



MASSACHUSETTS



Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts: Solving Behavioral Health Needs by Addressing Access Challenges

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts is the largest commercial payer in Massachusetts, serving 2.8 million members and over 25,000 businesses, including 75% of the state's cities and towns. The health plan strives to put the member first, and is committed to the pursuit of quality, affordable healthcare. Blue Cross is also committed to supporting its provider network—which includes 6,500 primary care physicians, 19,000 specialists and 12,000 behavioral health providers—in improving access to high quality care.

In 2016, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts set out to develop a multi-faceted telehealth program to improve affordability and member access. The health plan [partnered with Amwell](#) on its telehealth program, Well Connection. When developing the program, Blue Cross found it essential to not only offer members medical services, but also behavioral health. "There were a lot of health plans rolling out telehealth programs just on the medical side in response to employer demand," says Greg LeGrow, Senior Director of Consumer and Provider Solutions at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. "We really thought it was important to make behavioral health a big component of our telehealth program."

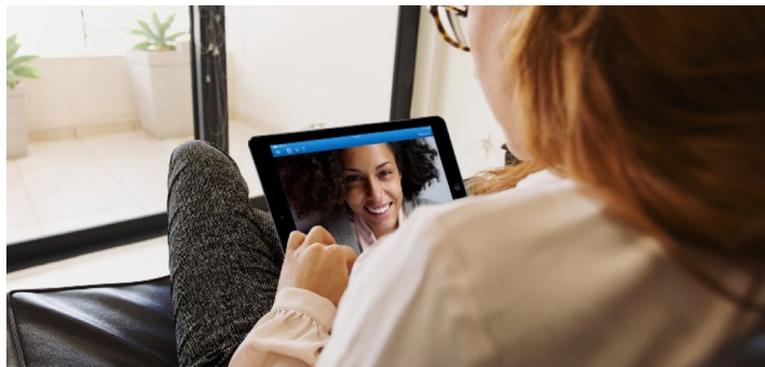
Behavioral health: high consumer demand, low provider adoption of telehealth

"Behavioral health services uniquely lend themselves to being delivered via telehealth, and have the promise to increase patient access and clinical capacity," says LeGrow.

Blue Cross launched Well Connection for behavioral health, but found that telehealth was being underutilized by its extensive network of behavioral health providers. In 2018, roughly 4% of the health plan's network providers submitted at least one claim for telehealth services. And while Massachusetts isn't particularly rural, there is still a notable access issue for outpatient behavioral health services.



“Our member services department is getting roughly 1,600 calls a month from members looking for behavioral health services. That’s a staggering number,” says LeGrow. Blue Cross recognized an opportunity to address this member access issue by encouraging more network behavioral health providers to use telehealth. They first needed to better understand why network providers were slow to adopt telehealth.



Addressing barriers to network provider telehealth adoption

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts began speaking with local behavioral health societies and network providers to identify the main barriers to telehealth adoption. They found there were three main barriers:

1. A limited number of reimbursable telehealth codes
2. Cost of the technology and ongoing support
3. Reimbursement levels

To address these barriers and promote behavioral health provider adoption of telehealth, Blue Cross began by increasing the number of reimbursement codes for telehealth. “Now, we essentially cover anything via telehealth that a therapist or psychiatrist would bill us for in-person,” says LeGrow.

The health plan also structured its behavioral health telehealth program so network providers could deliver virtual care on the platform. This allowed providers to utilize the Well Connection platform that Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts invested in. In addition, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts recognized that telehealth is a tool for physicians, and therefore should not be limited to only Blue Cross members. “We do give providers the option to use the Well Connection platform with any patient they have, regardless of payer,” says LeGrow.

Lastly, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts developed an incentive program to help address reimbursement levels for telehealth. The incentives were linked to certain utilization measurements, as well as measurements on providers feedback. “We want behavioral health providers to use telehealth for a certain percentage of our members to make sure that we’re not making investments and then not using the technology,” says LeGrow. “At the same time, when we refer a patient to a provider and they deem that patient or their condition not clinically appropriate for telehealth, we want that feedback to help us better understand.” Blue Cross will refer members who call the member services department in search of behavioral health services to providers who use telehealth. This not only helps providers grow their telehealth base, it helps patients get needed care sooner. By receiving provider feedback on these referrals, Blue Cross can refine this referral process and direct patients to the correct point of care sooner.

Building a behavioral health telehealth program for network providers

After addressing the main barriers to provider adoption, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts developed a program to encourage network provider adoption of telehealth. The program is available to select network providers who want to participate, and requires a two-year commitment. “We want to ensure we have enough time to get providers implemented and trained, as well as get telehealth integrated into their clinical workflows,” says LeGrow. “We also want to collect data and evaluate the success of the program.”

The Blue Cross team provides ongoing support to local behavioral health providers in the program, from implementation to training and practicing telehealth. “We set up a practice for them on Well Connection, and we help to promote it and introduce it to their patients,” says LeGrow.



While Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts is still in the beginning stages of rolling out its behavioral health program for providers, it has developed an evaluation plan to help measure the program’s success. The plan will measure:

- **Improved Access:** For the 1,600 members a month who call in looking for behavioral health services, is Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts able to quickly connect a high percentage of those members with a provider via telehealth?
- **Provider Capacity:** Behavioral health visit time slots right after school or work are the most popular, but can telehealth open additional time slots for members and increase capacity for providers? Blue Cross plans to measure if providers can see more patients by opening early morning or evening time slots via telehealth.
- **Quality of Care:** “I think just connecting someone with a therapist who otherwise wouldn’t have access is quality care,” says LeGrow. “But there are also other ways to measure it.” For example, medication management patients are often driving an hour for a 15-minute medication check-in, which is burdensome and often results in high no-show rates. However, having a 15-minute telehealth visit for medication management and having those visits happen more frequently can provide members with a higher quality of care. Blue Cross Blue Shield plans to measure the impact telehealth has on the medication possession ratio.
- **Provider & Member Experience:** The member-provider experience is incredibly important, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts wants to ensure that those relationships are maintained or improved through telehealth. To do that, they will measure the provider and member telehealth experience through satisfaction rates and feedback.

While the program is still in its infancy, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts hopes to use its learnings from the launch to shape its strategy and scale the program. Behavioral telehealth has been steadily increasing and is now over half of all telehealth claims. The health plan is also considering using Amwell’s automated provider onboarding tool to bring behavioral health providers on at a large scale. The tool verifies the provider’s identity and medical licenses, checks that the provider is in good standing, and creates a telehealth practice. Providers are given access to a learning management system with courses assigned to both providers and staff, and granted access to a provider community.

“We are starting small, but we have 12,000 behavioral health providers in network,” says LeGrow. “As we scale the potential becomes enormous. That is where we are heading.”



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