Universal Connectivity Policy Outline

The Telehealth Equity Coalition (TEC) believes that universal connectivity is paramount to achieving greater adoption of telehealth by all communities. We define connectivity as the state of communicating using tools, such as hardware (laptops, tablets, telephones, smart phones, landlines), software (digital applications, websites, portals), and internet access (5G, broadband, WiFi, cell coverage, hotspots). The following principles are intended to serve as a guide for which federal, state and local policies TEC will support to achieve optimal connectivity for unserved and underserved communities. These principles were derived from community discussions with TEC members. Included in this document are value statements used to identify problems and proposed actions and solutions to increase connectivity to telehealth care. These principles do not fully consider the intangible factors that impact digital inclusion, including digital literacy, financial barriers and trust and accountability in the healthcare system, which are further explored in other policy papers.

- **We believe in utilizing the work of digital inclusion pioneers who paved the way for the current movement to achieve universal connectivity.**

  **The Problem:** The realities of the pandemic and the new social justice movements sparked by the murder of George Floyd have inspired new organizations (like TEC) to engage in digital inclusion efforts. However, we risk “reinventing the wheel” and/or leaving out critical intelligence and stakeholders if we don’t begin by centering and amplifying the expertise and cultural competence of the pioneers in this space.

  **Our Solution:** We support policies or best practices that...

  - Have been developed by digital inclusion leaders to advance digital connectivity for underserved communities. These organizations laid the groundwork for TEC’s policies on the topic and support policies that are accessible, affordable and equitable.
  - Incorporate the input of a wide range of stakeholders so that the day-to-day needs and experiences of communities and cultures are at the center of efforts to advance digital inclusion.

- **We acknowledge that connectivity is necessary to fully realize the promise of telehealth in all communities.**

  **The Problem:** If some communities cannot or will not access the tools and technology necessary to connect via telehealth, we will never fully deliver on the promise of this mode of healthcare.

  **Our Solution:** We support policies or best practices that...

  - Acknowledge that access to affordable, accessible and equitable connectivity tools is a fundamental barrier to telehealth adoption, and drive toward solving these inequities.
  - Acknowledge that all communities deserve access to the full suite of telehealth modality options that are available.
  - Lower the financial burden for the underserved to obtain important technology, such as the [Emergency Broadband Benefit](#) and the Lifeline programs, that subsidize internet, voice and hardware access for low-income communities.
  - Commission studies to better understand the role that greater connectivity plays in
achieving telehealth adoption and ultimately, better health outcomes.

- **We fully acknowledge that physical access to connectivity technology and tools is only one facet of telehealth adoption.**

  **The Problem:** We are well aware that too often a lack of physical connectivity is singled-out as the sole cause of lower telehealth adoption in underserved communities.

  **Our Solution:** While the following policy principles address connectivity, we fully support practices and principles that...

  - Invest in the other TEC pillars that impact telehealth adoption, such as digital and health literacy skills, trust and accountability in the healthcare system, payment considerations and other social determinants of health.
  - Underscore that the physical tools are useless without investing in facilitators, such as digital health navigators, who have the trust of the community, and are compensated fairly to familiarize and educate communities on how to use connectivity tools.
  - Recognize that digital literacy is a journey that will require repeated engagements and investment.

- **Rather than endorsing a specific technology wholesale, we support policies and principles that evolve and optimize connectivity for the most underserved.**

  **The Problem:** While we strongly endorse the current efforts to deploy high-speed broadband, we recognize that broadband, like all technology, will one day become obsolete and/or might not meet the specific needs of every community.

  **Our Solution:** We support policies and best practices that...

  - Discourage policymakers and other decisionmakers from assuming that one technology or tool will always meet the connectivity needs of communities.
  - Focus on the intended outcomes for connectivity in underserved populations, such as user-friendliness, speed, efficiency, affordability, rather than a specific tool or technology.
  - Encourage telehealth platforms to focus on tools and technologies that will best meet the desired outcomes of underserved communities, rather than simply aspiring to develop the most advanced, high-tech products.

- **We support telehealth technologies that can be adapted by health providers across different health systems and platforms.**

  **The Problem:** The struggle to obtain literacy across a number of competing and ever-expanding tools, such as digital applications and portals, distracts health providers from focusing on their job of delivering quality care.

  **Our Solution:** We support policies or best practices that...

  - Encourage telehealth product developers to standardize and simplify their products without sacrificing innovation.
  - Explore open-source digital health software that allow product developers to learn, share and collaborate across platforms.
We believe in meeting people where they are and promoting limited access over no access.

The Problem: Many underserved communities exist in a digital gray area, where high-tech connectivity is not available or desired, but “lower tech” solutions, such as WiFi, hotspots, cell coverage or voice communication, have been adopted. Yet, healthcare institutions and policymakers often don’t permit or reimburse providers when they engage in telehealth using these proven modalities.

Our Solution: We support policies or best practices that...

- Acknowledge that for many communities the alternative to telehealth care is no care at all. While we fully support universal digital inclusion, we must meet people where they are now to ensure they receive care, especially during the pandemic.
- Utilize technologies that people already have access to and are comfortable with, while working to improve access and utilization of technology that could improve their care experience.
- Leverage learnings from the pandemic that found patients and providers connected in the way that worked best for them -- and that meant using a range of telehealth modalities.
- Utilize a technology neutral approach to telehealth, where the standard of care can be met by providers, to permit communities who do not yet have access to technology, like high-speed broadband and appropriate hardware, to access telehealth options.