



The Cutting Edge

MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION IN NJ

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS UPDATE

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MHANJ Survey Reveals the Importance of Mental Health Telehealth Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Preamble

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth services have become a staple of mental health service delivery and are expected to continue even after the end of the pandemic. Mental Health Association in New Jersey (MHANJ) is dedicated to ensuring that individuals experiencing mental health conditions receive access to telehealth services for the treatment of their conditions.

Through conducting a randomized research study, MHANJ found that the majority of current ICMS clients utilizing telehealth services most commonly engage in voice-only services—a finding that necessitates this form of virtual treatment be both accessible to consumers and covered by health insurance providers. Therefore, MHANJ recently supported and offered recommendations to bill S2559/A4179, which if passed, would require healthcare private insurers and Medicaid plans to include coverage of voice-only telehealth services. S2559/A4179 has unanimously passed in both the Senate and the Assembly. MHANJ will remain dedicated to endorsing future bills that will provide greater access to telehealth services to people in need, during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

This article details the study conducted by MHANJ, which highlights the importance of voice-only telehealth services for mental health conditions by examining the telehealth practices and preferences of individuals receiving mental health case management services in New Jersey.

Impact of COVID-19 on Behavioral Health Services

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented significant threats for people living with mental health conditions to access the in-person mental health services on which they depend. In the early days of the pandemic, it became clear that the overwhelming practical and emotional consequences of this unprecedented event necessitated the establishment of virtual services to ensure the continuity of mental health treatments. MHANJ identified the importance of telehealth services for persons isolated by the pandemic, and subsequently determined that receiving objective feedback on telehealth from persons with lived experience

in mental health was critical, as telehealth services are now expected to last even after the close of the pandemic.

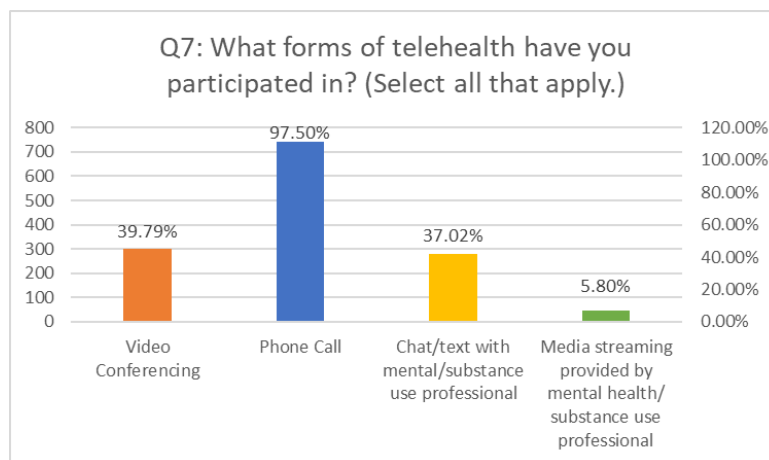
In July/August 2020, MHANJ conducted a purposeful pilot study with 75 consumers of mental health telehealth services. The results were compelling, however the need still existed to poll a population more representative of the public system of mental health care in New Jersey.

Understanding Experiences of Telehealth Utilizers

MHANJ conducted a randomized study of New Jersey’s ICMS (Integrated Case Management Services) population. This study was designed, approved, and implemented in 4Q20/1Q21. Through a 12-question electronic survey distributed by case managers, a total of 878 ICMS clients comprised the sample size of the study. The objective of MHANJ’s study was to gather information about consumers’ experiences and perceptions relating to telehealth services for mental health conditions. Ultimately, the study aimed to demonstrate the current impacts of telehealth and provide a basis for the future of telehealth services.

Benefits of Telehealth/Findings from Utilizers of Services

The study ultimately found that telehealth services are very positively regarded by ICMS clients throughout the state of New Jersey. The majority of participants felt that telehealth has been a safe way to seek care during the pandemic (95%) and is a great alternative to in-person care when face-to-face services remain largely unavailable (81%). Respondents also agreed that teletherapy is effective in treating their conditions (78%), is very convenient (90%), and has allowed them to feel connected to others while social interactions may be limited due pandemic-related restrictions (83%). The study also discovered that nearly all respondents use voice/phone calls to participate in telehealth sessions (97%), resulting in the very significant finding that voice-only services are the form of telehealth most often used by ICMS clients.



[Link #1: Study Results PowerPoint](#)

The majority of respondents also agreed that telehealth:

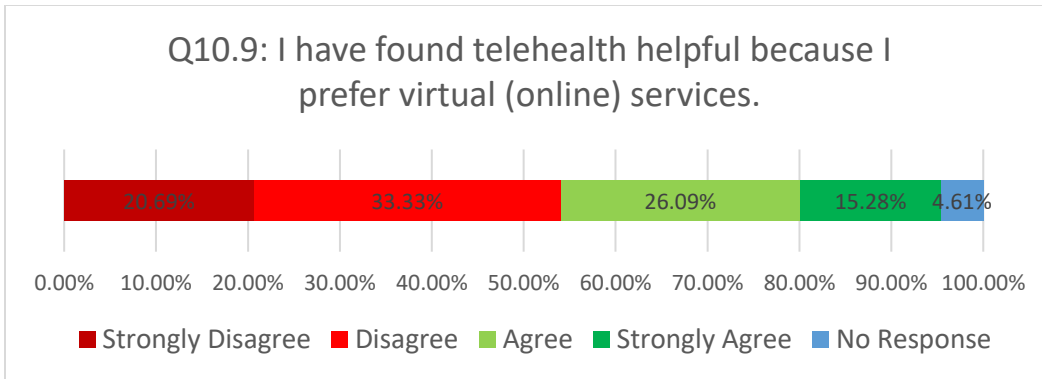
- Saves them time (84%) and money (77%) on transportation.
- Is helpful because they do not need to arrange transportation (82%) or childcare (51%).
- Is flexible with their work schedule (62%).

While transportation, money, and access to technology are often accepted as common barriers to accessing mental healthcare, the findings of this study show that telehealth services overcome such obstacles. Since the majority of participants agreed that telehealth allows them to spend less time and money to access appointments, these responses indicate that telehealth offers a higher level of convenience than in-person services.

Agreed/Strongly Agreed	Telehealth...	Disagreed/Strongly Disagreed
84%	Saves me time on transportation.	13%
82%	Is helpful because I do not have to arrange transportation.	14%
77%	Helps me save money on transportation.	21%
62%	Is flexible with my work schedule.	23%
51%	Is helpful because I do not have to arrange childcare.	33%
17%	Is difficult because I have limited access to a phone for my appointments.	79%
17%	Is difficult because I do not have a place to be alone for my appointments.	78%
44%	Is difficult because I have limited access to a computer for my appointments.	53%

Preference of In-Person Services vs. Telehealth Services

While almost all participants agreed with the benefits of telehealth (ex. saving time, money), 41% of respondents indicated that they actually prefer virtual services over in-person services. There is likely a wide variety of factors that may explain consumers' preference of in-person services over telehealth; further research may be needed to determine and evaluate these potential factors. This compelling finding indicates that while telehealth services continue as the standard for behavioral healthcare amidst the pandemic, the desire for in-person services in addition to telehealth services persists within the ICMS population. In a prior pilot study on telehealth (July 2020), providers and consumers of services agreed that telehealth services should be utilized when both parties agree it would be beneficial.



Advocating for Telehealth Services

This study ultimately showed that telehealth services for mental health have offered a convenient and safe way for individuals receiving ICMS services to utilize telehealth. The study’s compelling finding that the majority of respondents utilize voice-only services more frequently than any other form of telehealth reinforces the need for this method of treatment to be both accessible to consumers and covered by health insurance providers. Please contact Governor Murphy (<https://nj.gov/governor/contact/all/>) to ask that he support access and reimbursement for telehealth services for all residents of New Jersey.

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