Assessing broadband access, quality and use of the federal internet subsidies in a safety-net setting

Background: Shifting to telehealth risks exacerbating health disparities and inequitable access for marginalized populations. Targeted resources exist, particularly the Affordability Connectivity Program (ACP), but remain underutilized.

Objective: To understand patients' telehealth use, broadband and mobile data access, and interest in the Affordability Connectivity Program (ACP) in an urban, safety-net setting.

Methods: Roots Community Health (Roots), a health center in Oakland, CA focused on uplifting those impacted by systemic inequities, racism, and poverty through advocacy and community-based integrated care. Roots designed and implemented an intervention to connect patients to digital access resources, including a cross-sectional, 66-item questionnaire capturing patients' telehealth experience and barriers, device and broadband access, and awareness of ACP—a federal benefit providing up to $30 monthly towards internet service for low-income households. Patients interested in ACP were offered enrollment support. Patients were screened for ACP interest and eligibility and offered survey participation, in-person or by phone by trained clinic staff and volunteers.

Results: 109 patients were screened for ACP eligibility and interest; 99 completed the survey. Two-thirds (65/99) had experience with telehealth and 53% (52/99) were interested in future telehealth appointments. Patients reported notable barriers: slow internet (47/98), downloading/using the telehealth software (44/97), no internet access (39/99), and limited mobile data plan (32/98). Surveyed patients frequently reported utilizing the internet for resources categorizable as Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). The majority (65/109) had not heard of ACP, but almost half (60/109) reported interest in applying.

Conclusion: Telehealth is crucial in healthcare, yet disparities in access persist. Our findings highlight broadband connectivity as a SDOH, hindered by structural racism and low-income. Policy and advocacy should ensure access to telehealth, a gateway to other essential services. Healthcare organizations striving to support health equity must also assess their role in broadband policy and collaboration as they address SDOH.