

Telehealth and Telecommunication Opportunities in the Criminal Justice System

Technology is fundamentally changing the way that behavioral health care and services are delivered across the country. For leaders in the criminal justice system, telehealth is expanding access to assessments, case management, connections to treatment providers, and more—critical services that can improve outcomes for people with behavioral health needs.

Shown to be as effective as in-person services,¹ telehealth can also support continuity of care and reduce barriers to participation among people who live in remote areas. More broadly, local leaders are also leveraging telecommunication, such as conducting court proceedings via video and connecting people to diversion and reentry programs, to support criminal justice efforts.

The necessary infrastructure must be in place to fully advance these approaches. As such, many leaders are taking steps to ensure people in the criminal justice system have the necessary technological devices, broadband access, and training to facilitate uptake. This brief highlights opportunities to leverage telehealth and telecommunication throughout the criminal justice system to improve outcomes for people with behavioral health needs, many of which are being implemented in communities across the country.

Telehealth Approaches That Can Support Criminal Justice Efforts

Screening and assessment for behavioral health needs

Promising model for: Law Enforcement, Jails, Prisons, Courts, Community Supervision

The first step to connecting people to appropriate behavioral health care and services is identifying their needs through screening and assessments. Telehealth platforms can help these efforts by connecting people to behavioral health professionals through technologies such as live video, which can help identify more people for assessments and provide quicker access to these assessments. For law enforcement agencies that work with clinicians to respond to calls for service involving people with behavioral health needs, video calls can expand their reach by allowing the clinician to be on scene without being in-person. The clinician can virtually assist with crisis response as well as screening,

initial care coordination, and other social services. And within court systems, telehealth can support clinical assessments ordered by a judge and enable more immediate connections to care.

Telehealth can also expand the capacity of corrections and community supervision agencies to ensure screening and assessments are conducted by behavioral health professionals for mental illnesses and substance use disorders. Since screening and assessment are the basis for intake into behavioral health treatment and services within the criminal justice system and the community, telehealth can help more people access treatment and recovery support services and increase a person's chances of recovery. As someone reenters the community, it can also be important to reassess because it can lead to revised treatment plans, refined case plans, and updates to the person's goals. Implementing telehealth strategies for these screening and assessments can be particularly useful in rural and frontier communities and tribal nations that often experience workforce challenges due to geographic location.

Collaborative comprehensive case management

Promising model for: Jails, Prisons, Community Supervision

Collaborative comprehensive case management, an approach that coordinates treatment and services for people with behavioral health needs, often involves case conferencing with multiple partners. For people in the criminal justice system, these partners can include corrections officers, correctional health staff, community-based treatment providers, probation or parole staff, and more. Conducting virtual case conferences—typically via video—can save time and

resources for supervising agencies while also making it easier for participants to have one plan across multiple service agencies and mitigate transportation issues. Probation and parole departments, especially, are increasingly using virtual technology to support case conferencing and to help officers with large caseloads. Telehealth can also support successful reentry and care coordination by connecting people to community-based behavioral health programs as they prepare to leave correctional facilities.

Counseling and group programming

Promising model for: Jails, Prisons, Courts, Community Supervision
Telehealth counseling and group interventions, like their in-person counterparts, help support evidence-based treatment for people with behavioral health needs. For example, Seeking Safety—a therapeutic program for women with substance use disorders, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder—can be conducted by video and instructors may request PDF versions of the curricula to use with participants. This virtual programming provides more people with access to these interventions, allows counselors or participants to conduct sessions without having to travel to do so, and decreases cost for travel and childcare. For communities where it is hard to access services, telehealth can also increase engagement in specialty treatment.

Medication management

Promising model for: Jails, Prisons, Community Supervision
For people with mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders in the criminal justice system who have been prescribed medication, appropriate management is crucial to their recovery. Virtual medication management can help ensure continued access to medications, and that any adjustments to dosages are provided, without the person needing to travel to meet with a clinician. This telehealth approach can include an initial in-person evaluation for the need of psychotropic medications or medication-assisted treatment with ongoing medical monitoring by electronic communication.²

¹ Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program. *Using Telehealth for Behavioral Health in the Criminal Justice System* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2020). https://www.cossapresources.org/Content/Documents/BriefingSheets/Using_Telehealth_for_Behavioral_Health.pdf.

² For management of medicines such as buprenorphine, the doctor or nurse practitioner must still conduct an initial physical examination in person. However, a psychiatrist can virtually prescribe buprenorphine, if needed, as long as they are approved to prescribe buprenorphine in an outpatient or office-based opioid treatment program. See *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, FAQs: Provision of methadone and buprenorphine for the treatment of Opioid Use Disorder in the COVID-19 emergency* (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020), <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/faqs-for-oud-prescribing-and-dispensing.pdf>.

Telecommunication Approaches That Can Support Criminal Justice Efforts

Case and court processing

Promising model for: Courts

In many states, courts are using telecommunication technologies to conduct court proceedings, allowing court cases to move forward on time without requiring people to leave their correctional facilities or travel far distances. These methods have also assisted in case processing for defendants with behavioral health needs by creating fewer barriers to appear in court.

Virtual peer and family support communication

Promising model for: Jails, Prisons, Community Supervision

Telecommunication can facilitate access to peer support and help people maintain positive, prosocial connections while they are incarcerated or in the community. Many communities have implemented video visitation, which is just one method that allows people to connect with friends, family members, and peers more often and in safe manner. This model can also help people make connections to diversion, reentry, or community-based programs prior to their release.

Virtual 12-step programs

Promising model for: Jails, Prisons, Community Supervision

One critical service that often supports recovery for people with substance use needs is access to 12-step recovery groups, which can enable people to succeed in recovery. Conducted virtually, leaders can expand access to these programs, particularly for people who are incarcerated or have transportation issues.

Dig Deeper

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center offers in-depth subject matter expertise and can connect you to communities that are currently implementing some of these promising models. Visit the **Center for Justice and Mental Health Partnerships** to learn more.

Additional Resources

Using Telehealth for Behavioral Health in the Criminal Justice System by the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program

Implementing Telehealth in Jails (recorded webinar) by the Bureau of Justice Assistance

Remote Access: Using Video Technology to Treat Substance Users on Probation and Parole in South Dakota by Vera Institute of Justice