

IHS further expands telehealth services to meet patient needs

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The Indian Health Service announced an expansion of telehealth across IHS federal facilities to meet the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native patients on Oct. 31.

In July 2021, IHS awarded a clinical video telehealth contract to AA RingMD, a secure, cloud-based solution that enables patient-to-provider and provider-to-provider telehealth meetings. IHS has been working with AA RingMD staff and engineers to prepare for implementation. Beginning Oct. 31, IHS clinicians and support staff at federal facilities were able to use the secure system.

“This expansion of telehealth will increase access to care, patient safety, continuity of care, quality of care, and ultimately patient satisfaction,” IHS Director Roselyn Tso said. “We look forward to being able to reach even more of our American Indian and Alaska Native patients across Indian Country.”

This platform will be available across multiple devices and allows for expanded televideo visits in settings such as homes or schools with low broadband availability. AA RingMD is the first telehealth-focused platform that IHS has deployed and will complement Webex, the existing IHS telehealth solution, giving IHS two secure options to use when providing telehealth care, both now and when the public health emergency ends.

AA RingMD is a secure system that encrypts audio and video communications. The cybersecurity of IHS’s telehealth system is critical to patients’ safety, health, privacy, and the integrity of patients’ data.

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In a press release published on Oct. 31, IHS recognized the importance of protecting the personally identifiable information and protected health information entrusted to them. A plan is in place to adequately address all system vulnerabilities.

Pre-existing rules for the IHS workforce's use of telehealth continue, and health care providers must obtain the patient's verbal consent to meet via telehealth. Health care providers must also verify the patient's identity at the beginning of each encounter and are not authorized to record the session.

The IHS has a long history of using telehealth to meet its mission and the needs of its patients, dating back to the mid-1970s when IHS partnered with NASA and Lockheed Martin to provide telehealth to the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona.

In 2020, IHS significantly expanded the use of telemedicine, rapidly ramping up virtual care services from a pre-COVID average of under 1,300 per month to a peak of nearly 42,000 per month at the height of the initial pandemic surge.

For the first time, IHS clinicians could provide services into patients' homes. This allowed continued access to care while protecting patients and health care workers. The current average is approximately 11,000 per month.

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