

# Senate Hearing Witnesses: Telehealth Growth Depends on Broadband Access

Experts say that telehealth is in its adolescence. So it's not surprising it's experiencing growing pains. But one thing that will keep it from growing as it should is a lack of reliable broadband infrastructure in some areas of the country.

Seemingly absent a down-side, telemedicine is growing more popular each year. However, that doesn't mean it's being implemented as widely as the need and demand for it would indicate. In addition to generally lower reimbursement rates for providers, as well as interstate licensing issues that still need to be worked out, there's another major thorn in telehealth's side: access to fast, reliable broadband service.

## Telehealth witnesses get the floor in senate hearing

Earlier this month a Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee hearing provided witnesses the opportunity to inform the U.S. Senate of how crucial broadband services are to healthcare technology. Obviously telemedicine can only exist in theory if it can't be put into action.

Video consults between practitioner and patient cannot occur in the absence of high speed internet. And often, the most rural areas (which can be some of the areas with the spottiest internet networks) are the ones that could most stand to benefit from broad telehealth implementation.

Michael Adcock is the director of the Telehealth Center at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. As a witness in the hearing, he said, "As the technologies advance, there's going to be more and more done in a patient's home. We need to be able to have high speed internet in patients' homes that's reliable and available."

When it comes to ideas for expansion, Adcock says he is behind the SPEED Act of 2017 and the Rural Wireless Act of 2017, legislation that would streamline the broadband infrastructure permitting process by having the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) gather commercial mobile coverage statistics.

## Is a change in FCC definition "playing with words"?

One change proposed by the FCC to expand broadband access is more an exercise in semantics than a bonafide change. The agency has revised the definition of broadband, reducing the minimum speed to 10 mbps (from 25 mbps). This revision will of course result in a greater number of people with broadband on paper, but it will not bring the service to new users.

"They're playing with words as opposed to helping people get broadband," Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) said.

Angela Siefer is executive director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. She urged the government to come up with an "organized federal strategy" for expanding the infrastructure telehealth demands. She commented on witnessing the benefit of remote patient monitoring firsthand (the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs [VA] had furnished her father with the device used to monitor his breathing before he passed away).

"The VA is a leader in telehealth," Adcock noted.

The VA is a proponent of permitting telehealth to be practiced across state lines. But as Adcock pointed out, making telemedicine more accessible from a legislative standpoint is only half the battle. Without broadband coverage that can handle the service load, telemedicine laws would ring hollow.



Regarding services that require fast internet speeds (like video visits between patient and doctor), Adcock predicted: "we're going to run into a lot more connectivity issues in the home."

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