



# The Future of Telemedicine

A 2022 Telehealth Policy Outlook



## The use of telemedicine healthcare exploded during the pandemic.

In April 2020, overall utilization of telehealth was [78 times higher](#) than it was in February, just two months earlier. After that initial spike, usage dipped, but has stabilized at [38 times higher](#) than pre-pandemic usage- a remarkable adoption rate for a technology that just a few years ago was considered expensive and niche.

Now, however, the mindset about telemedicine solutions has changed. In fact, nearly [80% of employers](#) believe virtual health will play a big role in the future of healthcare. Many are excited about virtual care because it is consistent, scalable, and convenient for employees. In addition, they get better access to data and feedback to see if these solutions are serving their team.

The problem is, though telemedicine has made significant progress, it may only be temporary. The national COVID-19 public health emergency declaration unlocked flexibilities in care options, including expanding what types of services can be offered by telehealth, but this declaration comes with

Now that telehealth has been adopted so widely, what will the future of telehealth look like when these measures end, and what can be done to ensure the continued growth of virtual care?

# Bipartisan Agreement for Telehealth Resources

The American Telemedicine Association's EDGE conference, in December 2021 in Washington D.C., brought together industry leaders, lawmakers and policy experts to address those very topics. What emerged at the conference was a broad, bipartisan, consensus support for continuing and expanding access to telehealth.

Currently, the public health emergency, and the telehealth access it has allowed, was set to expire in January 2022. [The Telehealth Extension Act](#) would extend the emergency waivers currently allowing patients and medical providers more access to telehealth. The bill, now in committee, is co-sponsored by Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

A similar bill in the Senate, the [CONNECT for Health Act](#), aims to expand telehealth access and make permanent telehealth flexibilities available during the pandemic. The bill has 61 cosponsors from both sides of the aisle.

It is clear that elected officials want to take advantage of the momentum achieved over the last two years. Telemedicine technology was at the forefront of innovation and transformation during the pandemic, and members of Congress from both parties see the benefits for their constituents. However, as more providers embrace telehealth, Congress needs more data to help create policy and determine what telehealth will be in the future.



## Unanswered Questions: How Will Telehealth Look?

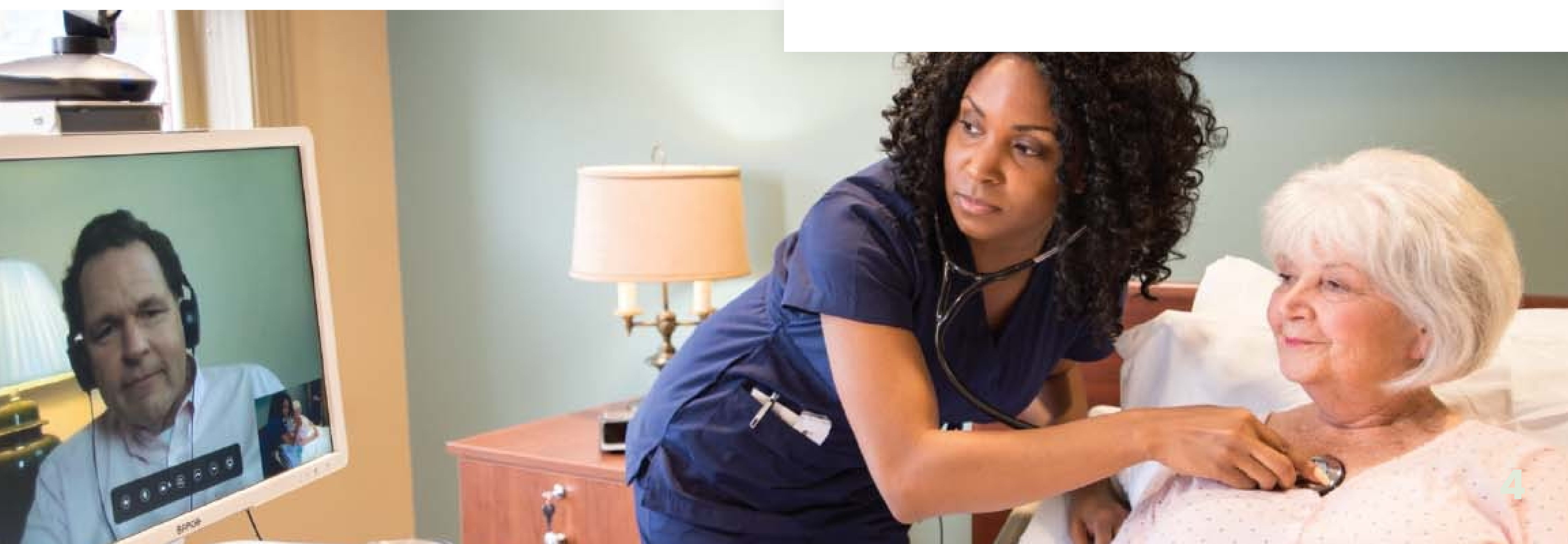
Several short-term and longer-term issues will shape the future of telehealth. The most immediate is the status of the **public health emergency**, which may extend into 2023. What will be the new status quo after its expiration, and how do telehealth providers transition to it, adjust to any uncertainty and to the needs of a post-pandemic healthcare system?

**Physicians' fee schedules and licensing** are central to the future of telehealth. Currently there are temporary telehealth codes that providers can use, but there has been little planning for coding and fee schedules once telehealth becomes the norm. Likewise, the current system of physician licensing poses complications for telehealth. Medical professionals normally are licensed by the states. But in telehealth, a doctor may provide care for a patient in another state.

Going forward, will doctors need to be licensed in both states, will there be adoption of reciprocal licenses, or a national-level licensing for telemedicine?

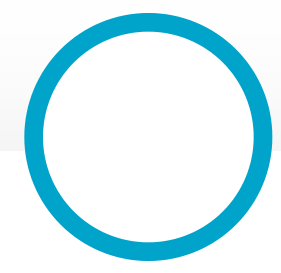
**Remote patient monitoring** is crucial for the growth of telehealth. Innovations in this area are already tremendous, but need to continue. As remote monitoring grows, how will the telemedicine sector adapt to privacy and safety regulations on the national level and in multiple states? In addition, remote monitoring depends on medical devices, particularly wearable devices. What can the Food and Drug Administration do to streamline its approval process?

**Artificial intelligence** will be increasingly important in telehealth. It helps physicians make real-time data-driven decisions to improve the quality of care and also helps prevent burnout. How will telehealth help drive advancements in AI and its applications for the field?



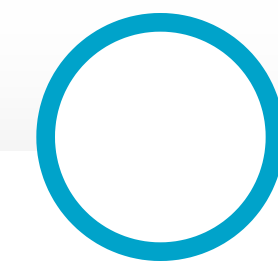
# Key Priorities For Congress

While the telehealth sector focuses on those questions, participants at the ATA conference have identified priorities that it must encourage Congress to address:



## **Closing the digital divide.**

Ensuring all Americans have the digital infrastructure and technology needed to access telehealth. The recently passed infrastructure bill will help bridge this gap but Congress needs to ensure spending is allocated properly and continue to monitor Internet availability.



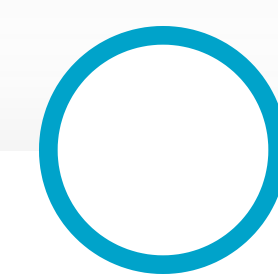
## **Education.**

Healthcare providers need to be educated on the solutions, technology and autonomy for providers in choice of platforms for care. Studies [indicate](#) that most clinicians find telehealth easy to use but far fewer use it regularly, suggesting the need for targeted training and quality improvement strategies. One possibility with a successful track record is [medical technology incubators](#).



## **Equal access to care.**

Telehealth can help address systemic inequities and the expanded access can also help to ensure diverse representation in clinical trials. Congress should make equal, high-quality access to telehealth for all Americans a fundamental part of the healthcare system.



## **Reimbursement.**

Telemedicine providers must be properly compensated for telehealth visits, or they will not choose to offer it. Congress has taken steps to improve coverage of telehealth but now needs to address the payment side, ensuring that reimbursement rates will be stable and reduce disparities between in-person and telemedicine.

# Let's Talk Interactive Positions for the Future

Let's Talk Interactive (LTI) has provided telemedicine software and solutions since 2001.



Recently, Amazon Web Services recognized LTI as a certified technology partner, solidifying the firm's position to act on these priorities and press for advancement in telehealth not only in America, but on a global scale.

To do so, LTI will continue to deliver on the traditional benefits of telemedicine: Driving down the costs of healthcare while increasing the quality of that care. In addition, LTI will advance an often overlooked and undervalued facet of medicine: [mental health and substance abuse care](#).

Historically, policymakers have looked at telemedicine technology as a high-cost solution, with costs increasing as utilization increased. However, utilization data has now disproved that assumption. Telehealth improves [preventative and followup care](#), which [lowers costs in the long term](#) by reducing the need for [emergency care and expensive procedures](#) for catastrophic situations. By ensuring patients adhere to care plans and attend follow-up appointments, telehealth is a [proven strategy](#) for helping patients get better, faster, and avoid readmissions.

LTI has seen tremendous benefits from the use of telehealth in the areas of mental health and substance abuse. LTI considers telehealth a lifeline, especially when it comes to mental health, and has been a pioneer in bringing care to underserved populations in great need.

One primary example is first responders, who have rarely been more essential than in the last two years. Unfortunately, care for their mental health is often overlooked. LTI is a partner in the 2nd Alarm Project, which offers behavioral health resources to firefighters and fire departments in Florida's Panhandle region. In a recent [study](#), the program found that 37% of firefighters reported suffering from PTSD and 32% reported struggling with substance abuse, with depression rates five times higher among firefighters than the general public. By making access to services as simple as logging in, LTI helps get our first responders the care they need, when they need it.

LTI also sees the need of all employers in navigating the fields of mental health and rehabilitation. While the business community has been early adopters and proponents of virtual care because of its affordability, they still need assistance in not only finding care providers but identifying quality of care, such as centers of excellence, and having confidence that they will see good results.



## Conclusion

With strong bipartisan support, it is clear that telemedicine will continue to expand, even if the final form it will take remains unclear. Telehealth has been stress-tested and its benefits proven during the pandemic, especially in mental health and substance abuse. So even though there are issues to address and questions to be answered, we can expect even greater acceptance and advancement.

To ensure this progress is timely and permanent, Congress must focus on the priorities that will make broad access to telemedicine a reality. Every American deserves access to high-quality health care, and telemedicine is the best way to ensure that goal.

LTI has been providing that access for two decades and still leads the way. With innovation and advocacy, LTI hopes to enable patients to access the high-quality care they deserve, in the form they choose, wherever they are.

[Learn More](#)