



PennState Health



Penn State Health: Pivoting to Scheduled Virtual Visits During COVID-19 Builds Momentum for Future Growth

Summary: *In March 2020, as COVID-19 began to spread across the Northeast, Pennsylvania was placed under strict stay-at-home orders. Penn State Health, a multi-hospital health system serving patients and communities across 29 counties in central Pennsylvania, saw in-person visits to its hospitals and clinics drop by 80%. Penn State Health knew it needed to preserve continuity of care for its patients across the state. In a matter of weeks, the health system onboarded 4,600 providers and staff onto its telehealth platform, powered by Amwell. In-person and phone visits were quickly converted to video visits, causing the number of scheduled video visits to skyrocket from just 196 in March to 7,400 in April and 13,500 in May. Building on the success of scaling scheduled virtual visits during COVID-19 through Amwell's Scheduled Visits module, Penn State Health is poised to expand its telehealth presence throughout Pennsylvania.*

Established Hospital and On-Demand Telehealth Programs

Like many health systems, Penn State Health began using telehealth for hospital-based services such as stroke care and intensive care, along with provider-to-provider consultations integrated into their Cerner electronic medical record (EMR) system. In 2017, the health system partnered with Amwell to set up a direct-to-consumer (DTC) telehealth offering, Penn State Health OnDemand.

From its implementation in August 2018 through the end of March 2020, roughly 25% of Penn State Health's monthly virtual visits were for scheduled visits and the rest were for on-demand urgent care. While more than 100 Penn State Health providers were active on the on-demand urgent care app, it was largely staffed by Amwell Medical Group, a group of providers that exclusively provides care through the Amwell platform. New telehealth use cases were introduced on a rolling basis, typically once every 90 days, said Chris LaCoe, Vice President Operations at Penn State Health.

Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center



Penn State Health is the parent organization of the Milton S. Hershey Medical Center and the Penn State Health Medical Group, which has more than 2,000 physicians in 57 facilities across nine counties in South Central Pennsylvania. Based in Hershey, Penn State Health is affiliated with the Penn State College of Medicine. The health system has been affiliated with Highmark Health since 2017, and together the entities are building two new hospitals: Hampden Medical Center, scheduled to open in fall 2021, and Lancaster Medical Center, slated to open in fall 2022.

“One of our [showcase programs](#) was Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig’s disease,” LaCoe said. “As patients progress with ALS, it’s very difficult to travel — especially from rural parts of Pennsylvania to our academic medical center in the Harrisburg area. That’s why telehealth worked so well for these patients.”

Penn State Health’s TeleALS Program



Pivoting in Response to COVID-19

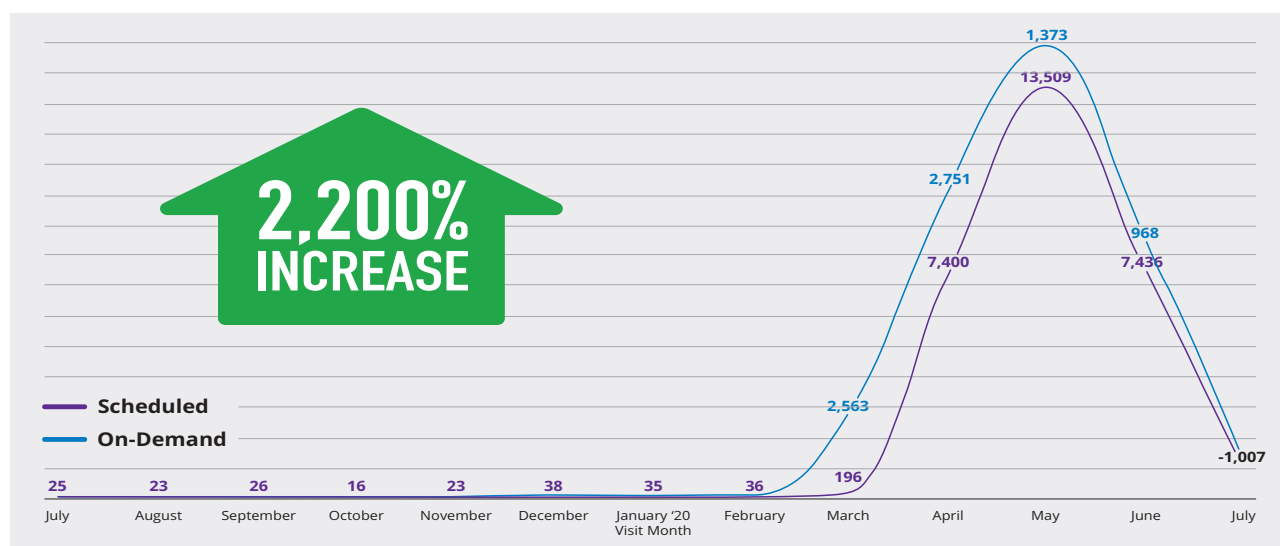
On April 1, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf implemented a stay-at-home order across the state. Penn State Health quickly saw its in-person hospital and clinical visit volumes drop by 80%. According to LaCoe, system leadership quickly recognized that being able to pivot to telehealth would be critical to providing continuity of care for patients across the state during the pandemic.

“Dr. Chris DeFlicht, our vice president and chief medical information officer, is a real proponent for virtual care. He is a user, he believes in it, and he understands it,” LaCoe said. “He and I developed a partnership through the COVID-19 crisis, and he worked very effectively to get the physicians aligned, engaged in the dialogue, and feeling like they were part of the process.”

In a matter of weeks, Penn State Health onboarded roughly 4,600 providers across the health system onto its telehealth platform. Nearly every department took part, including Family Medicine, Dermatology, Internal Medicine, and Women’s Health. While some providers staffed the on-demand urgent care program, the real focus was on scheduled visits, with both in-person and telephonic visits being converted to virtual scheduled visits.

Across Penn State Health, the number of scheduled virtual visits jumped from 36 in February and 196 in March to 7,400 in April and 13,500 in May. During that time, the health system also conducted 5,700 virtual COVID-19 screenings using the on-demand platform, with providers directing patients and their families to drive-through testing locations, if appropriate. Overall patient enrollments for virtual care rose to 58,000, more than 7 times the number before COVID-19 hit.





Comparing Scheduled & On-Demand Visits Pre & During COVID



LaCoe said that Penn State Health's clinical staff rose to the occasion amid the rapid onboarding process. The effort paid off — patients were pleased with the virtual visit process and the care that they received.

"Providers embraced the technology and began to transition away from telephone-based visits to two-way audio and video visits," he said. "We essentially created a virtual clinic with nearly 4,600 providers. We're no longer in our infancy stage of telehealth."

COVID-19 BY THE NUMBERS

-  **4,600+** PROVIDERS/STAFF ONBOARDED
-  **86,800+** PATIENTS ENROLLED
-  **3,700+** URGENT CARE VISITS
-  **8,000** COVID-19 SCREENINGS
-  **50,000** SCHEDULED VISITS

Penn State Health ran a patient satisfaction survey in May 2020 to better understand patients' experiences with telehealth. They also collected feedback from their own providers. Here are some of those responses:



"I received compassionate, patient-centric care that was efficient and addressed my concerns. Given the circumstances of the pandemic, everything felt very fluid and just like it would in person. Thank you!" | **Patient Satisfaction Survey, May 2020**

"It was my first virtual visit, and I was highly impressed. I was sent for my first chest X-ray outside and for a COVID-19 test. Penn State Health had its act together. The people were great, and the follow up was more than I could have asked for. Thank you." | **Patient Satisfaction Survey, May 2020**



"I just completed three visits on the Amwell platform, and all went well – including a 75-year-old and a couple in their early 50s who previously opted for a telephonic visit one month ago. They all commented on how easily this went for them." | **Physician Feedback, May 2020**

Moving Into a Post-COVID World

As COVID-19 cases declined across Pennsylvania in the summer of 2020 and in-person cases began to increase, LaCoe and his team remained focused on optimizing the health system's use of virtual visits in a methodical way. "Strategically, we see value in this, and we're very focused on continuing in the virtual space," he said.

PENN STATE HEALTH'S STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS

To encourage growth in telehealth adoption and expand its virtual care program, Penn State Health is focused on:

01 Collecting and reviewing patient satisfaction data daily

02 Analyzing virtual visit workflows within each clinic

03 Creating standardized educational content for providers

04 Providing "at-the-elbow" training & troubleshooting in the clinic setting

05 Embedding Amwell technology into its Cerner EMR

06 Leveraging call center staff to help patients set up passwords and verify technology prior to their first virtual visit

In 2017, Penn State Health and Pittsburgh-based Highmark Health formed a strategic partnership aimed at creating a community-based care network in South Central Pennsylvania. A key focal point of that partnership is for all area residents to be within 10 minutes of primary care, 20 minutes of specialty care, and 30 minutes of hospital care.

“Now we’re going to adopt a 0-10-20-30 strategy, meaning zero minutes to virtual care,” LaCoe said. “The patient, irrespective of where they are located, can connect with our providers — not only in the state of Pennsylvania but beyond, extending into the regions that we serve. Our partnership with Highmark Health will help us move in that direction.”