

Telehealth Now!

By Bruce Davis

The hour has arrived! What hour? The hour that people in the IDD community MUST embrace telehealth as a way of receiving health services. There are many reasons that this shift is important. However, the factor that has put the exclamation point on the others is the coronavirus. The vulnerability of persons with IDD to COVID-19 makes it of extreme importance that people with IDD and the staff who support them follow the CDC's instructions on social distancing. Maximizing the use of telehealth is one way to accomplish that. Because of the coronavirus situation, telehealth options are increasing. However, more is needed to minimize the risk of unnecessary in-person health services, clinical services, and emergency room visits that increase the risk of exposure to coronavirus. Each time a person with IDD meets someone in-person, both parties are placed at risk. In-person ER visits may expose a person supported and the staff who support them to many people in a waiting room, some of which may have the coronavirus without even knowing it.



Telehealth Was Great Even Before it was Cool

Even before the coronavirus, there were great reasons to adopt telehealth for persons with IDD. Telehealth has the capacity to help people

gain greater access to health services and reduce costs associated with expensive urgent and emergent care. Telehealth is a solution to many health care problems that exist today.

Rural Access

Many people in rural areas have experienced more limited access to health care services because they are usually most available in larger cities. A person with a chronic health condition who lives in a remote area may not be able to attend appointments as regularly as needed or receive important consultation from their health or clinical provider. Telehealth creates the opportunity for people to receive the services they need without traveling long distances.

Cost Savings

Another reason telehealth was a good idea before the coronavirus is that it saves hassle and cost. Often when persons with IDD experience a health condition and can't be seen by their regular physician, they are sent to an ER to get ordinary, everyday assessment and treatment services that could be completed by their physician if only they could be reached. Out of an abundance of caution, people are often sent to an emergency room because nothing else is available. Such visits are often quite costly. The cost of occupying a room at the ER is compounded by each service received during the ER stay and each physician who provides consultation. Under Medicaid coverage, these costs are often hidden to the person receiving services, but they are costly to the system.

Beyond these costs, emergency room visits are also costly to agencies who provide support to persons with IDD. Additional staffing is often required to take one person to an ER or urgent care visit so that other persons supported can continue their daily routines. The costs of this additional staffing are not just financial, but

they also exacerbate staffing shortages that are ubiquitous in IDD services.

Health Care Resources

Finally, during this time, it is anticipated that emergency rooms will be stressed in meeting the needs of people with COVID-19. Unnecessary ER visits distract health care workers from this important work and should be avoided however they can. ER visits already often resulted in long waits, but because of many more people now using ERs, these waits will be even longer. Such unnecessary visits may also cause the use of personal protective equipment that are currently in short supply.

So, even without the coronavirus, expanding telehealth options for persons with IDD makes perfect sense. When you add the coronavirus concerns, telehealth almost becomes an absolute necessity. We must do what we can to reduce unnecessary in-person services.

Telehealth Options Expanding

Across the country, IDD systems are doing their best to expand the availability of telehealth services so that people will not have to increase coronavirus risk by receiving in-person services. Medicaid Waiver services for persons with IDD are using Appendix K modifications to their ordinary menu of services to allow clinical providers to perform some of their services via telehealth options, when possible. In addition, state plans for Medicaid health services are allowing regular health and mental health appointments to be completed via telehealth. To aid providers who are not currently set up for telehealth services, certain HIPAA requirements have been temporarily waived to allow them to get started. Having these services available via telehealth is a tremendous boon to coronavirus prevention. Having clinical providers come into homes or going to a doctor's office for services exposes people to coronavirus risk. With these expanded

opportunities for telehealth, that risk will be substantially reduced.

But, What About ER Visits...

The expansion of telehealth options reduces in-person scheduled visits. In some cases, it may also allow health/clinical providers to perform emergency services that they wouldn't ordinarily provide. However, what about the times when those providers are not available? Those are times when people with IDD and their carers often resort to ER usage to get their needs met. Even with the expanded telehealth options available now, the prospect of unnecessary ER and urgent care visits still exists.

A Unique Service

Under its Enabling Technology grant, the TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (TN-DIDD) had been seeking to establish a pilot of a service that would provide telehealth services to persons with IDD to prevent unnecessary visits. Now the need to expand these types of telehealth services has taken on greater importance because of coronavirus risks in emergency rooms. This unique service is provided by an agency named StationMD. StationMD provides 24-7 physician availability for a face-to-face telehealth service that is designed to provide treatment that can prevent unnecessary ER visits. This is important, but what makes the service so unique is that it is designed specifically for persons with IDD.

[StationMD Flyer](#)

StationMD's physicians receive training on how to deal with difficulties in communication that often impair health services for persons with IDD. They're also familiar with relatively obscure conditions often experienced by persons with IDD, like genetic syndromes and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Their expertise in these areas is important because it helps them

overcome some of the natural barriers to providing telehealth services for persons with IDD. They have also recently added the capacity to intervene in behavioral health crises including verbal de-escalation and psychiatric treatment. StationMD's service is truly distinctive and has the capacity to prevent coronavirus exposures to a population that is vulnerable to serious consequences, including death, if they get COVID-19 (the disease caused by coronavirus).

What We're Doing

In cooperation with TennCare, TN-DIDD is exploring ways to provide this service. Several options for funding are being considered at this time. This is a service we want to make available to all persons served under IDD waivers. Our expectation is that agencies will begin to divert people from unnecessary ER visits by using telehealth. In this way, we would expect that obtaining medical consultation via telehealth would serve as an alternative for situations that currently require an ER visit. By implementing these actions, we're hopeful that this will be yet another strategy we can use to further diminish the risk of COVID-19 for the people served through IDD programs.

Moving Ahead

Assuming we're able to identify a way to fund these telehealth services, you should be alert for more details and the steps required to obtain it for the people you support. When we're able to move forward with the service, it will be a good idea to prioritize people with frequent emergency room or urgent care visits as this group is the most vulnerable. However, the goal is to provide the service to everyone who may be at-risk for ER visits. If we're able to combine this with other strategies for social distancing, we can decrease the chances that people will experience COVID-19. That is our *job one* at this critical time. Telehealth now!

Dr. Matt Kaufman, Director of StationMD is my guest on a special edition of the Clinical Consultation Network on Monday, March 23, 2020 at 1230 PM Central time. Please join us!

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