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FEATURED

New state law keeps coverage for telehealth services intact, even after pandemic ends

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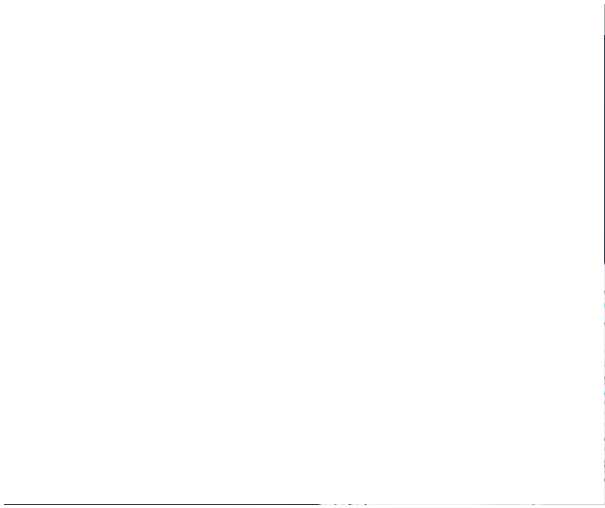
River Valley Family Health Center, whose Montrose location is shown here, backed Senate Bill 212, which became law Monday, providing certainty for those who have come to rely on having telehealth services covered by insurance, including Medicaid.

(File photo/Montrose Daily Press)

A freshly signed law will protect access to telehealth in Colorado, even after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

Senate Bill 212, the Reimbursement for Telehealth Services Act, became law Monday. It requires health insurance carriers, including Medicaid, to cover telehealth visits for both physical and behavioral health care. Nationally, such coverage is allowed under a temporary waiver implemented because of the pandemic.

“It’s massively helpful. The fact that we can provide telephonic and televideo services is absolutely huge for the safety of our patients and clinical staff,” said Jeremy Carroll, CEO of River Valley Family Health Center, a federally qualified health care facility with offices in Olathe, Montrose and Delta.



River Valley had supported the bill. Like Montrose Memorial Hospital and other medical providers in the community, River Valley has been using telemedicine to conduct routine patient visits remotely during the pandemic, thereby cutting the risk of spreading the novel coronavirus.

The federal waiver allowing Medicaid to reimburse for telehealth is temporary, and that threw into doubt the ability to continue what Carroll and others see as an essential service.

In addition to protecting access to telehealth even after the emergency passes, the new law requires the Colorado Department of Healthcare Policy and Financing to reimburse federally qualified health centers, rural health centers and the Indian Health Services for telemedicine.

It further continues parity for in-person and telehealth billing and bars insurance carriers from limiting the technologies used for telehealth, provided these comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

Under the new state law, telehealth can be used for assessment, diagnosis, consultation, treatment, education, care management, self- management, remote monitoring and recommendations for consumers. The law also waives the requirement that patients already have a relationship with a provider to receive telehealth services.

Backers said the new law also provides consistency.

“The hospital supports people’s access to telehealth services beyond the pandemic and we do plan to continue offering telehealth after the pandemic,” Montrose Memorial Hospital Chief Marketing Officer Leann Tobin said.

“It is very helpful for the patients we see from the West End of Montrose County, Gunnison, Telluride and more.”

The hospital offers telehealth at its associated clinics, such as Alpine Women’s Centre and San Juan Cancer Center, along with cardiology, pulmonology.

“We have received very positive feedback from the patients who are using it — primarily from our cardiology, pulmonology and oncology clinics,” Tobin said.

Hospital telehealth are services accessible by electronic means, such as a smartphone or computer; more limited telehealth is also available in audio-only, via phone.

Carroll said River Valley patients who cannot travel also benefit from telehealth, and sometimes, when a provider cannot be in the office, he or she can use telehealth to still see patients — all of which amounts to more access, he said.

“It absolutely opens up a lot of opportunities. It increases our access. ... This impacts our primary area, but it is a huge win for community health centers and our patients,” Carroll said.

River Valley patients who do not have internet access can drive to the parking lot and have a loaner tablet delivered, enabling them to be “seen” without having to go inside and potentially be exposed to the novel coronavirus, or infect others if they are infected.

“It’s good news for our patients and the whole primary care continuum,” Carroll said.

He also said he was heartened to see the measure pass with bipartisan support, with Matt Soper, R-Delta County/Mesa County and Susan Lontine, D-Denver leading efforts.

“It is really nice to see their work as it relates to providing care. This impacts all of primary care, but is a huge win for community health centers and our patients,” Carroll said.

“This is something we have been advocating for for years. Unfortunately, it took a pandemic to kind of push us over and get us to move on it.

“It’s very important for the future of health care. I believe it will drive down cost of care and reduce utilization of emergency rooms by providing additional access to care.”

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