

Barriers within Rural Health: Telehealth and Health Literacy

History

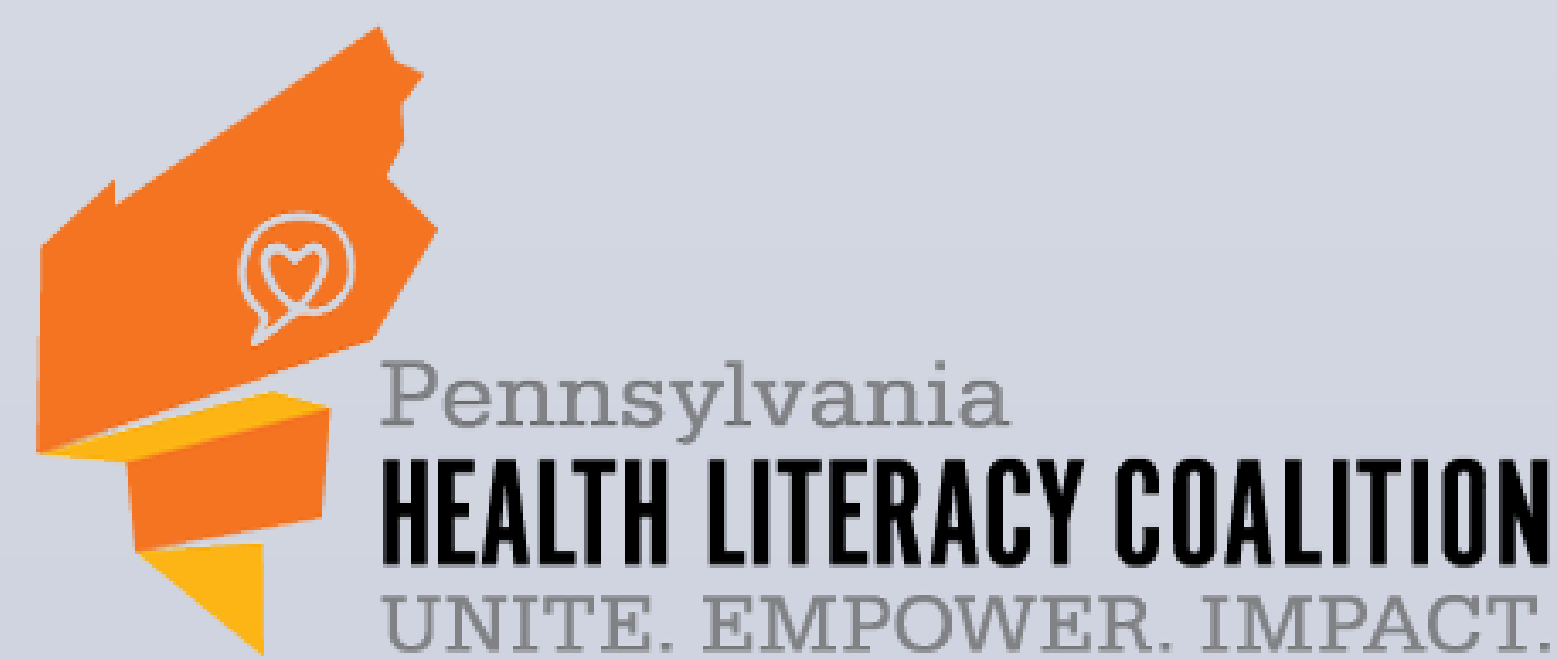
According to the 2010 US Census, 1 in 5 Americans live in rural communities around the country, or about 60 million Americans¹. Of those, 3.5 million of these individuals live within rural PA, which is 27% of the population². It is often seen that individuals in rural areas have fewer resources available to them and, on average, are less educated and poorer

Telehealth is “the delivery of healthcare services at a distance using technology”³. Currently, 15% of the state’s rural households, or 253,000 households, do not have internet access at all, which would make access to telehealth challenging from their homes.

Health literacy is the degree that individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make important and appropriate health decisions⁴. One in ten Americans struggle with understanding health information.

Supporting Organizations

The Pennsylvania Health Literacy Coalition (PAHLC) priorities include establishing strong cross-sector partnerships, empowering patients to access the health information they need to thrive, and influencing provider and system-level change to create a culture of health literacy with an ultimate goal to improve health communication and ensure good health for all. The establishment of the PAHLC was funded through the PA Department of Health.



Political Issue

Poor health literacy and the complete use of telemedicine are some of the biggest barriers within healthcare for individuals who live within rural America, especially those living in rural Pennsylvania.

Social determinates of health are condition in the environment that affect the health, functioning, and quality of life⁷. Those at high human service needs in populations around the country include “minority population, population 65 and older, veterans’ adults without a high school diploma, and other factors.

Economic indicators included poverty, households without vehicles, households receiving SNAP (food stamps) benefits, and income received from government transfer programs”⁸.

In comparison of rural and urban areas, rural Americans have a harder time with health literacy. This is due to the information being harder to use, find, and understand, especially with lower educational achievement levels.

Along with the prevalence of the issue in these areas, the economic standpoint of it is quite costly.

My Proposal to Improve the Situation

I am proposing the need of funding for educational programs to increase health literacy within Pennsylvania’s rural communities. This education would not only extend to classes for adults, but also start at the school age level. I would also like for you to proposing a state level bill for more available broadband internet access in rural communities so that individuals will have more means to access telemedicine.

Impact on Students and Professional Nurses

Telehealth includes services from simple phone appointments or follow ups with physicians, video conference calls and monitoring patient’s vital signs and health conditions. Although the major advantage to telehealth in rural PA is the access to provider services, a major disadvantage especially in low-income rural areas, is lack of access to computers and smartphones which could make using online portal services difficult. The biggest obstacle for appropriate utilization of this service is that broadband, or fast internet, is inaccessible to many rural and low-income communities⁶.

With telehealth not being an option to all rural patients due to broadband issues, patients may have more difficulty accessing healthcare and specialty services.

Impact on People in Rural NW Pennsylvania

It is often seen that individuals in rural areas have fewer resources available to them and, on average, are less educated and poorer.

Low-income households in these rural PA areas without computers and smartphones which could make using online portal services to schedule appointments or request prescription refills difficult.

Rural areas and low-income rural areas struggle more with health literacy due to on average, lower education levels achieved, and information that is harder to use, find, and and understand, especially with lower educational achievement levels. Along with the prevalence of the issue in these areas, the economic standpoint of it is quite costly⁴.

Legislator

Representative Martin T. Causer, 67th District of PA House of Representatives

In a meeting March 23rd, Representative Causer expressed how important Healthcare follow up with telemedicine is, especially with its ability to bring specialty



Services to McKean county. He stated that telemedicine is a top priority within the PA State Capitol. Representative Causer sponsored a bill that regarded underserved broadband service across the state and to extend it. Having the providers reduce the cost of broadband services is one way to help meet the needs of the residents of rural PA and increase access to telehealth.

References

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