Pandemic Era Use of Telehealth Procedures in Pennsylvania

Executive Summary

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 had a dramatic impact on the practice of behavioral health and other social services, which led many agencies to provide some or all their services via telehealth procedures. It has been reported that 80% of all behavioral health visits in the pandemic era have been virtual, with Medicare claims for telehealth services increasing from 13,000 per week to 1.4 million per week.

To gain Pennsylvania specific information regarding the use of telehealth procedures, RCPA, in partnership with Woods Services, surveyed members that utilized telehealth as part of their behavioral health and consumer engagement strategies during the pandemic. After a year of implementing telehealth as a primary mode of service delivery, the responses support the initial success of this modality – although there are ongoing challenges.

Continued Telehealth Success

- 75% of respondents reported reductions in cancelled appointments compared to pre-pandemic treatment participation.
- Telehealth procedures enhanced consumer access by eliminating such barriers as transportation, childcare, work scheduling conflicts, and travel time.
- Primary uses of telehealth procedures included individual therapy, group therapy, and monitoring of psychiatric medications.
- Practitioner satisfaction was high at 95% and consumer satisfaction reached 85%.

Funding & Cost Overview

- Primary funders of telehealth procedures were Medicaid (85%), private insurance (64%), and Medicare (39%).
- 80% reported that payments were complete and generally timely, with only isolated problems.
- Overall, provider costs did not appear to be largely affected by using telehealth procedures.
- For behavioral health members (consumers), primary funders were private insurance (78%) and Medicare (50%).
- Respondents noted that there were increased costs associated with the purchase of software access such as Zoom, which was by far the most popular delivery platform.

Challenges and Areas of Need

- Over a year into the pandemic, many private insurance companies are now limiting coverage for telehealth.
- The most identified barrier was consumer access to the necessary hardware and software.

- Providers reported high levels of satisfaction with telehealth procedures, although it was noted that their subjective impressions suggested a slightly reduced efficacy when compared with the pre-pandemic era.
- Some consumers were initially uncomfortable with the telehealth process until they became more acclimated.

Next Steps & Recommendations
- PA telehealth standards that incorporate current delivery flexibilities into the post pandemic services environment.
- With limited broadband access, the use of telephonic/audio only to remain an acceptable telehealth service delivery platform.
- Ensure parity for access and payment for telehealth among all funding and payment entities.
- Development of best practices standards, training, and education for practitioners and consumers.