Health IT: Improving Quantity & Quality of Care in Rural Areas

It's no secret that delivering health care in rural environments comes with its own unique challenges, from patient transportation issues to workforce shortage issues, higher rates of uninsured or under-insured and higher poverty rates. But with rural areas in nearly every state and 1 out of 5 Americans living within a rural area, it's clear that agencies and providers must overcome those challenges to be able to effectively serve the people in their communities.

The Centers for Medicaid & Medicare (CMS) recently identified its [first-ever Rural Health Strategy](#) which focuses on ways that technology can help improve rural health outcomes in a way that doesn't further burden already-stretched systems. Here's how CMS is using (and supporting) technology to benefit rural patients:

Expanding telehealth

In the past year, CMS has expanded the Medicare program to allow for access to telehealth and other virtual services, allowing rural patients to easily check in with their physician over the phone or via the internet, using patient-supplied videos and other images to help determine if an in-person visit is warranted. These efforts have created historic changes in the way healthcare is delivered to rural communities by bringing healthcare to patients where they are.

Increasing Medicare Advantage

flexibility

Expanding telehealth and other technology-enabled health services is the first step in better serving rural communities, but it's imperative that Medicare covers these services in order to achieve anticipated benefits. In addition to expanding the scope and type of services that can be delivered remotely, CMS is also creating more flexibility in Medicare Advantage plans by ensuring that innovative telehealth services are now part of the basic benefit.

Revising policies to support rural providers

To support its technology initiative, CMS is also reviewing its policies and programs to identify how each will impact rural providers. Instead of considering rural populations as somewhat of an afterthought, CMS is proactively reviewing current policies to determine the intended or unintended consequences for rural physicians, hospitals and other healthcare providers. Additionally, [CMS recently enacted Medicare hospital inpatient prospective payment systems (IPPS)](#) which, among other things, aims to address the wage index disparities impacting low wage index hospitals typical in rural locations. This change will decrease the delta between rural and urban hospitals and will empower rural hospitals to better attract talent, improve patient care quality and give patients greater access.

Take a Page from the CMS Playbook

Clearly, technology is having a significant and positive impact on healthcare outcomes in rural areas, and CMS continues to make strides in expanding access and improving adoption. State health IT execs are urged to take a page from the [CMS playbook](#) and apply similar thought processes in their

own organizations so that their rural citizens can experience the best care possible.

Need insights on best practices for using technology to deliver healthcare to citizens in your rural communities? [Get in touch](#) to learn more about how CNSI can help your organization.