

## CLOSING THE GAP: How a Complete Virtual Care Experience Can Help Address the Mental Health Crisis in Rural America

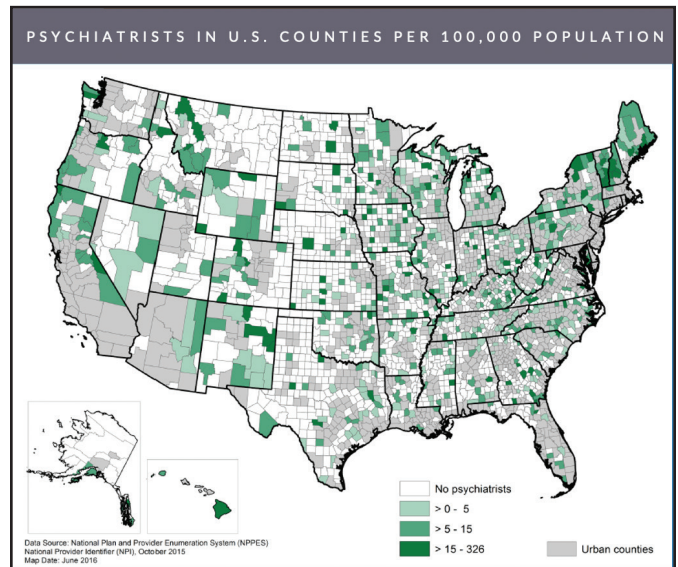
During this COVID-19 crisis, multiple studies are reporting that more Americans are suffering from stress and anxiety than ever before. Many of these people live in remote, rural areas that are already suffering from drastic shortages of mental health professionals. They lack resources, connectivity, awareness and access to the care they desperately need. Not only are citizens suffering, but when left untreated, mental health can have a dramatic impact on the costs of our healthcare system, which it is desperately trying to contain.

### The Challenges Are Real

While the prevalence of behavioral health needs is similar between rural and urban areas, the availability of behavioral health services is dramatically different in three key areas:

- ▶ **ACCESSIBILITY:** Rural residents often travel long distances to receive services and are less likely to have insurance coverage for mental health services.
- ▶ **AVAILABILITY:** Rural areas face chronic shortages of mental health professionals and existing mental health providers are more likely to practice in urban centers.
- ▶ **ACCEPTABILITY:** There is often a stigma surrounding the need or receipt of behavioral health services, which creates barriers to care.

One study found that 65% of non-metropolitan U.S. counties lacked a psychiatrist, and 47% lacked a psychologist, according to the “Geographic Variation in the Supply of Selected Behavioral Health Providers” study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that 53% of rural areas do not have enough mental health professionals.

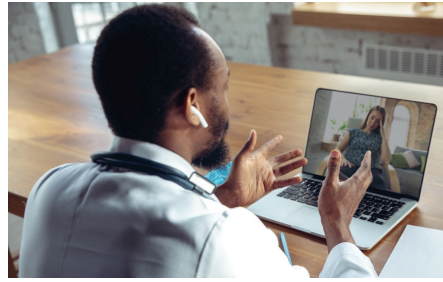


### Sharp Increase in Depression and Anxiety Linked to COVID-19

**7k+**  
SCREENINGS  
PER DAY

**406%**  
INCREASE PER DAY  
in anxiety screenings in  
June vs. January

**457%**  
INCREASE PER DAY  
in depression screenings in  
June vs. January



## The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 public health emergency has made a serious issue even worse, further driving a need for our rural communities to be supported when it comes to mental health. The CDC has reported that 40% of Americans are experiencing at least one adverse behavioral health issue associated with the pandemic, including symptoms of anxiety, trauma, or increased substance use. The most significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- ▶ **FEAR** of the virus and its effects, particularly for their at-risk family members. Anxiety disorders such as OCD may be worsened or triggered.
- ▶ **LOSS OF STABILITY** associated with a financial downturn, including lost jobs, lost homes, food instability and disruption of social connections can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- ▶ **QUARANTINE** and stay-at-home orders have increased isolation, creating many long-term ramifications on physical and mental health.

## Telehealth is Solving Part of the Problem

During the COVID-19 public health crisis, hospitals and providers urged patients to utilize remote health visit options and many responded accordingly. Adoption was also encouraged by government actions that supported equal reimbursement for virtual visits as in-person visits and previous restrictions related to originating sites were lifted by the government and commercial payers.

According to government reports, more than 10 million Medicare beneficiaries received telehealth care from mid-March to early July, up from 14,000 beneficiaries per week before that period. Forty-two percent of Americans have reported using telehealth since the pandemic began. Behavioral health was one of the biggest contributors to these numbers,

and according to a Definitive Healthcare report, the numbers are not dropping like they are in other specialties.

In August, President Trump issued an Executive Order on Improving Rural and Telehealth Access. This order clarifies reimbursement and investment in infrastructure to support delivery of virtual mental health care in rural areas.

The use of telehealth among behavioral health specialists, primary care providers and community service providers is helping Americans get access to the care they need, but our rural communities still suffer. It is important that care providers consider a complete virtual care experience – from assessment through to diagnosis and follow up. Such a complete virtual care experience includes:

- ▶ **Evaluation and diagnosis:** Observe the patient; administer scales, assessments and screenings; and diagnose conditions.
- ▶ **Case consultation:** Consult with psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, social workers and other care team members.
- ▶ **Treatment:** This may include counseling and psychotherapy for individuals, couples or groups. Telehealth can also be used to deliver education and skills coaching.
- ▶ **Medication management:** Telehealth can help rural patients adhere to their medication regimens with tools that include monitored in-home dispensing devices, mHealth apps and telephone counseling.
- ▶ **Continuing care:** Some rural programs provide case management services through telehealth to improve patient outcomes. For example, a nurse care manager could coordinate with other care team members over the phone to meet patient needs.
- ▶ **Provider education:** Rural providers can receive training or continuing education about behavioral telehealth through distance learning, telementoring or webinars.

## How to Create a Complete Virtual Care Experience in Rural America

Most behavioral health, primary care or emergency care providers conduct mental health assessments to help determine the extent of a patient's symptoms and possible treatment options. To do so virtually requires new approaches to the assessment phase, using some of the latest technologies like those delivered by nView Health.

The use of online assessments, including screening, interviews and monitoring tools, helps engage patients and providers. Patients can complete assessments in the privacy of their homes, and patients do not need to travel for an initial visit and assessment. Providing remote access to these assessments can help reduce inequity in mental health care.

When used in a telehealth setting, online assessments equip primary care and behavioral health providers with valuable patient insights that can make the telehealth visit more efficient and productive. Information from online assessments can be available to providers in advance of the virtual consultation and provide necessary insights to reach a more accurate diagnosis. This makes online assessments a crucial first step for any successful behavioral telehealth program.

### ABOUT NVIEW

nView offers behavioral health technology that enables healthcare professionals, researchers and educators to rapidly deliver the right diagnosis, resulting in the right treatment at the right time. Our team is passionately focused on mental illness and how it is perceived, assessed, diagnosed and treated. We are activists, advocates, business leaders and disruptors who are determined to alter a failing status quo.

Cited in thousands of publications and approved studies by the FDA, NIH and WHO, nView empowers healthcare professionals, educators and researchers with software solutions that allow them to more accurately and efficiently identify, diagnose and monitor these individuals who need behavioral health assistance.

nView's signature product, the digital M.I.N.I., allows providers to deliver validated diagnostic behavioral health screens, interviews, outcome tracking and billable services to patients in a simple, easy-to-use platform. Our evidence-based solutions have been referenced or validated in more than 17,000 studies and used by physicians all over the globe for the past 25+ years. To learn more, please visit [nview.com](http://nview.com) or follow nView on LinkedIn or Twitter.



## Conclusion

When it comes to mental health care access, the disparities between rural and urban areas persist. Meanwhile, behavioral health concerns like anxiety, depression and substance misuse are rising in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regulatory changes promise to make online behavioral health care delivery easier and more profitable for providers, including those serving rural areas.

With more care moving online, there is a critical need to use online tools to identify patients with behavioral health symptoms and assess the extent of those symptoms. The right online assessment tool can help providers diagnose and treat behavioral health needs faster. To make sure your organization has the right virtual assessment tools, view this checklist.