



## Adoption and Expansion of Telehealth Solutions

### Case Study: Texas Oncology Implements Virtual Visits for a Statewide Practice

Multidisciplinary care team members from Texas Oncology participated in a group interview about their experience with telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below is their story.

#### Telehealth Expansion during COVID-19

The pre-COVID-19 telehealth services offered by Texas Oncology consisted of a patient portal and a HIPAA-compliant platform to support video visits. Approximately 20-25 providers used video visits to consult with patients about proton therapy and neuro-oncology care. Providers conducted these complementary video consultations in their medical offices. Now, video visits are a standard, billable service. From March 2020 to March 2021, 633 providers conducted approximately 222,000 telehealth patient visits (i.e., 15%-20% of total practice volume).

*“Telehealth has been a great tool for our providers and patients. It erases a lot of barriers. Going forward, we hope to use telehealth as a force multiplier to deliver care for the best experience, the best outcomes, and at the lowest cost. Really using it in a systems-level approach to our care.”*

#### Implementation Challenges and Solutions

##### Challenge

Rollout efforts were met with some provider reluctance due to preference for in-person visits and low comfort levels with technology.

##### Solution

Organizational leaders directed the development of educational documents and presentations to support providers during the implementation of telehealth visits. Physician champions collected provider feedback with a survey and were instrumental in gaining buy-in from their peers. IT support was critical to ensure hardware and software were available to make the new telehealth platform operational. Administrators monitored practice-wide telehealth utilization. When administrators identified providers with no telehealth visits, they would reach out to them directly to discuss barriers to use and how the practice could support their adoption of telehealth.

##### Challenge

Texas ranks last among all states in terms of broadband access in rural areas, which created connectivity issues for a large sub-set of patients.

##### Solution

A multidisciplinary team oversaw telehealth implementation. After identifying, evaluating, and acquiring commercial telehealth products developed for low broadband use, the team made them available to patients and providers. After the low broadband video telehealth platform was rolled out, an internal survey of the practice’s physicians revealed that fewer than five percent of all telehealth visits were telephone-only. These results indicated that the telephone was not the preferred way for patients to interact with their providers, reinforcing the need for low broadband tools.

## Outcomes

Staff members at Texas Oncology have developed several metrics to assess the success of their telehealth program.

Key metrics include:

- Volume of telehealth visits by provider and site
- Percentage of telephone-only visits
- Amount of time providers spend in video or telephone visits
- Patient satisfaction regarding video or telephone visits

Texas Oncology observed several positive outcomes from its telehealth initiative:

- ✓ Increased efficiency by providing a means for physicians to expedite patient work-up
- ✓ Reduced barriers to care
- ✓ Increased patient support by allowing caregivers and family members to participate in video visits
- ✓ Continued service during the 2021 ice storm

## Lessons Learned, Next Steps, and Recommendations

Based on their experiences, providers and support staff at Texas Oncology learned several key lessons, formed next steps for their practice, and developed recommendations for other cancer programs seeking to implement or expand telehealth services.

The staff at Texas Oncology recommends approaching virtual care as you would creating a new clinic. It is important to involve a multidisciplinary team that includes patients, physician champions, revenue cycle management staff, IT personnel, legal and compliance staff, nursing and administrative champions, and marketing professionals to guide the implementation process. Diverse perspectives are critical to addressing all aspects of telehealth implementation and developing robust workflows.

Texas Oncology staff also advise making a significant effort to understand patients' needs, particularly those related to their technology literacy and ability to access virtual services. Staff should develop patient-targeted support tools and navigation services to ensure cost efficiency and a well-coordinated experience.

Implementing telehealth services provides an opportunity to review and improve all services to better meet the needs of patients. For staff at Texas Oncology, that means thinking differently about how to provide important services to reach all patients through the practice's newly established virtual care program. **"Texas Oncology has 220 sites of service, and each practice looks very different. In our view, telehealth helps you provide a more consistent level of quality-enhancing services across a statewide practice, where it is impossible to staff for some functions at each site."**

Moving forward, staff at Texas Oncology plan to explore ways to better offer survivorship care planning, advanced care planning, genetic counseling, nutrition counseling, social work, prior authorization assistance, and pharmacy management through telehealth. **"Cancer care will be better throughout the country if providers and practices use telehealth as a tool to grow support services."**

### *Marketing Telehealth Services: An Important Part of the Patient Experience*

At Texas Oncology, the marketing department played a key role in expanding and supporting telehealth services. Early on, the multidisciplinary Texas Oncology team realized that for telehealth visits to be successful, the practice needed to communicate the availability, benefits, and experience of a telehealth visit to patients.

The marketing department promoted telehealth visits on the Texas Oncology website and developed collateral materials for physicians to help patients navigate visits. Materials focused on walking a patient through a visit with the goal of providing a seamless experience.

Moving forward, the marketing team will play a key role in expanding Texas Oncology's virtual care program.

### *Meeting Patients Where They Are*

During the pandemic, Texas Oncology staff found that telehealth enabled providers to better serve working patients, particularly those of lower economic status. While patients previously had to take time off from work for appointments, telehealth made that unnecessary, decreasing the burden on patients and maintaining care continuity.

