How Norman Regional Health System Activated Virtual Care Amid COVID-19

Norman Regional Health System, a rural health system in Oklahoma, was fortunate to avoid the steep incline in COVID-19 cases experienced by so many other health systems in hotspots across the country. Still, the health system needed to quickly activate telehealth to provide ongoing care to existing patients during the pandemic. In just 72 hours, Norman Regional onboarded nearly 200 providers and 20 clinics and practices to its virtual health platform, enabling a dramatic increase in scheduled virtual visits. Virtual health helped Norman Regional Health System adapt to new and uncertain conditions and ultimately continue operations during the pandemic.

A Strong Virtual Foundation

Norman Regional Health System is a multi-campus system that serves communities throughout South Central Oklahoma. It comprises an acute-care facility with 219 beds; a HealthPlex campus with 168 beds, offering cardiovascular services, spine and orthopedic surgery, and women's and children's services; and Norman Regional Moore, a facility that houses physician offices, a 24/7 emergency center, labs and imaging services, and rehab therapy. Norman Regional employs more than 3,000 people and has more than 350 providers on staff. These providers deliver outpatient diagnostic care, medical transport services, primary care, and more.

Before COVID-19, Norman Regional had partnered with Amwell on a telehealth initiative to increase

Norman Regional Health System Locations
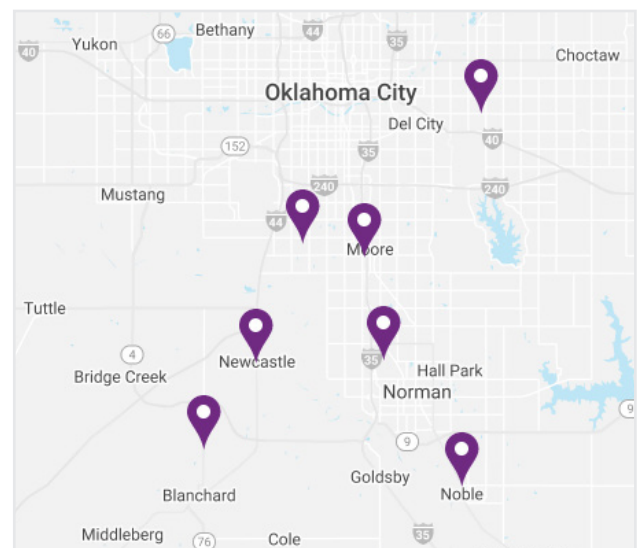
healthcare access in rural areas. "We decided to go with Amwell because eventually we wanted to do more than just urgent care, and Amwell had a history of doing that and doing it well," says telehealth coordinator Molly McCool-Hare. In February 2018, the health system launched its direct-to-consumer urgent care service, Norman Regional Virtual Care, and expanded to school-based telehealth later that year. In May 2019, the system launched virtual scheduled visits for specialty care, with plans to add additional specialists throughout 2020. However, the emergence of COVID-19 accelerated those plans, leading Norman Regional to massively expand and grow its specialty care virtual offerings in March 2020.

Activating Virtual Care During COVID-19

On March 17, Norman Regional's leadership directed the telehealth team to get all primary care providers up and running on virtual care as soon as possible. The team immediately started creating provider accounts, enrolling staff and getting them set up on the platform over the next 24 hours. Once that work was complete, the telehealth team quickly transitioned to onboarding specialty, ambulatory and rehabilitation providers.

Because Norman Regional's telehealth team consisted of only two full-time employees, they needed to think strategically about how to efficiently and effectively train these providers on telehealth. To tackle this challenge, the telehealth team developed a comprehensive set of guidelines they could roll out to key stakeholders at each of the health system's location. These guidelines covered instructions on everything from how to schedule visits on the platform and reset your username or password, to descriptions of what the experience would be like from the provider and patient perspective. The telehealth team adopted a "train the trainer" model in which they trained key stakeholders and clinic managers on virtual health. These stakeholders and managers then trained their clinic supervisors, who went on to train the rest of the clinic staff. This method allowed the Norman Regional telehealth team to get providers up and running on telehealth as soon as possible, while avoiding the support bottlenecks their small team might have caused.

"We wanted these stakeholders to gather the knowledge and be able to support their own providers, ultimately taking ownership," says McCool-Hare. "They've done a really great job. We went from fielding 75 support calls a day to maybe getting one or two."

The Result of Norman Regional's Virtual Efforts

Norman Regional Health System went from having one specialist using telehealth in early March 2020, to having 173 specialists using it by the end of the month. In just a few weeks, Norman Regional stood up 19 active in-person clinics on its virtual care platform, creating a total of 22 virtual practices.

Provider Use of Scheduled Virtual Visits

|	PRE-COVID-19 (ACTIVE)	POST-COVID-19 (ACTIVE)
Primary Care Providers	0	40
Specialty Care Providers	1	88
Ambulatory Care Providers	0	13
Rehab Therapy Providers	0	32
Total Providers	1	173

In April 2020, Norman Regional saw a four-fold month-over-month increase in the total number of virtual visits, including a three-fold increase in scheduled visits. On-demand virtual visits also saw an increase during the pandemic, with the average daily visits more than doubling.

From the patient's perspective, the expanded virtual care has been a welcome addition. Patients of all age groups shared positive feedback regarding the flexibility of the virtual program, saying it has allowed them to access the healthcare they needed while staying in self-isolation and minimizing their fear and risk of exposure to the virus.

From the provider perspective, the "train the trainer" method proved very effective and resulted in a network of users who felt comfortable troubleshooting and solving telehealth-related issues on their own.

For Norman Regional, rapidly deploying scheduled telehealth visits helped the rural health system keep its virtual doors open even while its physical doors were shut, allowing physicians to continue providing care to patients amid the pandemic.

Norman Regional Health System Scheduled Virtual Visit Volume
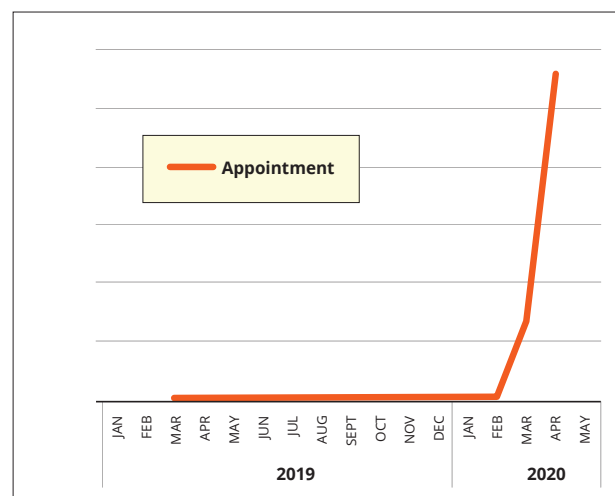
A Look at the Future of Virtual Care at Norman Regional

Given the success of these telehealth efforts, Norman Regional is looking beyond COVID-19 and considering the future of virtual care at the organization. The health system is in the process of surveying providers to better understand their patient volumes, needs, and level of engagement with telehealth. While key questions still remain around how telehealth reimbursement and regulations may evolve after an unprecedented expansion, Norman Regional envisions that telehealth will continue to play an important role for its providers even after the pandemic.

Norman Regional hopes to keep its current method of training key stakeholders in place to continue to promote telehealth use at its clinics. By sustaining this approach, the health system aims to expand its virtual care coverage to meet patients where they are — no matter how rural. The COVID-19 pandemic may have accelerated the organization's telehealth plans, but Norman Regional saw firsthand the value of virtual care and its potential now and in the future.