



Health
AUGUSTA UNIVERSITY

How Augusta University Health Quickly Integrated Telehealth into its COVID-19 Response Plan

Problem: Augusta University Health (AU Health), an academic medical center offering comprehensive primary, specialty, and subspecialty care in Augusta, Georgia and the surrounding region, was in the early stages of rolling out their direct-to-consumer urgent care and teleED program in March 2020 when COVID-19 began. In response to the pandemic, AU Health quickly launched then converted its direct-to-consumer platform into a COVID-19 screening program to minimize risk for its employees while maintaining the ability to test and treat patients safely, quickly, and at scale.

Solution: AU Health worked closely with its telehealth partner Amwell to convert, implement, and deploy the virtual COVID-19 screening program. In the program's first two days, AU Health staff trained over 100 emergency department and primary care faculty on how to triage and care for patients on the platform. The health system also converted in-person ambulatory care into virtual visits as elective surgeries and visits were cancelled.

Result: AU Health's innovative telehealth strategy became a cornerstone of its response to COVID-19. AU Health rolled out telehealth at 35 ambulatory clinic sites and trained 1,150 providers (both for COVID-19 screenings and for ambulatory care) on its virtual platform. By the end of April, the health system had conducted more than 12,300 virtual care screenings. In addition, AU Health partnered with the Georgia Department of Public Health to schedule COVID-19 tests resulting from virtual screenings.

12.3K

Virtual COVID-19
screening visits by
the end of April

35

Ambulatory clinics
using telehealth

1150

Providers trained
on telehealth

Background

Prior to March 2020 and the arrival of COVID-19, AU Health's telehealth efforts were modest. The institution had a well-established telestroke program, which was developed to bring stroke care to underserved rural areas across 35 sites in Georgia and South Carolina.

AU Health's outpatient services were primarily with Georgia's Department of Public Health sites; it did not have its own provider-to-provider sites. However, thanks to the USDA Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant, AU Health was able to partner with Amwell to stand up a tele emergency department (teleED) program in early 2020 to support five rural hospitals in Georgia. The organization also worked with Amwell on AU Health Express Care, its direct-to-consumer urgent care program, which it planned to roll out on April 1, 2020 to its own employees.

"That was really our telehealth experience and maturity — we were very much in our infancy stages," says Lauren Williams, Director of Population Health at AU Health.

When COVID-19 hit, AU Health needed to act quickly to expand its reach and provide safe and accurate testing and treatment. The key to doing so was an innovative approach to virtual care.

AU Health At a Glance

Augusta University Health (AU Health) comprises the 478-bed Augusta University Medical Center, the 154-bed Children's Hospital of Georgia (which includes the region's only Level IV NICU), a Critical Care Center (which houses a 13-county regional Level I Trauma Center), and more than 80 outpatient practice sites, serving over 24 counties in Georgia and South Carolina. AU Health has over 650 members within its provider group and over 3,600 total staff, conducting more than 19,000 inpatient visits and 368,000 outpatient visits annually.

An Agile Approach: AU Health's COVID-19 Response Timeline

As COVID-19 began to impact the region, AU Health quickly pivoted and found innovative ways to integrate virtual care into its response. Here is a look at the health system's response timeline:

March 10: AU Health kicks off its COVID-19 response plan by converting the AU Health Express Care urgent care program into a COVID-19 virtual screening clinic.

March 12: The health system enrolls more than 100 providers in the program.

March 13: AU Health launches AU Health Express Care. Due to the urgency created by the pandemic, AU Health launched with the website only first, which allowed staff to focus on internal screenings. Some of the first cases of COVID-19 were the hospital's own employees. By getting the virtual screening and testing in place quickly, AU Health limits early exposure across the workforce.

March 14: AU Health Express Care launches on Apple and Android stores as an app. AU Health then starts to spread consumer awareness of its virtual care program via electronic billboards, TV interviews, radio ads, and social media campaigns. Alongside the app, AU Health sets up a provider line patients can access if they do not have the technology needed for a virtual screening.

March 18: AU Health cancels elective surgeries and starts rescheduling clinic visits. This positions AU Health to launch virtual ambulatory care. On the same day, the organization opens a drive-thru testing clinic — the first in the region.

March 20: AU Health completes over 1,500 COVID-19 virtual screenings.

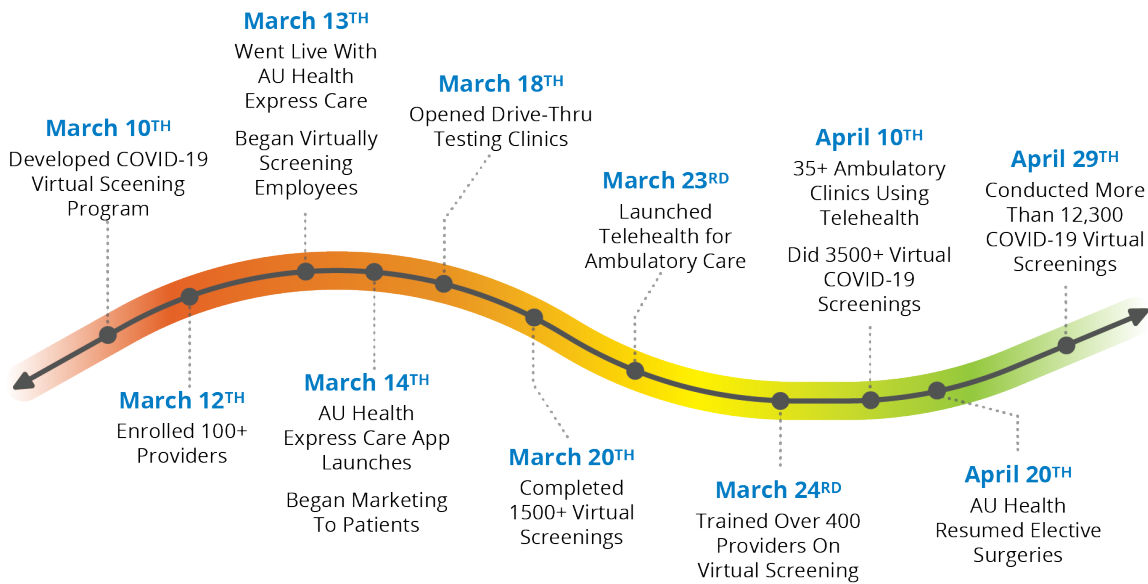
March 23: AU Health opens an ER COVID-19 tent to separate COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients coming into the ER. Patients who screen positive for COVID-19 symptoms or risk factors are evaluated in the tent and discharged via telemedicine units. On the same day, AU Health sees its first ambulatory clinic virtual patient.

March 24: AU Health trains its 400th provider on AU Health Express Care to screen patients for COVID-19.

April 10: AU Health successfully launches telehealth in over 35 ambulatory clinic sites, with over 350 providers seeing patients virtually. Over 3,500 virtual screenings had been completed for ambulatory care.

April 20: AU Health resumes elective surgeries.

April 29: The health system completes over 12,300 COVID-19 virtual screenings in total by April 29th, and has trained more than 1,150 providers on AU Health Express Care for both COVID-19 screenings and ambulatory care.



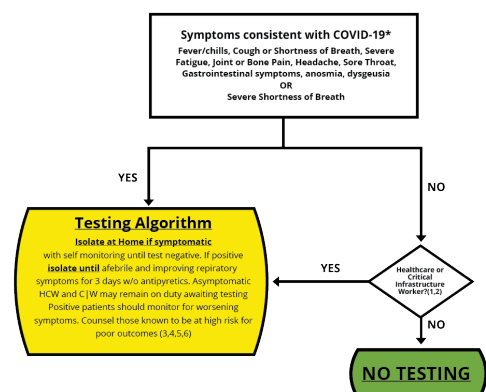
Telehealth's Role in the COVID-19 Ecosystem

AU Health's COVID-19 virtual screening program was part of a larger effort, growing into what Dr. Matthew Lyon, MD, Vice Chair of Emergency Medicine at AU Health, calls a COVID-19 "ecosystem." This ecosystem was born from collaboration and coordination across the organization — and beyond.

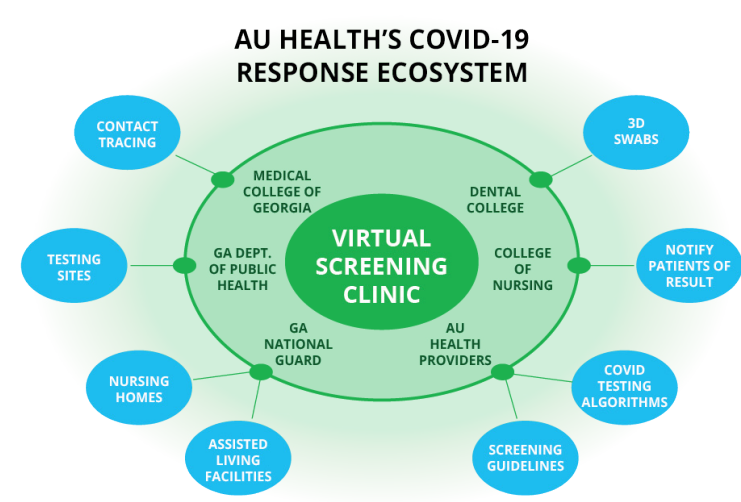
At the heart of this ecosystem was the COVID-19 virtual screening clinic. AU Health systematically collected data from the program and handed it off to the health system's Chief Medical Officer and the Chief of Infectious Disease and Infection Control who used the data to develop a testing algorithm and a standardized screening process. The algorithm could flex based on the number of tests and resources available across the state. It also provided the most up-to-date telemedicine screening guidelines and helped prioritize who received testing.

The algorithm and resource materials were embedded within AU Health's BOX Account, which linked directly into the AU Health Express Care platform via Amwell's Insight tool. This allowed AU Health to easily update the algorithm based on test availability and push the most recent version directly into the platform where physicians were seeing patients.

Testing Algorithm



AU Health also developed a standardized online provider training program. By March 24th, over 400 providers were trained and leveraging AU Health Express Care. AU Health also coordinated with the College of Nursing to handle the testing and results notification process after patients were screened.



As the COVID-19 ecosystem expanded, AU Health partnered with the GA Department of Public Health (DPH) to set up testing sites across the state, encouraging patients to go through the app instead of visiting a care facility in person. Over 32 DPH sites utilized the app, with an additional 20 testing sites going live in hotspot areas by the end of April.

AU Health also collaborated with the National Guard to visit nursing homes and assisted living facilities, allowing AU Health to hit harder-to-access areas. Meanwhile, the Dental College of Georgia developed a way of 3D printing swabs for testing, and the Medical College of Georgia students, partnering with Google, used the AU Health Express Care app to conduct contact tracing.

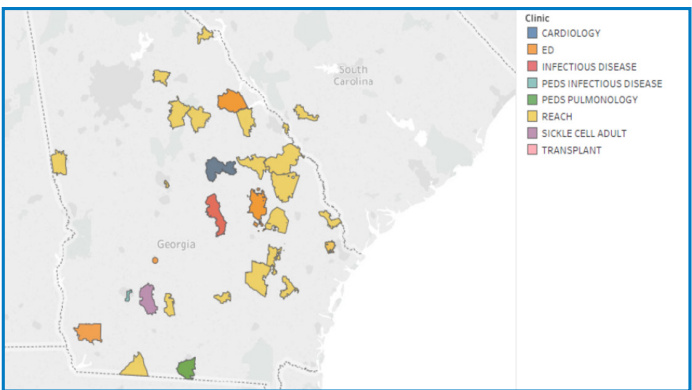
The combined efforts of the COVID-19 ecosystem enabled AU Health to vastly increase Georgia's testing. AU Health Express Care also enabled the health system to cross state lines and provide testing for South Carolina residents. As its geographical reach expanded, AU Health was able to better serve patients through telemedicine services.

Building on AU Health's Telehealth Foundation to Prepare for the Future

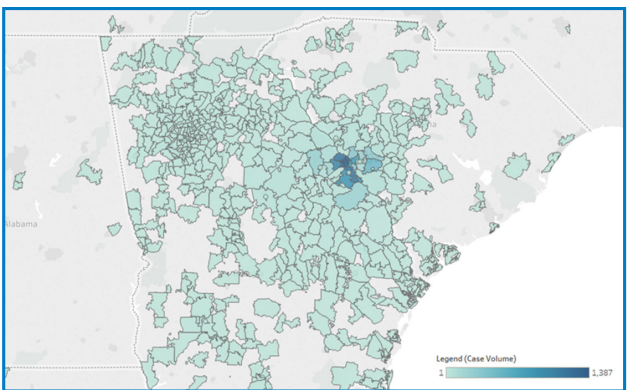
AU Health developed an effective and innovative telehealth strategy as part of its COVID-19 response. In coordination with its telehealth response, the lab at AU Health increased its COVID-19 testing capabilities to reach 10,000 per day. In collaboration with state partners, AU Health assisted in reaching the state's largest number of citizens tested in one day – 13,000.

AU Health Telehealth Reach

Prior to March 13th, 2020



March 13th-April 29th, 2020



Not only did the health system greatly increase testing, it expanded its virtual footprint across the states of Georgia and South Carolina. Prior to COVID-19, AU Health's telehealth reach was sporadic, mainly spread out in the Southeast and Southwest regions of Georgia. In March and April of 2020, the health system's reach expanded to nearly every area of the state, as well as the Southwest regions of South Carolina.

Moving forward, AU Health plans to continue providing virtual care visits for high-risk patients, requested visits, and patients located in geographical regions outside of Augusta. Overall, the community response has been incredibly positive, and AU Health will be looking for ways to better serve patients via telemedicine. This will include deploying additional teleED sites, offering a wider range of healthcare services virtually, and continuing to roll out the AU Health Express Care app for urgent and prompt care services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people everywhere receive care, and telemedicine may become the new normal of healthcare. AU Health plans to embrace that change — not just to prepare for the next pandemic but to meet the experience patients will demand in the future. AU Health's aspiration is to offer a full healthcare experience virtually. It's a lofty goal, but AU Health now feels more capable of achieving this objective and confident that their patients, providers, and partners will be receptive to it.