

## Best Practices in Telemedicine

- **Needs Analysis & Environmental Analysis**
    - **Best Practice: Perform A Needs Analysis / Self-Assessment**
      - Must match the mission/vision of the organization
      - Determine the needs you wish to meet, and how you are going to meet them
        - Build community support
        - Check patient outcomes to focus on services and areas of needs
        - Data driven for outcomes
      - Involve providers and administration in decisions – encourages early buy-in
      - Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis
      - Multidisciplinary team
        - Risk management
        - Legal
        - IT
        - Telecommunications carriers
        - Clinical leadership
        - Encourage collaboration with local organizations
    - **Best Practice: Perform a market analysis and write a business case report**
      - Does demand and needs for services match?
      - Identify and develop your revenue opportunities and fiscal estimates
        - View grants as only short term ‘seed funding’. Actively seek long term sustainability from the outset. Grants may be sought to support required program expansion.
        - Focus beyond the ‘here and now’. Incorporate growth into the business case report.
        - Reimbursement - Programs need to look for opportunities to contract with payers, insurance companies and others to offer cost effective services.
  - **Define Services, Program Model and Technology Model**
    - **Best Practice: Develop preliminary goals and objects for service delivery**
      - Prioritize your service options.
      - Be mindful of the size and scale of the program you are creating.
    - **Best Practice: Match delivery model to your organization’s service goals & objectives**
      - Familiarize yourself with the different types of telehealth
      - Create an internal implementation committee
      - Develop a timeline for implementation
      - Create high quality, structured and layered training plan
        - Start Simple
        - Train on an ongoing basis, at both host and remote sites
        - Practice for disaster scenarios
      - Be sure to establish both short and long term performance goals
        - Long range strategic planning for a telehealth program should be carried out on an ongoing basis and should include the program’s governing board.
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- Plan to begin collecting vital program data from the very beginning of your program implementation.
  - Determine and communicate your measures of success.
  - Things take time. Be realistic in your setting of goals.
  - Develop an evaluation and monitoring plan
    - Monitor and evaluate all key elements of the program on a regular and ongoing basis.
    - Include a range of topics in your plan, including service usage, patient and provider comfort level with particular technologies, devices and applications and cost savings analysis.
    - Be sure to monitor and track ancillary or related services benefiting from your telehealth program activities, e.g. lab and blood tests performed at local clinics, staff and nursing employment etc.
  - Develop a Quality Improvement Process
    - Document improvement structure and clarify all improvement activities in your QI process.
    - Create a written document.
    - Develop and share your QI process before implementing the program.
    - Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your program on a regular basis.
    - Implement new ideas, adjustments and solutions in an organized fashion.
    - Ensuring constant quality improvement must be a part of regular operations.
    - Report regularly
      - General Service utilization reports and quality of service measurements are of primary importance.
      - Evaluate your telehealth systems and applications in a clinically appropriate and user friendly manner.
      - Undertake ongoing analysis of financial performance. This will form the basis of your business strategy as you move towards self-sustainability. Financial analysis should include evaluation of cost and benefits, coding issues, reimbursement, account receivables and network utilization.
    - Present your outcomes
      - Present your outcomes and program developments in a public forum (published or by meeting presentation) at least once per year.
      - Involve members of your telehealth team in these positive communication activities. This will help secure buy-in from your staff, and increase passion for the program.
      - Join forums for networking purposes, and the sharing of experiences and lessons learned.
      - Share outcomes and successes with non telehealth stakeholders and interested parties, the local communities in which you work, etc.
  - **Best Practice: Plan to incorporate Health Information Technology (HIT)**
    - Electronic medical records and other HIT is taking place at a rapid rate.
    - Network security and privacy issues and concerns related to HIT
      - Technical leadership
      - Legal counsel
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- Seek seed funding / grants
    - High Speed connectivity
    - Telehealth equipment
  - **Best Practice: Grow your champions**
    - Find champions who will enable you to achieve the level of change in attitudes and practice.
    - Ensure your champions are true agents of change, with the vision and passion to bring it about and instill it in others.
    - Find equivalent champions at all participating network sites.
    - Recognize that your champions are the primary advocates of your program, and that their success depends upon the full support and dedication of the entire team and the wider organization. Help them succeed.
    - Gain administrative support.
  - **Best Practice: Know your geographic area**
    - It is important to understand the nature and norms of the locations you will be working with remotely.
    - Go visit both remote and host sites.
    - Keep communication between sites direct, clear and simple.
    - Consider business and legal considerations such as providing services across state lines or nationally.
    - Know the 'political geography' of any region
      - Activities and interests of local providers, organizations and other local stakeholders.
      - Their support of your program, and willingness to collaborate with you, may prove to be a deciding factor in creating a successful telehealth outreach program.
  - **Best Practices: Development of Detailed Implementation Plan**
    - Identify multiple revenue streams from the telehealth program
      - Hand in hand clinical services
      - Educational (CME) services
      - Know reimbursement strategies and ensure your program has a good patient payer mix
  - **Best Practice: Select the right equipment**
    - Clearly identify appropriate specifications for your devices, applications and all technical systems.
    - Identify trustworthy and knowledgeable sources to guide you in your equipment choices, and to provide ongoing support. Do extensive equipment comparison to identify the best equipment for your program.
    - Be mindful that technology advances quickly, and systems and applications will need upgrading and warranty renewals. There can be substantial costs involved. Be sure to budget.
    - Test, test, test your equipment and connectivity before announcing or advertising your program.
  - **Best Practice: Plan for the seamless integration of telehealth into your operation**
    - Plan a workflow analysis to reveal how your program fits in with standard clinical practice. Discuss necessary changes with stakeholders.
    - Think of the telehealth technology as just another tool for the delivery of normal services, with the only difference being that the patient isn't in the room.
    - Keep it simple.
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- **Best Practice: Apply known principles of successful telehealth room design. Create a convenient and effective care environment reminiscent of a traditional care environment.**
    - Follow basic and standard rules for the design of your telehealth room. When designing your telehealth room space pay close attention to location, size, equipment, furniture placement, lighting acoustics and wall color.
    - Plan carefully and discuss your design ideas with program colleagues and IT personnel.
    - Remember to budget for necessary design/remodeling.
    - Make sure that any licensing requirements are known and implemented.
  - **Best Practice: Know the Law**
    - Identify the current policies and regulations and determine the impact they may have on your program. Consider including:
      - Licensure
      - Credentialing
      - HIPAA
      - Medication prescription
    - Realize that telehealth law is a rapidly changing area of law and to include your legal counsel with any program expansions, activities and plans.
  - **Best Practice: Plan for the availability of strong IT support at all participating locations**
    - Identify an IT champion.
    - Focus on introducing IT personnel at all sites to each other.
    - Ensure IT personnel are fully versed in your technologies, and are authorized to work directly with network systems and settings at an organizational level.
    - Familiarize all IT staff in all organizations with all the systems, applications and network needs.
  - **Best Practice: Plan to appoint a dedicated telehealth program manager**
    - Appoint this individual at the very beginning of your program planning.
    - Scale this position to the size and scope of your program.
    - View this individual as the ‘eyes and ears’ of your clinical and administrative champions. This individual should be directly responsible for all programmatic elements and the design of performance monitoring and evaluation strategies.
  - **Best Practice: Plan for system redundancy for all critical system applications and network**
    - Technology can be fickle. Realizing this in advance and planning appropriate back-up for all your mission-critical systems and applications is vital. Don’t wait for your network to go down, without back-up, mid-consult.
    - Don’t forget to budget for this redundancy, and include it in your business case analysis and plans.
    - If costs for redundancy are prohibitive, ensure process redundancies are well planned to cover any technical failures.
  - **Best Practice: Plan for the development of protocols policies and procedures**
    - Create protocols that are as close as possible to non-telehealth protocols. This will instill far greater comfort and confidence in your caregivers who will not feel they are doing something strange and unusual, and way out of line with their traditional practices.
    - Follow standard, recognizable protocols which will lead to consistent clinical results that will be vital for your evaluations and program monitoring.
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- **Best Practice: Communicate regularly with your remote partners**
  - Consider bringing participating site personnel together quarterly or annually to discuss the program, air grievances and discuss and implement any changes necessary. This will enhance relationships and build support.
  - Keep your communication channels open.
  - Learn and move the program forward together.

## Resources

California Telehealth Resource Center (n.d.) National Compendium of Best Practices in Telehealth Services. Retrieved from <http://www.caltrc.org/knowledge-center/best-practices/national-compendium-of-best-practices-in-telehealth-services/>

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