WellstarON

Anytime. Anywhere.

An Enterprise-Wide Response to COVID-19: How Wellstar Health System Incorporated Telehealth into Inpatient and Ambulatory Care

Problem: Wellstar, a large nonprofit health system in Georgia offering primary, secondary and subspecialty care, was using telehealth primarily in the inpatient setting as COVID-19 began to spread in March 2020. In response to the pandemic, Wellstar deployed telehealth across its enterprise and the full spectrum of care—from inpatient to ambulatory care—accelerating the timeline and escalating the scale of its telehealth strategy.

Solution: Wellstar leveraged its existing telehealth technology used for inpatient care and expanded it across the enterprise, broadening inpatient virtual care programs and creating new virtual ambulatory care programs. In just four weeks, 60% of Wellstar's providers were using telehealth — a rollout schedule nearly a full year faster than originally planned. The expansion included deploying tablets in each of the health system's intensive care units (ICUs) to allow physicians to have virtual face-to-face conversations with patients and their families, and accelerating the use of an on-demand telehealth program, WellstarON, which launched in November 2019. Along with the rapid technology deployment, Wellstar developed a multimedia educational program for all providers and a streamlined billing system to encourage adoption.

Result: Telehealth was a cornerstone of Wellstar's COVID-19 response. From March 23 to May 12, Wellstar conducted more than 42,000 video visits for ambulatory care and saw a 350% increase in WellstarON enrollments. The health system also launched Quarantine Care, a virtual platform that supported patients who had been directed to self-quarantine due to virus exposure. In the inpatient setting, Wellstar used telehealth to provide patients in the ICU and medical surgical units with the care they needed, while also reducing the use of personal protective equipment for providers.

42 K
Ambulatory video visits in less than two months

350%
Increase in WellstarON enrollments

60%
Of providers embedded virtual care into everyday care

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Background

Prior to March 2020, Wellstar had a robust inpatient telehealth program in place, which included telestroke, teleneurology, and telepsychiatry programs designed to extend specialty care into the underserved areas of Georgia. In the ambulatory setting, by contrast, the use of video visits was "minimal due to the reimbursement climate," says Sally Eckford, Assistant Vice President of Virtual Health at Wellstar. "Our providers had been conducting ambulatory remote e-visits and telephone visits for quite a while, but we just hadn't been able to bill for those services."

Throughout early March, Wellstar's leadership watched as COVID-19 spread across areas such as New York City, and they began preparing for the inevitable. "Our biggest anticipation was that we might have to close some clinics and still be in a position to provide care," Eckford says.

An Acceleration of Ambulatory Telehealth Deployment

In preparation for COVID-19's arrival, Wellstar developed a COVID-19 response plan that put a large emphasis on virtual care. The health system prepared for a wide-scale rollout of its telehealth platform, WellstarON. Wellstar originally had developed a gradual, one-year rollout plan for WellstarON but COVID-19 expanded and accelerated that initiative.

Within four weeks of rolling out WellstarON in the ambulatory setting, more than 60% of medical group providers had embedded virtual health into their everyday operations. Within six weeks, the health system tracked 50,000 virtual visits, of which 42,000 were video. As a result, patient enrollments in WellstarON increased 350% in that timeframe.

In addition, Wellstar deployed a virtual Quarantine Care practice on WellstarON, which was made available to any patient who had been directed to self-quarantine by a Wellstar physician. This enabled patients to reach out to Wellstar's urgent care providers for any medical needs.
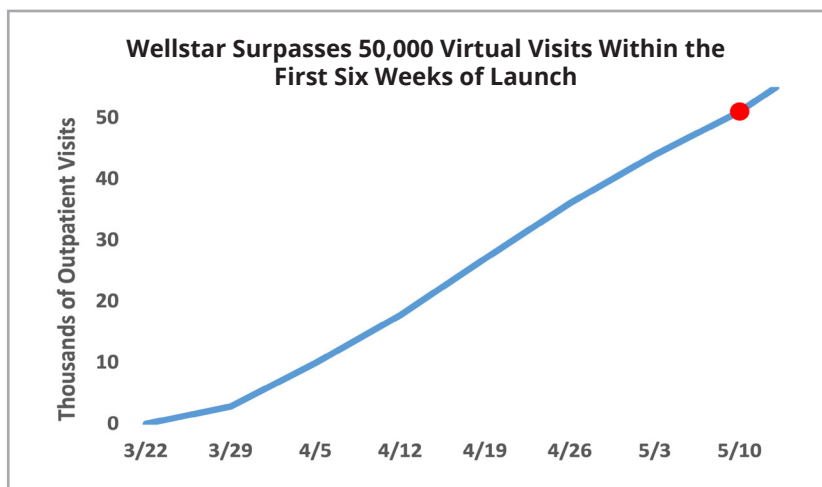
Wellstar At a Glance :

Wellstar Health System is one of the largest and most integrated health systems in Georgia. The Marietta-based health system is made up of 11 hospitals, nine cancer centers, 15 urgent care locations, and more than 300 outpatient practice sites. Wellstar's staff includes more than 24,000 employees, including 850 primary care physicians, more than 200 behavioral health specialists, and more than 200 hospitalists.

Telehealth Timeline - From 0 to 60 in Four Weeks:

- **Early March:** Wellstar leadership begins developing COVID-19 response plan.

- **March 14:** Governor Brian Kemp declares state of emergency in Georgia.

- **March 17:** Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) relax requirements for telehealth billing.

- **March 18:** Wellstar accelerates its original WellstarON rollout plan from one year to four weeks and expands it beyond post-surgery care to allow its 800+ medical group providers to leverage the technology.

- **March 19:** Wellstar provides communication and instructions to all its providers on how to document and bill virtual care visits.

- **March 20:** Rollout of WellstarON began for the Wellstar medical group providers.

- **April 19:** In four weeks, 60% of Wellstar's providers are using virtual care, and patient enrollments for WellstarON increase by 350%. The health system launches Quarantine Care to virtually care for patients who have been exposed to the virus.

- **May 9:** Wellstar surpasses a total of 50,000 virtual visits since March 22nd.

- **May 12:** Wellstar enrolls its 10,000th patient on its on-demand video urgent care platform.

Wellstar Surpasses 50,000 Virtual Visits Within the First Six Weeks of Launch

Thousands of Outpatient Visits

| | 3/22 | 3/29 | 4/5 | 4/12 | 4/19 | 4/26 | 5/3 | 5/10 |

Expanding the Inpatient Response

Wellstar already had a robust inpatient telehealth presence spanning telestroke, telepsychiatry and teleneurology. In response to the pandemic the health system expanded its inpatient program to ICUs and medical surgery units (med-surg units) by placing tablets and telehealth technology in each unit in their hospitals. This allowed the health system to limit its use of personal protective equipment (PPE) while continuing to provide high-quality care. The use of telehealth in ICUs and med-surg units also enabled Wellstar physicians to include family members in conversations about their loved ones' care plan. This feature was especially important, as family members had been required to remain outside the hospital and had not seen their loved ones since they first came to the emergency room.

"We also created contingency plans to make sure patients had the kind of care they needed even if providers were to become quarantined," says Tina Shah, MD, MPH, Medical Director, Virtual Health, Wellstar. "When you have multiple COVID cases presenting in your facilities, there is greater risk for team exposure. Because we had already deployed tablets and telehealth technology, doctors that were quarantined could still conduct consults from home."

Six Steps to Rapid Provider Adoption of Telehealth

For its inpatient and ambulatory telehealth programs to be successful, Wellstar understood the importance of provider engagement. The health system developed a six-step strategy to foster provider adoption of virtual care:

- **Create a CPT Grid.** Wellstar's virtual health, billing, and compliance teams collaborated to create a list of the Current Procedural Terminology (CPT) codes and documentation requirements that applied to each type of virtual visit. The grid, which was written in a provider-friendly format, was updated nearly every day due to rapid payer changes.

- **Create a Virtual Heath Guidebook.** This resource included video demos and tip sheets to help providers get started with the video visit process. Wellstar posted the guidebook as a link off the providers' Epic sign-in page. "The key to this was to make it as accessible as possible to doctors and advanced practice practitioners," Shah says.

- **Simplify Billing.** To limit provider burnout due to frequent changes in billing codes, Wellstar directed providers to the CPT grid. Compliance and revenue cycle teams worked on the back end to audit billing codes in accordance with new guidelines. This helped Wellstar drop its denial rate to 1% - more than 5 times better than

A Meaningful Connection :

"When working in the ICU, there was a patient who had been on a ventilator for a long time. We had to make some tough decisions, and the family had really been struggling. We used a tablet and our telehealth technology to set up a video call. I got to see the patient's wife and her grandbaby – and for the first time in my life as a doctor, it felt like we connected human to human. During our conversation, we addressed tracheostomy and we talked about critical end-of-life questions. We were in lockstep."

**Tina Shah, MD, MPH,
Medical Director
Virtual Health
Wellstar**

the industry standard for evaluation and management (E&M) visits.

- **Maintain EHR Workflows.** Within two weeks of going live, Wellstar deployed a new video visit type in Epic. This allowed physicians to use Epic for scheduling, documenting, and billing appointments regardless of whether a visit was in-person or virtual.

- **Peer-to-Peer Coaching.** In addition to maintaining the guidebook, Wellstar hosted educational webinars on Fridays, led by their own physicians, to discuss topics such as conducting a no-touch virtual exam. "Peer-to-peer coaching really helped drive adoption," Shah says.

- **Set Goals and Report Results.** Wellstar's medical group set an ambitious goal for physicians: After two weeks of using virtual care, strive for 10 video visits per day, or 50% of your pre-COVID visit volume to be virtual. The health system posted daily reports about how many video visits each provider completed, to leverage healthy competition and identify who was exceeding the goal and who may need additional support.

Looking Forward: Continuing to Expand Telehealth Across the Continuum of Care

Based on the success of its use of telehealth to respond to COVID-19, Wellstar is considering additional ways to leverage telehealth services.

"Our ability to dramatically enhance the patient-provider experience has been truly remarkable - to be able to give that kind of face-to-face interaction when people can't drive to the hospital," Shah says.

One candidate for telehealth expansion is shared services, where a neurologist based in one Wellstar hospital serves patients across the Wellstar network via virtual visits. This would enable patients to receive the specialty care they need regardless of where they are in the region.

Another example is leveraging video visits for work that is already being done. It's not uncommon for community-based physicians to consult with neurosurgeons about a patient to determine if that patient needs to be transferred for subspecialty care at a flagship hospital. Conducting these consults as virtual visits would enable the health system to increase care quality and bill for services provided.

With provider adoption at an all-time high and virtual programs deployed across the full spectrum of care at the health system, Wellstar has the platform in place to continue expanding and growing its virtual program to exceed patient expectations and quality goals.