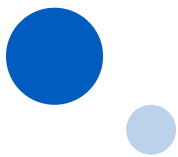




**Telehealth adoption trends:
Findings from the 6th annual
Becker's-Teladoc Health telehealth
benchmark survey for hospitals and
health systems**



Introduction

Telehealth adoption skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic, propelled by the urgency of finding solutions to the restrictions imposed on in-person healthcare encounters. As hospitals and health systems scrambled to meet demand for care under those limitations, the benefits and value of telehealth were magnified. Now, as the healthcare industry emerges from the crisis, organizations are taking the longer view on telehealth, looking beyond its adoption and acceleration as a result of the pandemic to more strategic considerations. However, there is also the risk of regressing back to old habits.

In collaboration with Becker's Healthcare, Teladoc Health recently conducted its 6th annual telehealth benchmark survey, which elicited responses from healthcare CEOs, CFOs, virtual care leaders, directors, CIOs and other decision-makers about where their organizations stand virtual care and where they are going.

Becker's Hospital Review recently spoke with Tony Burke, Senior Vice President for Health System Partnerships and Innovation at Teladoc Health, who shared his thoughts on what the survey findings reveal about virtual care and about health systems going forward, some of the barriers that are currently holding back telehealth expansion, the resources that healthcare organizations need to surmount those barriers and how staffing models need to evolve to continue to deliver the benefits of telehealth adoption amid persistent workforce shortages.

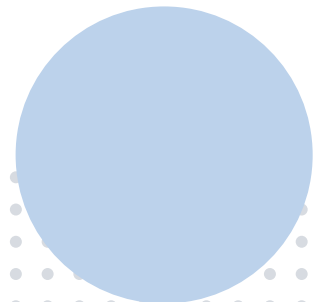
Insight 1: Organizations are reevaluating telehealth programs, driven by a desire for more comprehensive, efficient and user-friendly solutions

One of the most notable trends among organizations with telehealth programs already in place — more than 60 percent of which indicated they are expanding such programs — is that 12 percent are reevaluating their current approach. Mr. Burke said this is expected given that health systems have been implementing a slew of telehealth solutions to deal with specific use cases.

"We're at a critical crossroads to not fall back into old practices that are going to threaten growth and evolution."

- Tony Burke, Senior Vice President for Health System Partnerships and Innovation, Teladoc Health

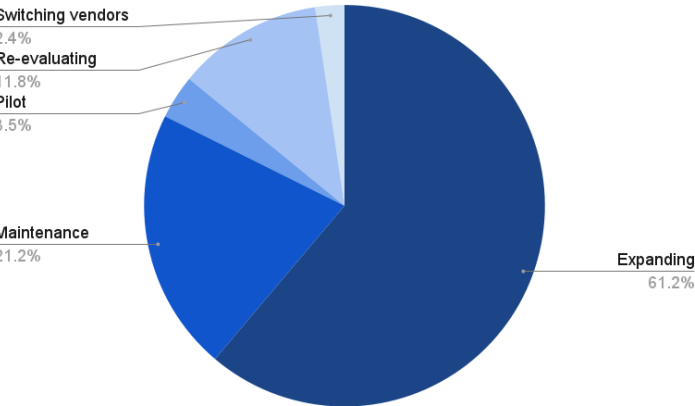
"From a patient or clinician engagement perspective, [many current telehealth products] are not well designed and weren't meant to be put together that way," Mr. Burke said. "Health systems are reevaluating — they're looking for simplicity, efficiency, lower cost, less disruption and better clinician engagement with the patient or consumer in a way that's seamless, easy and a great experience."





Findings from the Becker's-Teladoc Health survey are based on answers from 101 respondents, 85 of whom said their organization has a telehealth program in place, 10 whose organization does not have a telehealth program in place but is looking to implement one in the next 12 months, and six whose organization neither has nor is looking to implement such a program within a year.

Which best describes the current status of your telehealth program?



Insight 2: Barriers to telehealth expansion remain – and are a mix of staffing, cultural and financial concerns

Two of the top barriers to telehealth expansion are staffing capacity constraints and the deeply embedded preferences of many clinicians and patients alike for in-person clinical encounters, even after the broad adoption of telehealth proved that in-person visits often aren't necessary. "We see the value and the impact that telehealth can have on better experiences, better quality and lower cost — but many doctors still love to see their patients and patients like to see their doctors," Mr. Burke said.

Mr. Burke acknowledged he was surprised to learn from the survey results that as many as 40 percent of respondents whose organizations had telehealth initiatives in place said they were not expanding those programs. While this finding was unexpected, he said there was likely a good explanation for it: a lack of economic resources, combined with downward cost pressures on healthcare providers and a highly uncertain reimbursement horizon for telehealth services.

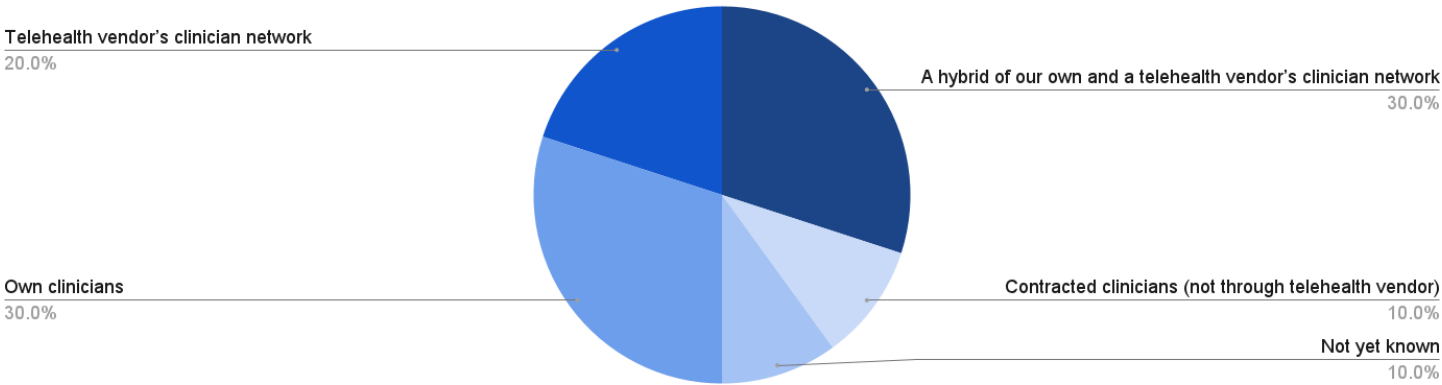


Although these barriers are understandable, not solving for them poses the risk of losing the considerable momentum that was gained during the pandemic. “We’re at a critical crossroads to not fall back into old practices that are going to threaten growth and evolution,” Mr. Burke cautioned, referencing not only healthcare organizations but also policymakers and government and commercial payers. “If we don’t muscle through that, if we don’t strategically think through that at the highest levels of governance to C-suite to clinicians, we run the risk of not fully realizing the potential of what digital can do for our field.”

Insight 3: Amid staffing shortages, both telehealth staffing models and care delivery models must evolve

The survey revealed that almost 70 percent of organizations with telehealth programs in place currently staff those programs with their own internal clinicians. By contrast, only 30 percent of organizations that plan to implement such programs in the next 12 months signal an intention to staff them exclusively with their own clinicians. A hybrid telehealth workforce composed of internal clinicians and members of a telehealth vendor’s clinician network appeals to another 30 percent of organizations that are yet to implement telehealth, while 10 percent envision staffing telehealth programs with independent contract clinicians.

What will be the staffing model for your telehealth program?





This divergence is indicative of the fact that some organizations recognize the current model of internal-only staffing is unrealistic and/or unsustainable, even as many of their peers still overwhelmingly rely on internal staffing. “We need new partnerships and new types of models for hospitals to engage in, in terms of organizations that can help them supply staffing on an as-needed basis,” Mr. Burke noted.

In addition, the survey found a 12% year-over-year increase in organizations that completed more than 10,000 virtual consults, more evidence that telehealth can be viewed as a fundamental, rather than reactionary, channel of care delivery. Inpatient virtual nursing is set to have the highest year-over-year increase in new rollouts in 2023. It is one of 11 different services that at least 20% of care providers plan to introduce in the coming year.

Mr. Burke also argued health systems need to consider completely redesigning care pathways rather than simply layering technology on top of existing structures. “It’s going to take a combination of process improvement, system improvement and new and emerging partnerships as well as reigniting a belief in healthcare being a career choice by continuing to focus on the front end of the pipeline to solve for the future,” he said.

Insight 4: Beyond technological, economic and staffing considerations, telehealth is ultimately a strategic imperative

Investing in a virtual care partner is not just about investing in technology or digitizing current practices. At its core, it is about extending your existing investment by enabling your enterprise to enhance systems of care and engagement.

“If we are truly going to do patient-centric care, the lines between a digital strategy and a live strategy have to become really blurred and consumer-directed,” Mr. Burke said. He explained that such convergence can go a long way toward making care processes more efficient, while also streamlining the work of clinicians and changing the behavior of patients to be more aligned with evolving care models.

In a nod to the generalized downward trend of telehealth utilization in healthcare, Mr. Burke suggested that, indeed, rather than this trend being an indicator of pulling back on telehealth, it is likely a sign of momentary hesitation and uncertainty on the part of policymakers as to whether the technology can be a long-term solution to the persistent workforce and financial challenges in healthcare.

Based on the long-term criticality of a telehealth strategy, Mr. Burke said that if organizations are scaling back on their telehealth usage, they should consider how that may impact patients, more and more of whom are adopting a consumer mindset and expecting the efficiency and convenience telehealth offers for non-urgent care. ●