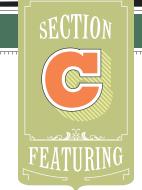
Inside
Chico's sprucing up
Spanish Springs store, C3

# local&state





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**Yesterday** Religion Report VILLAGES IN-DEPTH

HOW OUR COMMUNITY WORKS

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# Did Someone Call a Doctor?

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, medical providers worked to quickly establish a safer way to treat patients. The result was an explosion in telemedicine services that allowed patients to see a doctor without ever leaving home.

— By Leah Schwarting, Daily Sun



#### WHAT IS TELEMEDICINE?

Telemedicine can take several forms. It includes real-time phone and video communication between patients and providers as well as remote monitoring of patients using tools that can collect and communicate data, such as blood pressure monitors.



The pandemic led many providers to offer patients a telehealth option instead of an in-person visit. Providers can use telehealth to virtually help with tasks like managing chronic conditions, reviewing lab work and treating some acute conditions.

# HOW HAVE TELEHEALTH SERVICES EXPANDED IN RECENT YEARS?

Medicare expanded the benefit on a temporary and emergency basis in March, allowing for the payment of office, hospital and other visits provided via telehealth to patients at home. Providers, such as doctors, nurse practitioners, clinical psychologists and licensed clinical social works, can offer telehealth to their patients.



About a year ago,
Dexston Reed opened
FaceTime on his Mac.
It was his first telemedicine experience.

"I can be anywhere," he said. "I don't have to be at my home. I can be someplace else and access it."

The use of telemedicine was gradually expanding for years before the COVID-19 pandemic propelled it to the forefront of health care. Nowadays, patients can take advantage of telemedicine to communicate with providers in real time through video or phone conversations, receiving medical care without ever stepping into an office.

"The main advantage is the convenience for the patient," Dr. Jeff Lowenkron, chief medical officer for The Villages Health. "The visits for the

Please See TELEMEDICINE, C6





NOW



A TIMELINE OF **TELEMEDICINE** 



## How Medical Visits Went Virtual

1964

Physicians in Norway use radio links to provide teleconsultations to crews on ships at sea.

ns ay D AT&T introduced a video phone called the Picturephone at the World's Fair. The device became commercially available in 1970 but did not catch on.

### 19**7**0S

NASA works with other organizations for the Space Technology Applied to Rural Papago Advanced Health Care program testing technology to provide improved health care to a remote population in Arizona.

### 1993

American Telemedicine Association launches to accelerate industry adoption of telehealth.

The nonprofit



### 1999

Medicare starts paying for some telehealth visits for patients in rural communities.

### 2020

As the COVID-19 pandemic forces people to social-distance in order to stop the spread, more and more medical providers begin offering telehealth services.

### TODAY

The U.S. House of Representatives passes a bill in July to extend Medicare telehealth services to Dec. 31, 2024. The bill is now in the U.S. Senate's hands.

Compiled by Daily Sun staff

## villages in-depth



# HOW TO MAKE A TELEHEALTH APPOINTMENT WITH THE VILLAGES HEALTH

The Villages Health offers primary and specialty care virtual visits using a telehealth system powered by Athena. Villagers and others with telehealth appointments through TVH can visit the villageshealth.com/telehealth to watch a short instructional video on how the visit will go. The process is straightforward. "Your provider will give you a link via email, text message or through your patient portal," according to the video. "Simply click the link and it will send you directly to the telehealth portal." After that, patients can check in. They are then sent to the "virtual waiting room" where the clinician will meet with them as soon as possible. (Staff Report)

#### TELEMEDICINE

Continued from C1

clinicians can also be shorter as there is a more limited physical exam."

However, the loosening of pandemic restrictions didn't bring an end to telemedicine. In fact, the field has become a more prominent in the United State's health care network, and it remains part of local care options.

#### **Pandemic Growth**

As the pandemic continued, more and more telemedicine services were offered.

A 2019 study by American Medical Association researchers found just 15.4% of physicians worked in a practice that used telemedicine to interact with patients in 2016. But, according to a 2021 study by McKinsey and Company, the overall use of telemedicine was 78 times higher in April 2020 compared to just two months earlier.

In March 2020, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services broadened access to telemedicine for Medicare beneficiaries in response to the pandemic.

Locally, providers offered patients the option of scheduling telehealth appointments and screened patients by phone for COVID-19.

While The Villages Health never closed its doors, staff soon realized they needed more options for patients concerned about making in-person visits.

"Early on, there was no treatment for COVID-19, and testing was scarce," Lowenkron said. "As people became more and more wary of stepping foot into our offices for appointments, we started offering telehealth options."

Two weeks after the telehealth option was introduced in March 2020, the percentage of patients that chose telehealth over in-person appointments at TVH rose from zero to 71%. TVH providers had 8,000 telehealth visits between March 22 and May 8, 2020.

As interest in telemedicine increased, so too did the need to learn about best practices, and to help patients adapt to the new virtual reality.

During 2020, University of Florida researchers, led by UF College of Journalism Communications scholars Carma Bylund and Jordan Alpert, surveyed 79 UF Health Cancer Center patients. Bylund is a professor in the public relations department and the division of hematology and oncology at UF College of Medicine, and Alpert is an advertising assistant professor.

Their research team also held in-depth follow-up interviews with 16 of the center's patients, and analyzed more than 1,400 secure message conversations.

The team used the information they gathered to develop materials for clinicians and patients. The center's clinicians got a flyer with tips on how to communicate more effectively with patients, and patients had an FAQ added to their appointment reminders that addressed topics frequently discussed in secure messages.

Chelsea Hampton, a health communications scholar at UF, was part of the research team.

"Recognizing, especially within the context of cancer, the challenges posed by a pandemic are huge," she said. 'You're considering certain types of care and care needs, so obviously this was something we were going to need to do some work on."

For the most part, Hampton said the patients she spoke with had an easy time transitioning to telemedicine appointments, and the feed-

back was largely positive. However, context matters, she said, and telemedicine  $could\,be\,challenging\,for\,those$ who aren't as familiar with it.

The research conducted by her team worked to help smooth out some bumps in the road. For instance, clinicians' flyers included advice like having a backup plan to use a phone if something went wrong, or to share screens to show materials.

### **Local Use**

Interest in telemedicine didn't go away as the country began reopening. Since his first appointment a year ago, Reed has had others with his primary doctor, who is not a TVH provider.

"I like that I don't have to wait in the office for an hour," said Reed, The Villages Apple Club president.

It also saves you travel time, he said, and it's on your

schedule.
"The only thing you're missing of course is the actual physical looking at you, taking your heart rate, etc., but if you're skilled at this you're getting your own blood pressure and temperature," said Reed, of the Village of Winifred.

About a year and a half ago, Art Fenn had his first telehealth appointment when a doctor reviewed his regular blood test results. It wasn't a TVH appointment, and took place over Zoom.

"I had no problem using it: it was easy," said Fenn, of the Village of Virginia Trace.

Telehealth still remains an option at The Villages Health, and Villagers and others are getting on their phones and computers to speak with their doctors and other medical staff.

Please See **NEXT PAGE** 

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## villages in-depth



**U.S.** Department of Veterans Affairs

# VA HEALTH SYSTEM INCREASES TELEHEALTH ACCESS FOR VETERANS SEEKING CARE, SERVICES

The North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System uses telehealth technologies to increase veterans' access to specialty care and services in VA clinics near them. With telehealth available, patients may not have to travel as far, according to the VA website. Instead, they can receive their medical care through video visits, remote health monitoring, as well as devices that gather health data. Last year, more than 2 million veterans received care through the VA's telehealth program. The VA also offers programs to connect veterans who only have limited internet access to telehealth options through methods like lending out internet-connected tablets. For more information, go to telehealth.va.gov/. (Staff Report)

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#### **Continued from PREVIOUS PAGE**

"Telehealth visits are used for both acute complaints and follow-up," Lowenkron said. "There  $\bar{i}s$  an ability to do things like simple wound checks, etc. and save the patient a trip to the office."

And sometimes, telehealth may be all that a doctor or medical office needs to make a diagnosis or determine a path forward.

"On a video call, you can get the physical information by looking at the patient," Lowenkron said. "How does the person look? Is the person nervous, agitated or distracted? That gives you insight."

Doctors can also use the patient's medical history to ask the right questions during an appointment.

However, those choosing the phone or computer to talk to their doctor has scaled back significantly. Only about 7% of TVH's primary care appointments are telehealth appointments. For specialty appointments, the number is only 3%.

The numbers are below national statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An October 2021 poll revealed that 23% of adults surveyed reported having used telehealth services during the previous four weeks.

"When offered a choice, patients like to get out of the house and go to the office,' Lowenkron said. "There is a comfort with going to the care centers and seeing people they know."

Telehealth also has its limitations. There are parts of the physical exam that are not possible with current technology, Lowenkron said. And, although there's a visible connection, touch often helps in the connection and healing process.

But, while telemedicine may not be as popular as it once was with TVH patients, it remains a part of their services so anyone who wants or needs it has the choice available.

Not every visit needs to be in person, but telemedicine won't necessarily be appropriate for every kind of need, Hampton said. Preferences and needs must be taken into consideration.

If it's possible to use telemedicine, that may be preferable and make more sense, particularly for people who have a long commute or

"It's good to try to meet people where they are," Hampton said.

Despite not having any problems with the Zoom appointment, Fenn, president of The Villages iPad Club, wouldn't choose to do it again. From a patient perspective, he thinks its better to physically see a doctor.

"It (the Zoom appointment) did what I wanted to do, but I prefer the other one," Fenn

#### The Future of **Telemedicine**

In March, the American Medical Association released a survey that revealed nearly 85% of doctors surveyed use telemedicine for their patients, and almost 70% reported they are motivated to continue using it in their practices.

"The use of telemedicine came about largely because of a necessity because of the pandemic, but this has helped us realize its utility regardless of the context," Hampton said. "It's very very useful for patients because of many different factors."

Congress also extended telehealth policies adopted during the pandemic earlier this year as part of an omnibus spending plan. Under these policies, Medicare patients can receive telehealth services regardless of where they live, and allows for audio-only telehealth services to continue to be provided to Medicare telehealth patients.

More recently, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to extend Medicare telehealth services to Dec. 31, 2024. The bill is awaiting a vote in the U.S. Senate.

"The COVID-19 public health emergency made plain that care via telehealth should be available to all Medicare patients, especially with their own physicians, regardless of where they live or how they access these services," said Dr. Jack Resneck Jr., AMA president, in a statement. "From continuity of care, broadened access to care, and removing geographic and originatingsite restrictions, our hope is that the flexibilities afforded during the public health emergency will be made permanent."

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