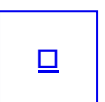


[Health](#), [Technology](#)

Expanded Rural Telehealth Likely Coming to North Carolina

August 10, 2020 By [Kevin LaTorre](#)

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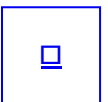
President Trump signed an executive order on Aug. 3 to expand and cement rural access to telehealth. You might remember that our state’s rural healthcare [has suffered](#) throughout COVID-19. But here’s why the presidential order might boost rural hopes for telehealth in North Carolina.

The Executive Order Means to Expand Rural Telehealth Access

Stat News [just explained](#) obstacles to widespread, effective telemedicine (lacking high-speed internet, lacking mobile access and disabilities). Because the executive order only recently listed several tasks to complete by early September, how it handles these barriers remains to be seen. Let’s first get into what the order outlines, and then what North Carolina medical professionals think so far.

North Carolina HHS will need to improve healthcare payment and access structures.

Under the president’s direction, the Dept. of Health and Human Services received 30 days to launch a new payment model and improve the digital infrastructure used for telehealth access in rural areas. In short: the department (also meaning here in the state) will unveil new deregulations (or regulations) that enable easier telemedicine payments for rural patients. It also has to improve high-speed internet in communities that lack good broadband or mobile service.



Some companies and regulators have already [removed payment regulations](#) (like reimbursements), making telehealth more feasible. COVID-19 has brought new surges of digital medical care: a weekly [1.4 million telemedicine visits](#) by late April, compared to only 14,000 before the crisis. If this order spurs permanent telemedicine infrastructure in Congress (as one writer from the Advisory Board [anticipates](#)), then digital healthcare could stay long term.

First, though, the HHS needs to implement the payment and access improvements in 30 days. And then they need to evaluate them within the next 60 days. But the signs so far suggest that telemedicine will persist after COVID-19. The question is whether it will better serve rural communities.

North Carolina support for rural telehealth already exists.

One representative from the [North Carolina Medical Society](#) (which leads healthcare's improvement in the state) voiced the group's support. Elaine Ellis, Vice President of Marketing & Communications at NCMS, stated:

“[W]e are pleased that the Executive Order aims to retain [policy] incentives to continued use of telehealth beyond the current emergency. We have long held that telehealth is a way to improve access to care in remote areas of the state and continue to advocate in the NC General Assembly for better broadband availability in rural and underserved areas. The recent Executive Order sets a positive direction to continue the progress we have recently seen in increased use of telehealth and are hopeful the goals outlined in the order will come to fruition within the stated timeframe.”

Why Could the Telehealth Expansion Matter?

Image courtesy of [NCMS](#).

We've [noted before](#) that some health systems (like [ApolloMD](#)) see telemedicine's business opportunity. You might expect the biotech hub in Raleigh's Research Triangle to leap into the chance of long-term digital medicine.

But on the side of North Carolina's healthcare, the successful arrival of telehealth in rural communities could ease the burden of not living nearby a healthcare system. If you live somewhere remote, calling a doctor (and receiving insurance help for it) might become your best option. Especially when rural hospitals in the state (and country) have begun closing (per [the Citizen-Times](#) and [Vox](#)).

In short, we don't have a concrete outlook because the executive order barely gave a concrete outline. But the federal nod to rural telehealth expansion in North Carolina deserves our notice. Why? It could boost short-term medical care as COVID-19 continues. And it could also support long-term healthcare means for vulnerable rural patients in our state.

[Healthcare](#), [North Carolina](#), [rural](#), [Telehealth](#)

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