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Increasing Health Equity in Your Community

Advances in Virtual Care and Language Services are the Difference

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The past two years have seen accelerated adoption and utilization of telehealth services by a majority of healthcare organizations, driven in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virtual care has been well documented as a less expensive and convenient care option that delivers both quality and patient satisfaction. When used appropriately, virtual care improves patient health and reduces costs, making care more equitable and accessible to the 89% of U.S. adults who own a smartphone, including those in medically underserved communities.[1]

As organizations move beyond adoption and into an optimization phase, they are making adjustments to their telehealth offerings from experience gained with both technology and the program administration of virtual care.

This white paper discusses how organizations can harness the potential of virtual care for greater health equity and improved access to care with embedded language services, as well as the advances in technology that are facilitating these changes.

A Focus on Health Equity

The American Public Health Association defines health equity as the opportunity for every person to attain their highest level of health regardless of social or demographic factors such as race, gender, income, geographic region, or primary language spoken.[2]

Success in healthcare requires organizations improve quality and clinical effectiveness while decreasing costs. Healthcare organizations committed to outcomes improvement must also be committed to health equity, and their first step is making it a systemwide, leadership-driven priority. This includes investing in the structures and processes to provide culturally competent care to many different patient populations. Healthcare professionals need to understand their patients' lives, address their population-specific healthcare needs, make their practices inclusive, and build trusting relationships that enable them to openly participate in care.[3]

Ensuring health equity in telehealth programs is an often overlooked, but necessary and vital element of a successful strategy. For healthcare facilities to achieve health equity, the same medical services must be offered to all patients.

Provide Care Anywhere with Telehealth

With the right solutions and talent partner, telehealth is a cost-effective, highly productive option that can make significant progress in achieving health equity through enhancing patient access in both rural and urban settings, as well as expanding services and providing more points of contact. Additionally, telehealth is a valuable and convenient tool for managing at-risk and chronic care populations, improving outcomes while reducing rehospitalizations.

To ensure the use of telehealth is transformative to communities, organizations need to develop a strategy that defines telehealth roles and secure talent with the right competencies to fill them.

Among clinicians, staff, and management, skills such as familiarity with advanced software and effective remote patient communication techniques are needed. With a shortage of talent across healthcare, many organizations are turning to the use of locum tenens physicians and advanced practice providers to be the backbone of their telehealth and virtual care offerings. This strategy can remove the physical barriers between patients and care providers, expanding access to care without adding stress to your core healthcare professionals.

Additionally, rather than build their own telehealth solutions, which can be challenging and expensive, organizations can implement white-label, HIPAA-compliant software solutions that integrate with all the functions needed to practice any form of physical or behavioral medicine suitable for virtual care.

Additional services may be required to ensure all patients can effectively participate in telehealth programs. For example, any limited English proficient (LEP) or Deaf or Hard of Hearing (HoH) patient will require the assistance of a medically qualified interpreter.

Language Services Expands Access to Care

Each day, healthcare providers encounter an increasing number of patients in need of language services.[4] These patients require the assistance of a medically qualified interpreter to ensure meaningful access to healthcare information, as required by Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, among other federal regulations. If organizations do not comply with regulations surrounding language access in care, they can be stripped of financial reimbursement.[5]

When it comes to treating LEP and HoH patients, physicians and other care providers need a fast, easy-to-use solution to effectively communicate. Patients with access to a medical interpreter at check in and discharge have been found to have a significantly lower rate of readmittance within 30 days and experience a higher level of care than those without access to the service.[6]

By investing in patient engagement technology and language services, healthcare providers can worry less about the flow of communication with LEP and HoH patients. Additionally, the integration of language services into the healthcare workflow keeps hospitals and health systems in compliance with federal regulations surrounding language access in healthcare. Lastly, the use of professional language services has been proven to improve the LEP patient experience.

Fortunately, the days of scrambling to locate a medical interpreter in the language needed onsite have become an element of the past. Video remote interpretation (VRI) greatly simplifies the process of providing language services to patients.

One Nation, Many Languages

67.3 million residents in the United States, or 22 percent of the population, now speak a language other than English at home, a number equal to the entire population of France. The number has nearly tripled since 1980, and more than doubled since 1990.[7]

There are 50 different languages included in the top ten languages used in patient encounters by state. Here are the cumulative top ten languages, other than English, used in patient/healthcare provider encounters nationally.

67.3M or 22%
speak a language other than English in the home.

LANGUAGE	PERCENT USED
1. Spanish	74%
2. Vietnamese	3.8%
3. American Sign Language	3.6%
4. Arabic	3.5%
5. Mandarin	3.0%
6. Russian	1.8%
7. Cantonese	1.7%
8. Portuguese	1.2%
9. Haitian Creole	1.0%
10. Korean	0.9%

As tracked over 110 million+ minutes of medical interpretation services provided by AMN Healthcare in 2021.

Technology Advances Provide Easier, Accurate Communication

VRI is an ideal solution to ensure all patients have access to language services. Within 30 seconds, a qualified medical interpreter can appear over HIPAA-compliant video ready to facilitate effective patient-provider communication in more than 200 languages across a range of telehealth solutions.

By augmenting patient care with technology services, healthcare providers can focus on treating their patients and can outsource communication assistance and cultural brokerage to outside experts.

Recent technology integrations between remote language services and telehealth providers have further simplified the process of treating LEP patients. For example, integrations with popular telehealth platforms allow video remote interpreters to be accessed directly from within telehealth sessions.

Recently developed technology has also enabled the integration of VRI with several patient engagement tools, i.e., patient bedside devices. Serving as a mode of communication, bedside devices provide patients with a secure, convenient way to instantly connect with their providers and care teams. They also serve as an essential educational tool, providing patients with vital healthcare information in an easy-to-use format. When patients are well informed, they tend to be more engaged in the development of care plans, resulting in better patient satisfaction and outcomes.[8]

Medical interpreters are bound by a professional code of ethics that includes a commitment to accuracy, impartiality, and confidentiality, all essential elements of communication in healthcare. Accuracy refers to the interpreter's faithfulness to convey the original message in its entirety without editing or omitting any of its meaning. Accuracy in communication is paramount, as an astonishingly high percentage of adverse events occur due to communication error.[9] Studies demonstrate the use of a qualified medical interpreter significantly reduces the number of communication errors, improving both patient outcomes and satisfaction with care.[10]

Your Partner for Improving Health Equity in Your Communities

At this unique point in time, patients, physicians, payers, and providers have new experiences and awareness of telehealth services. Though the healthcare industry is experiencing rapid changes and associated uncertainties, the increasing presence of technology in medicine and its ability to improve health equity is clear.

The implementation of mobile communications apps, patient engagement devices, and telehealth solutions with embedded language services have been shown to streamline provider workflows, increase health equity, and improve quality and patient satisfaction.

For more information about how we can partner to provide virtual care and language services to help you increase access to care in your community, please email **client.services@amnhealthcare.com** or visit **AMNHealthcare.com**

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