Reduce Rural Opioid Addiction: Telemedicine Parity is Needed in Pennsylvania
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Opioid Abuse Kills Thousands in Rural Communities
Opioid abuse kill tens of thousands of Americans every year. Over 72,000 people died of opioid related drug overdoses in the United States in 2017 (1). Opioid-related deaths in the US occur for many reasons and 40% involve prescription drugs (2). While rates of opioid addiction are higher in urban communities, rural communities experience higher rates of death due to opioid usage (3). Rural communities often do not have access to the most effective treatment (4).

Telemedicine parity uses an innovative strategy to help rural communities combat high rates of opioid-related deaths. Pennsylvania legislators must pass Senate Bill 857 and House Bill 872 to ensure telemedicine parity. Telemedicine is defined as medicine practiced at a geographic distance (5). Strategies may include 1) simultaneous two-way audio and/or video, 2) images collected and sent later for review, or 3) the use of mobile apps and other health management tools.

Telemedicine Offers a Solution to Treat Opioid Abuse in Rural Areas
Telemedicine allows rural healthcare providers to support and treat people struggling with opioid addiction in places currently without treatment. Telemedicine parity law provides the financial backing to support and sustain telemedicine, as well as a mandate that all health-care payers reimburse for specific types of services. Telemedicine parity legislation requires that all healthcare insurers, private and public, reimburse healthcare providers who use telemedicine to provide healthcare services to patients. This legislation needs to be passed in Pennsylvania to combat the lack of access in rural communities.
Mental Health Parity is an Established Model for Telemedicine Parity

Access to insurance coverage, availability and access to mental health providers, and stigma impede mental health treatment (6). Mental health parity laws reduce these barriers. Health insurance companies are mandated to reimburse for mental health services just as they do for physical health. This promotes an increase in access to mental health services as coverage expands to people with existing physical health insurance (7).

Similarly, telemedicine parity specifically benefits people struggling with opioid addiction in rural communities. First, parity legislation increases the availability of mental health services by incentivizing providers to adopt telemedicine (8). Second, people in rural communities will have access to healthcare providers who offer specialized, high-quality care that is typically concentrated in urban areas.

Telemedicine parity is a common strategy employed across the United States and increases telemedicine use (8,9). Rural communities also see increases in telemedicine use for people with mental illnesses (9). However, Pennsylvania is one of fifteen states to not implement this potentially life-saving strategy. Pennsylvania legislators need to pass telemedicine parity legislation to increase access to opioid treatment in rural communities.


Chronic Pain Management, Delivered through Telemedicine, Can Reduce Opioid Deaths

Opioid dependence often occurs in individuals who need to manage a chronic pain condition. One strategy to holistically address chronic pain management is through interdisciplinary chronic pain management (10).

Interdisciplinary teams are groups of physicians, psychiatrists, physical therapists, and other health providers that offer specialized chronic pain treatment. These teams use a biopsychosocial approach to provide holistic treatment which identifies a variety of strategies for treating chronic pain, outside of the use of opioids (10).

However, specialized chronic pain interdisciplinary teams are typically located in urban areas making it difficult for rural populations to access the best care possible. This is where telemedicine makes the difference. Teams of chronic pain specialists are able to provide guidance to patients and healthcare providers in rural community by using telemedicine. This approach can ensure that patients have access to an in-person clinician while also receiving targeted treatment solutions. Rural healthcare providers are able to use telemedicine to partner alongside interdisciplinary chronic pain management teams to take advantage of specialized knowledge while also understanding the local context. Such an approach can treat the underlying pain condition effectively, while preventing opioid abuse and opioid-related deaths.
Moving Forward

The opioid epidemic kills thousands of people every year. Rural communities experience a greater proportion of opioid-related deaths than urban areas. Current solutions are not effective at managing this problem.

Telemedicine parity is the innovative solution rural communities need. Telemedicine parity ensures that all people have access to high quality care regardless of where they live. Telemedicine parity is the best strategy for ensuring residents in rural communities receive high quality care. Pennsylvania legislators must pass Senate Bill 857 and the corresponding House Bill 872 to ensure telemedicine parity.

References:


