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## AHA Urges CMS to Keep Relaxed Regulations Beyond Crisis

- The American Hospital Association is urging CMS to retain the relaxed regulations or waivers it has extended to the industry beyond the COVID-19 public health crisis currently set to expire in about a month.
- Specifically, AHA and its 5,000 member hospitals want to keep the flexibilities around telehealth, quality and compliance measures and bed capacity.
- AHA said it will help physicians and hospitals be more efficient by removing these barriers "While our members continue to do everything they can to address COVID-19 cases, they also must begin to assess how to best care for all patients moving forward," CEO Richard Pollack said in a letter sent to CMS Administrator Seema Verma on Friday.

### Insight:

In the past few months, federal and state regulators peeled back the rules hospitals and providers have to follow in an effort to help them effectively respond to the crisis posed by the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The public health emergency in the U.S. was declared in late January and runs until the end of July, but AHA a week ago asked HHS to extend the declaration until multiple criteria are met regarding the availability of supplies, number of patients requiring intensive care and other factors.

One of the most popular flexibilities from CMS to help facilities adapt to COVID-19 has been the relaxation of rules around telehealth. The use of virtual visits has exploded, especially in the earlier months of the pandemic as many patients abandoned traditional visits in an effort to curb the spread of the virus.

During that time, the number of Medicare members using telehealth grew 120 times, according to earlier reports recounting the first weeks of the outbreak. Nearly 1.3 million Medicare members received telehealth care in the week ending April 18.

AHA said the looser restrictions around telehealth have "allowed hospitals to provide much more patient-centered, convenient health care delivery to their communities," according to Friday's letter.

Specifically, AHA is asking CMS to permanently eliminate geographic restrictions and to continue payment for services delivered in a patient's home in any area of the country. AHA also wants hospital outpatient departments to be allowed to bill for these services, which could include an audio-only connection.

AHA isn't alone in its quest to continue the use of these waivers and relaxed rules.



Earlier this month, the American College of Physicians urged CMS to extend its current waivers for telehealth reimbursement. And Premier, a major group purchasing organization, wants to see federal laws revised so patients can be screened remotely before entering the ER for care.

"There's no reason to revert back to the status quo just because patients may seek different avenues for treatment," Blair Childs, Premier's senior vice president of public affairs, previously said in a statement.

AHA also wants CMS to allow medical professionals to practice at the top of their licenses in other states and to "hold hospitals harmless" for increasing bed capacity during future emergencies.

"We ask that the agency remain flexible as our hospitals and health systems continue to care for patients during and after this national emergency," Pollack said.

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