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Congress Gets Another Shot at Codifying Telehealth Coverage for FQHCs, RHCs

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The HEALTH Act has been re-introduced to Congress, with a goal of making permanent Medicare coverage for telehealth services delivered by federally qualified health centers and rural health clinics.

July 19, 2021 - A pair of Congressmen [have re-introduced](#) proposed legislation aimed at codifying telehealth coverage for federally qualified health centers and rural health clinics.

US Reps Glenn Thompson (R-PA) and G.K. Butterfield (D-NC) are trying again to push [the Helping Ensure Access to Local Telehealth \(HEALTH\) Act](#) through an increasingly crowded connected health agenda on Capitol Hill. They're hoping the success seen in FQHCs and RHCs using telehealth during the coronavirus pandemic and the pressure on Congress to set long-term telehealth policy will make a difference.

"Continued use and promotion of these services will improve health equity by increasing access to care for our most vulnerable," Thompson [said in a press release issued last week](#). "The **HEALTH Act** cuts red tape and permanently allows community health centers and rural health clinics to furnish telehealth services to their patients."

As defined by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, there are roughly 1,400 FQHCs and another 4,300 RHCs in the US, many of them serving predominantly underserved populations and communities. Because they're haven't been considered a distant site for telehealth by CMS, opportunities for reimbursement are few and far between, and many rely on grants and donations to offer telehealth services.

Due in large part to emergency provisions enacted by federal and state lawmakers to help providers expand access to and coverage of telehealth services during the COVID-19 crisis, many of these sites embraced telehealth and mHealth services. Those freedoms will last only as long as the federal public health emergency, so the HEALTH Act is designed to make some of them permanent.

Specifically, the bill would remove originating site facility and location requirements for distant site telehealth services furnished by FQHCs and RHCs, and extend coverage to audio-only

telehealth services (such as a landline telephone) for patient who can't access audio-visual telemedicine services.

“Continuing coverage of audio-only and audio-visual appointments, providing payment reimbursement parity to an in-person visit, and allowing patients and providers to receive and give care regardless of their location are all vital provisions that should be adopted,” Tom Van Coverden, president and CEO of the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC), said in the press release.