



December 10, 2020

Re: CMS-1734-F Audio-Only Visits

To Whom It May Concern:

The New York State Association for Rural Health (NYSARH) appreciates this opportunity to comment on the proposed final rule for telehealth services.

As you know, broadband service is not available in all parts of rural New York state. Moreover, many Medicare beneficiaries are elderly, are not tech savvy and do not own a 'smart' telephone or computer. This makes it difficult for them to utilize patient portals or videoconferencing software.

Section 1834(m) of the Social Security Act uses, but does not define, the term "telecommunications system." The term is defined in regulation at § 410.78 (a)(3) requiring that Medicare telehealth services be furnished using video technology. We believe CMS has the discretion to amend this definition to permit Audio-Only visits in some circumstances.

1. NYSARH believes that there will be circumstances after the Public Health Emergency when audio-only visits are appropriate instead of video or in-person visits for established patients. In rural areas, travel to an in-person visit is often a significant barrier to access and, in many areas, there is not sufficient broadband coverage to enable video telecommunications and many patients do not have access to a computer. Audio only visits may be particularly appropriate for the management of chronic conditions and for behavioral health services.
2. NYSARH supports the opportunity for a longer 'virtual check-in' to determine whether an in-person visit is required.
"for CY 2021, on an interim basis, we are establishing HCPCS code G2252 (Brief communication technology-based service, e.g. virtual check-in, by a physician or other qualified health care professional who can report evaluation and management services, provided to an established patient, not originating from a related E/M service provided within the previous 7 days nor leading to an E/M service or procedure within the next 24 hours or soonest available appointment; 11-20 minutes of medical discussion.)."

About Us:

The New York State Association for Rural Health (NYSARH) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, grassroots organization working to preserve and improve the health of the citizens in rural New York State. NYSARH membership includes representatives of all facets of the rural health care industry, as well as individuals and students. On many different levels, NYSARH serves individuals, consumers, non-profit organizations, government agencies and officials, health care facilities, emergency medical service providers, long-term care organizations, businesses, universities, foundations, associations, and other stakeholders in rural health.

www.nysarh.org

If you have any questions, please contact me at sara@nysarh.org.

Sincerely,
Sara Wall Bollinger
NYSARH