan for addressing session disruptions, become familiar with technical support options, and acknowledge challenges while demonstrating patience.

## Best practices for agencies

In addition to best practices for providers, research suggests several best practices for agencies to follow when implementing telemental health services, which include:

- **Develop a strategic plan for implementing telemental health services.** This could include developing a vision for services, identifying roles, investing in technology, and other best practices for agencies identified in this summary.
- **Conduct needs assessments and site visits.** Agencies may wish to collect information about the communities they will serve and assess site readiness, scalability, sustainability, technological needs, and existing resources.
- **Build partnerships and conduct community outreach.** Strengthening relationships with local partners, community leaders, and the communities served may help to ensure local engagement with services.
- **Train and engage staff.** Staff should receive training specific to telemental health services, and agencies may wish to conduct staff engagement activities to encourage buy-in.

- **Develop staffing and workflow protocols and policies specific to telemental health services.** These could relate to emergency situations, disclosures of imminent harm, mandated reporting, the use of interpreters, and delineated staff and provider responsibilities.
- **Review regulations and assess third party payer requirements.** Agencies may wish to explore relevant licensure restrictions, liability coverage, custody issues, parity laws, jurisdiction-based restrictions, and other reimbursement limitations.
- **Address issues related to confidentiality, data privacy, and informed consent.** Agencies should adapt their confidentiality, privacy, and consent policies to the unique format of telemental health services.

## Recommendations for state agencies

There are a variety of strategies state agencies can take to encourage the expansion of telemental health services to rural areas, including working toward mental health parity relative to physical health concerns and telehealth parity relative to in-person services. Reimbursement policies could also be modified to maximize flexibility; specifically, these could include different types services provided via different types of delivery formats, services provided by peer support specialists and providers with different types of licenses or at different stages of the licensure process, and services provided or received in different jurisdictions or different types of sites. In addition, agencies can support the development of technological infrastructure by coordinating efforts statewide, investing in infrastructure, and providing telecommunications funding. Agencies can also work to address the mental health workforce shortage, support telemental health training and education opportunities, simplify the funding process, and adopt policies that support a shift away from a fee-for-service model to value-based care .

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