

A vibrant field of sunflowers in the foreground, with a dense green forest in the middle ground, and a blue sky with white clouds in the background.

EMERGING STRONGER THAN **EVER**

2021 SOUTH CAROLINA TELEHEALTH ALLIANCE ANNUAL REPORT

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Telehealth data included in this report are based on self-reported numbers provided to the SCTA by its partners. This does not reflect the totality of telehealth occurring in South Carolina.

MISSION

Improving the health of all South Carolinians through telehealth

VALUES

- Patient Centered
- Quality
- Collaboration
- Sustainability
- Accountability

STRATEGIES



Service Extension

All citizens of South Carolina will have equitable access to ambulatory care. Telehealth modalities will be used in the ambulatory setting to extend the reach of services that would otherwise be limited by travel and related barriers to care.



Hospital Support

Every community hospital in our state will have access to telehealth partnerships that enhance its services and its finances. These Hospital Services represent partnerships that extend care between hospitals using telehealth with a focus on connecting resources from larger urban hospitals to community hospitals throughout the state.



Health Equity

Targeted, novel initiatives will close the gap in access to health care services for high-priority health disparities. Health Equity services will make progress towards achieving health equity across the state in identified areas of health disparity.

VISION

Telehealth will grow to support delivery of health care to all South Carolinians with an emphasis on underserved and rural communities.

It will facilitate, coordinate, and make more accessible quality care, education, and research that are patient-centered, reliable, and timely.

Our state will become recognized nationally for telehealth that is uniquely collaborative, valuable, and cost-effective.

VALUE PROPOSITION

Telehealth in South Carolina will deliver high value through productive collaboration.



Convenient Care

All citizens in South Carolina will have affordable and immediately available patient-initiated virtual urgent and other health system-entry level care from an in-state provider. Convenient Care services are designed to engage individual patients through their own available devices in order to optimize utilization and maximize healthcare engagement.



Primary Care Support

All primary care clinics in the state, with emphasis on Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), will have access to integrated services through telehealth partnerships. These services are intended to support the mission of the primary care clinic as a medical home, emphasizing the importance of local health care infrastructure while mitigating gaps in access to supporting resources.

FROM THE SCTA LEADERSHIP

We are on the verge of providing the most accessible healthcare in history. The work deploying telehealth in South Carolina has shown that health services at a distance can be implemented and scaled, best practices can be established and the research on health impact is bearing fruit. In this report, we reflect on the progress and advancement of telehealth throughout the past year. However, this is not to take pause, but rather to energize and accelerate our efforts. It is our responsibility to learn from the work since the SCTA was founded, including the catalyst of the pandemic, and put forth our resources in collaboration to continue the mission of improving the lives of all South Carolinians.

In all domains for telehealth service, there has been an impressive development over the years, followed by an unprecedented acceleration in response to the pandemic. It is in this combination of solid foundation followed by rapid innovation that we have the tools to exit this pandemic as a stronger and more accessible healthcare community than ever before. However, it will take intentional efforts to ensure that this access reaches all of the citizens of the state. Collaborations depicted throughout this report span public and private, large and small, distant and local elements. These must continue to cover our map and find each individual in need.

Please enjoy this report, as it represents more success than we could ever have imagined. Then, please, take a hard look at the strategy before us and digest what each arm of the plan means as a call to action. We look forward to charging forward with all of you once again to establish this most accessible healthcare in history for our state.



James T. McElligott, M.D., MSCR

*Telehealth Executive Medical Director
Medical University of South Carolina
SCTA Advisory Council Co-Chair*



Kathy Schwarting, MHA

*Chief Executive Officer
Palmetto Care Connections
SCTA Advisory Council Co-Chair*



Dear Fellow South Carolinians:

I appreciate the opportunity to address you and be part of the 2021 SCTA Annual Report. In the past few years, we have experienced the most challenges to our health and healthcare systems in our lifetimes. We mourn those who have lost their lives and celebrate those who have strived to save them and others while providing care for all of us – both at the point of care and all those behind the scenes who make it possible.

Preference for new care options: The SCTA was formed seven years ago and recently helped position many health care providers in the state to address the coronavirus pandemic. We have seen telehealth's meteoric rise, with some waxing and waning use by patients, mirroring the surges in cases. It has taught us that while other care models can be effective, patients want choice and still desire in-person care. In a recent survey, sixty six percent of patients wish to have video visit as an option. Given equal cost, preference is split between in-person and video.¹ We need to continue to evolve our healthcare environment to better support these changing care models and our patients.

Equity: We have seen barriers to virtual care similar and different than in-person care. Many South Carolinians do not have access to broadband connections. As one example, only 49% of Allendale has access to broadband.² Financial barriers are more pronounced for virtual care, such as connectivity service fees, connection-video devices, and health monitoring devices. And, even with the tools, technical literacy can be a barrier for successful use. Palmetto Care Connections addresses many of these barriers and is a diamond for the state.³ While they are making great strides, collectively we need to close this gap in access to all care options.

Opportunities: The majority of providers have used and continue to offer virtual visits. We need to continue our journey to offer new and convenient care options to improve each person's health. We need to continue to implement digital services, such as remote patient monitoring, eVisits, automated chat, and specialist video care throughout our state – wherever the patient is. Expanding both allowed and payer/plan covered services would provide improved access and assist in transforming the care models for all providers in the state.

Your role: The SCTA and its members need you on this journey. Everyone can play a part to continue advocacy for the expansion of services, policies, and payer support, and address gaps to ensure all have access to these convenient and impactful services. Our patients deserve the best we can offer. We are grateful for your resilience, innovations, and new contributions.

Mark L. Wess, M.D., MSc

*VP Chief Health Information Executive, Prisma Health
Member, South Carolina Telehealth Alliance Council*

REFERENCES

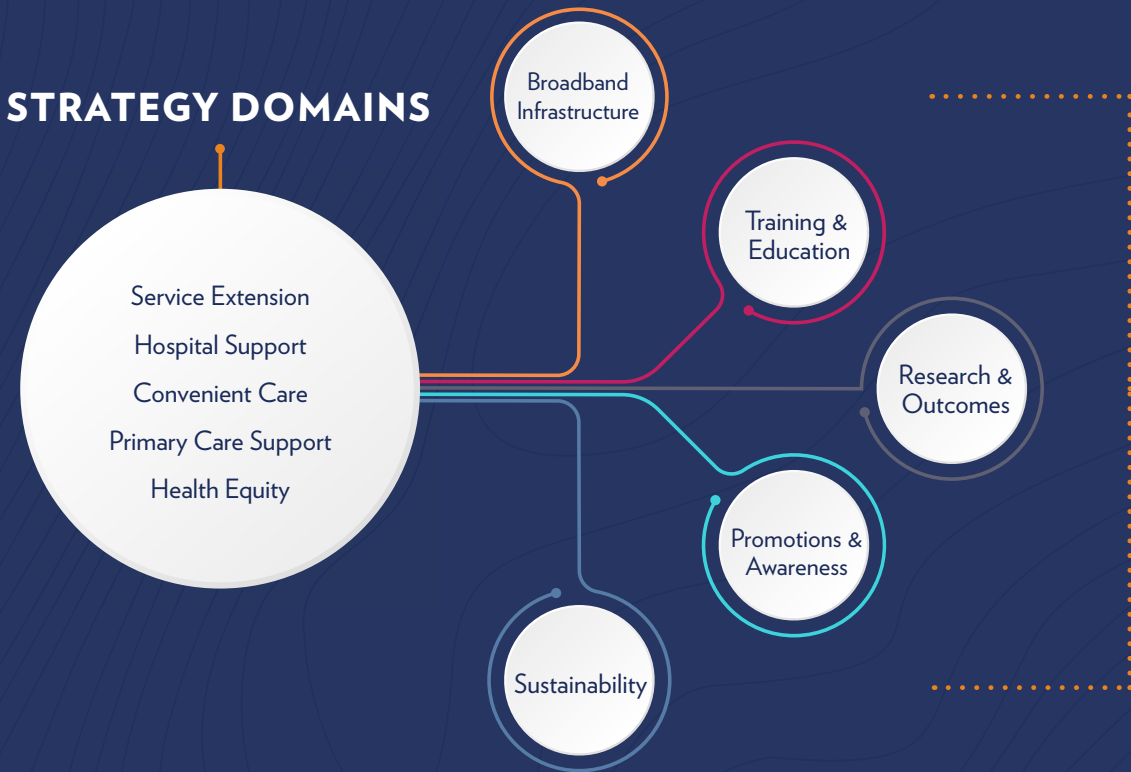
- 1 - JAMA Network Open. 2021;4(12):e2136405. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.36405
- 2 - <https://broadbandnow.com/South-Carolina>
- 3 - <https://www.palmettocareconnections.org/>

EMERGING STRONGER THAN **EVER**

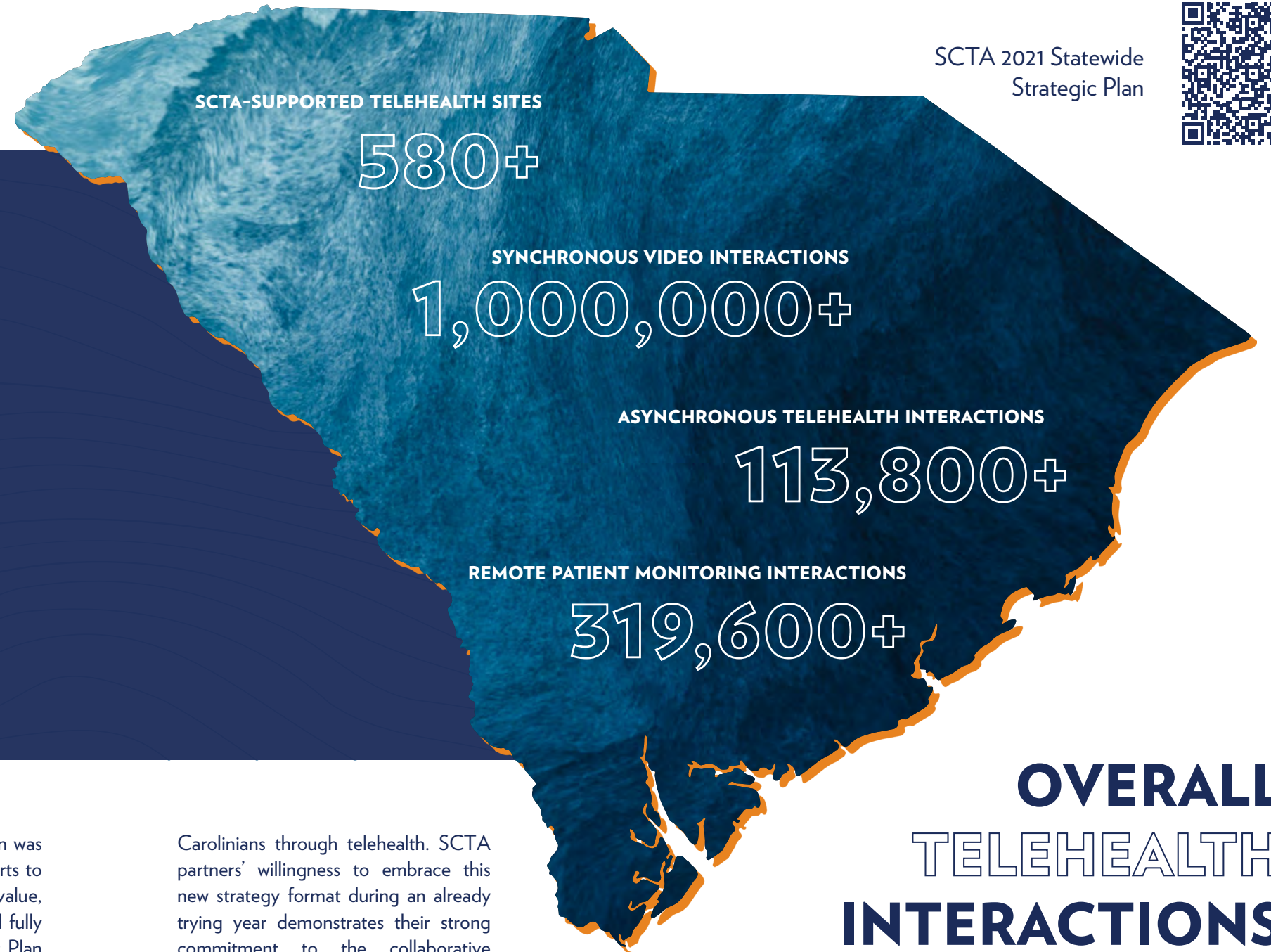
SCTA 2021 Statewide Strategic Plan



STRATEGY DOMAINS



SUPPORT TACTICS



OVERALL TELEHEALTH INTERACTIONS

1,580,000+

For nearly a decade, SCTA partners have worked tirelessly to build a solid, long-standing telehealth infrastructure in South Carolina. To leave no health system or citizen behind, SCTA partners continuously develop telehealth programs, create educational resources and training tools, and build on the technology and connectivity groundwork to support telehealth expansion statewide. Although telehealth has been an important part of South Carolina's healthcare system for years, the COVID-19 pandemic propelled it into the mainstream, establishing telehealth as a critical piece of the care delivery system. We are well poised to exit this pandemic on a path to establish the most accessible health care in history!

In 2021, the new and improved SCTA Statewide Strategic Plan was introduced. With a goal of enhancing our tactical support efforts to improve our telehealth program infrastructure and maximize value, the SCTA Statewide Strategic Plan format was re-thought and fully operationalized last year. The 2021 SCTA Statewide Strategic Plan focuses on five service-oriented strategy domains with cross-cutting support tactics.

Each strategy domain showcased throughout this year's annual report features overarching objectives that SCTA partners collaboratively work towards in the mission to improve the health of all South

Carolinians through telehealth. SCTA partners' willingness to embrace this new strategy format during an already trying year demonstrates their strong commitment to the collaborative expansion of health care access in South Carolina through telehealth.

To see the SCTA 2021 Statewide Strategic Plan, **scan the code above.**

SERVICE EXTENSION

OBJECTIVE

All citizens of South Carolina will have equitable access to ambulatory care. Telehealth modalities will be used in the ambulatory setting to extend the reach of services that would otherwise be limited by travel and related barriers to care.

EXAMPLE SERVICES

- Ambulatory Telehealth Visits
- Regional Telehealth Clinics
- Outpatient Telepsychiatry
- eConsults

DESCRIPTION

In response to the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, many healthcare providers were quickly introduced to Service Extension programs as they continued to provide patient care from afar. Remaining sustainable throughout 2021, this strategy domain carried the largest volume of telehealth in the state, serving as an easy, reliable tool to extend care beyond limits.



In 2021, the **SCTA** partnered with a referral and consultation platform to extend access to specialty care in SC through eConsults - an asynchronous, provider-to-provider communication allowing primary care providers to securely connect with specialists regarding next steps in the care of a patient.

To facilitate the use of telehealth across SC, in 2021 the SCTA continued to offer free memberships on its premium statewide instance of a HIPAA compliant telehealth platform. **Over 1,600 SC providers** have taken advantage of this offer, completing **over 90,700 visits** on the SCTA's instance during the year.

980,000+
total synchronous ambulatory visits in 2021

82,000+
average synchronous ambulatory visits per month in 2021

HOSPITAL SUPPORT

OBJECTIVE

Every community hospital in our state will have access to telehealth partnerships that enhance its services and its finances.

These hospital services represent partnerships that extend care between hospitals using telehealth with a focus of connecting resources from larger urban hospitals to community hospitals throughout the state.

EXAMPLE SERVICES

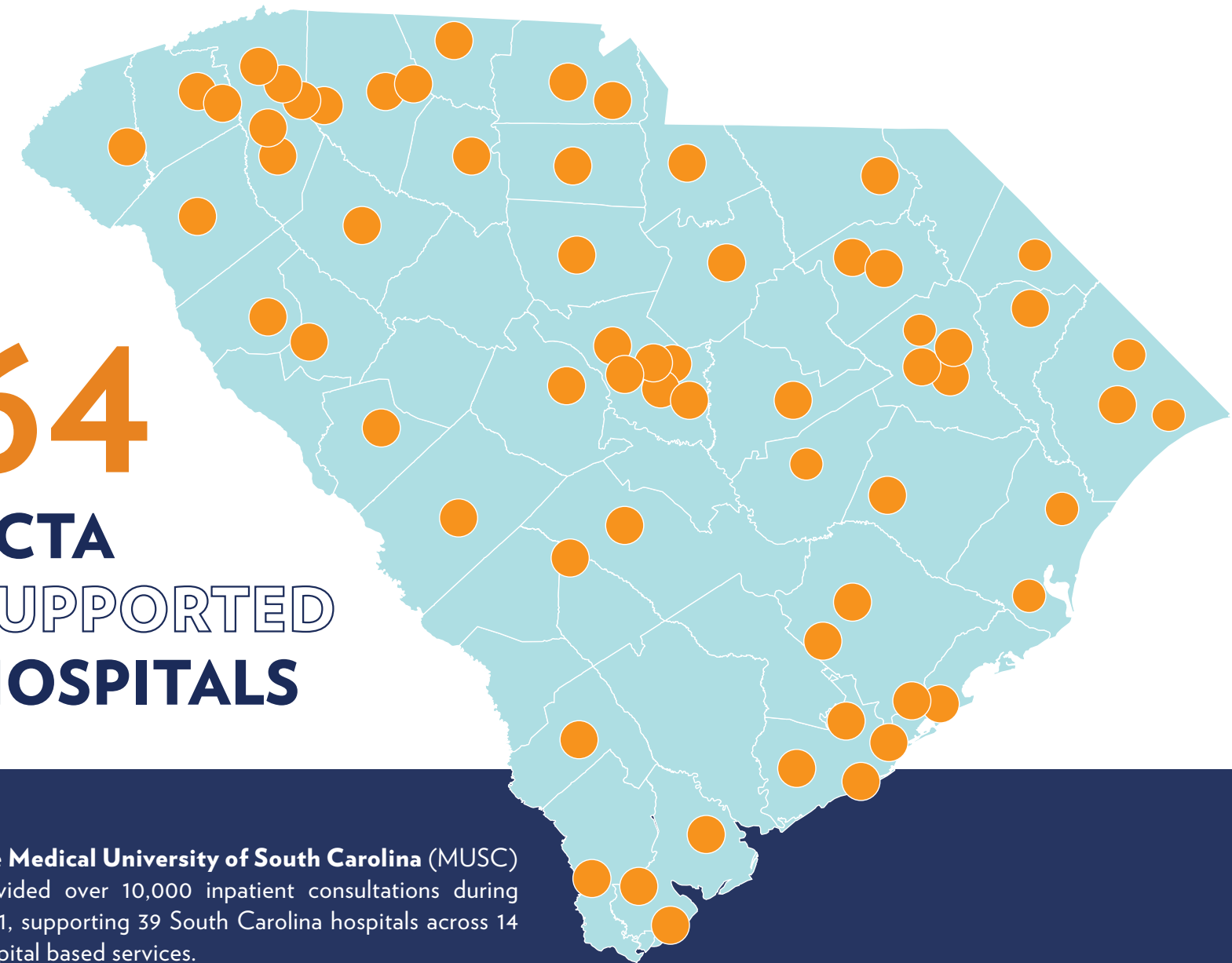
- Neurosciences
- Tele-ICU
- Inpatient Specialty Tele-Consultations including:
 - Infectious Disease
 - Psychiatry
 - Palliative Care
 - Hospitalist
 - Cardiology
 - Pulmonology

DESCRIPTION

Hospital Support houses many programs that launched South Carolina's telehealth journey. The purpose of this strategy domain is to ensure community hospitals remain successful in delivering the highest level of care possible, regardless of their location. Many services that fall under this domain offer specialty provider access, via telehealth, to community hospitals that are lacking in that particular specialty area.



64
SCTA
SUPPORTED
HOSPITALS



The **Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC)** provided over 10,000 inpatient consultations during 2021, supporting 39 South Carolina hospitals across 14 hospital based services.

In 2021, **Prisma Health and McLeod Health** partnered to launch a pediatric subspecialty program at McLeod facilities, increasing access for McLeod patients to Prisma pediatric subspecialists such as nephrology, hematology, pulmonology, and neurology.

SC Department of Mental Health (SCDMH) continued to provide accessible mental health care through its Emergency Department telepsychiatry program, providing approximately 9,300 telehealth services per month in 2021, over an 18% increase from the year before.

CONVENIENT CARE

OBJECTIVE

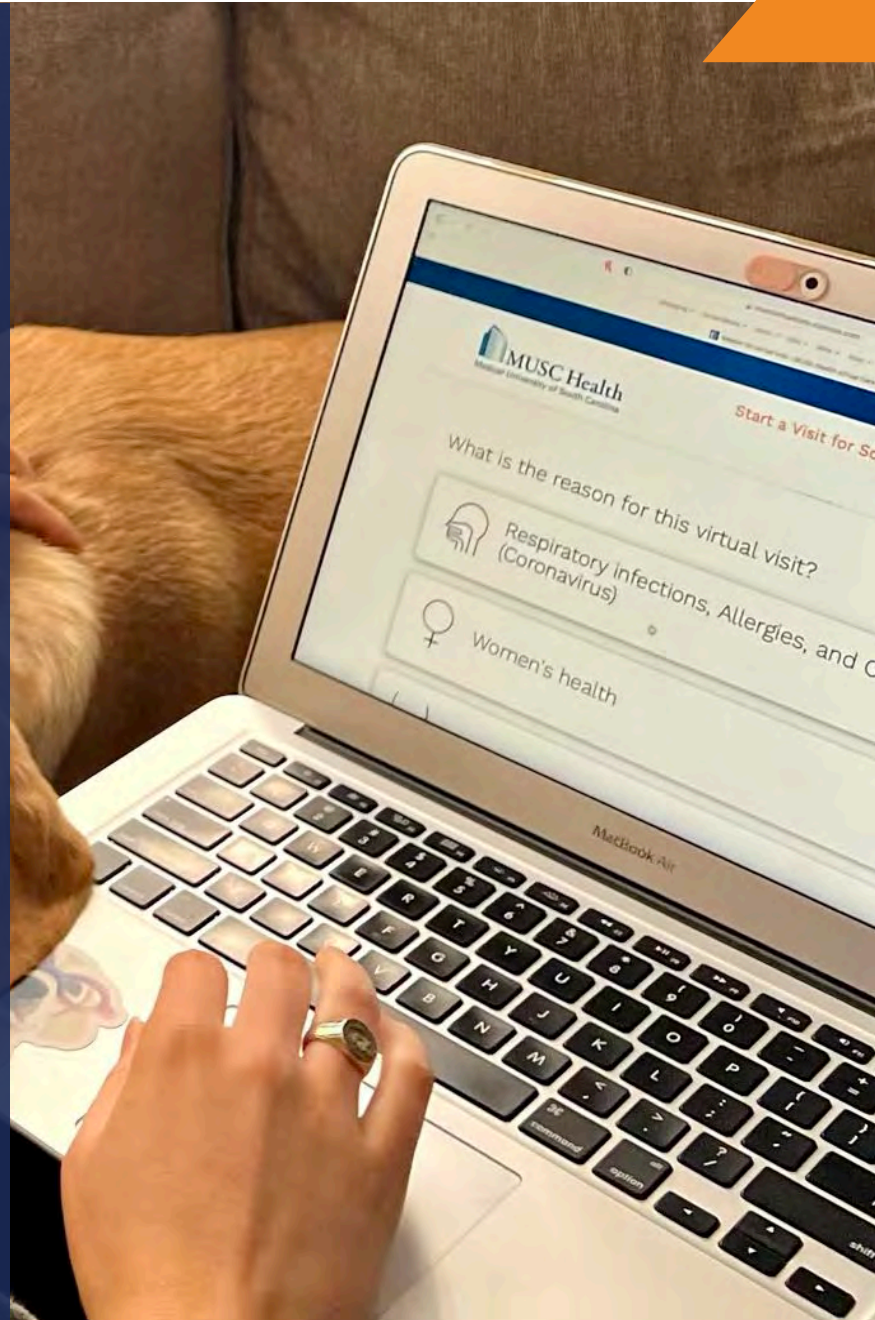
All citizens in South Carolina will have affordable and immediately available patient-initiated virtual urgent and other health system-entry level care from an in-state provider. Convenient Care services are designed to engage individual patients through their own available devices in order to optimize utilization and maximize healthcare engagement.

EXAMPLE SERVICES

- Virtual Urgent Care

DESCRIPTION

Convenient Care was designed to give South Carolinians access to low-acuity healthcare visits at their fingertips. These virtual visits are offered 24/7, usually asynchronously (not in real-time), allowing patients to complete an online questionnaire specific to their health concern, connect with a provider, and receive a diagnosis with next steps. Convenient Care not only aims to deliver simple, accessible care but also acts as a first step in engaging in healthcare for many patients.



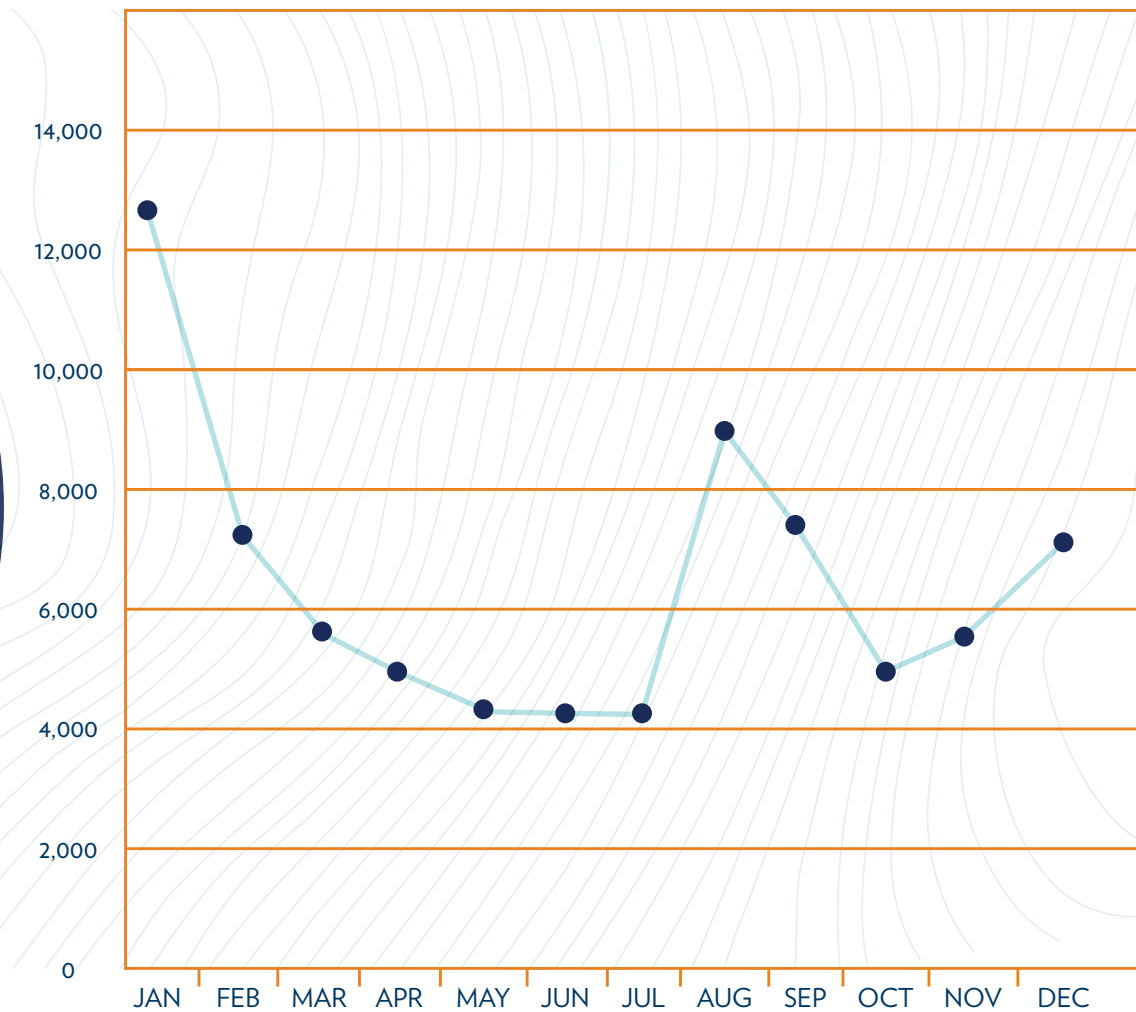
76,504

virtual urgent care visits conducted in South Carolina by SCTA partners in 2021

2021 saw a slight decrease in VUC utilization, but **volumes remain elevated** as compared to pre-COVID levels.

During COVID-19, SCTA partners leveraged their virtual urgent care platforms for COVID screenings and referrals to testing as appropriate. In 2021, fluctuations in monthly volumes tend to mirror the numerous waves and variants for this reason.

VIRTUAL URGENT CARE VISITS BY MONTH 2021



PRIMARY CARE SUPPORT

OBJECTIVE

All primary care clinics in the state, with emphasis on Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), will have access to integrated services through telehealth partnerships. These services are intended to support the mission of the primary care clinic as a medical home, emphasizing the importance of local health care infrastructure while mitigating gaps in access to supporting resources.

EXAMPLE SERVICES

- Project ECHO/Telementoring
- Diabetes Remote Patient Monitoring
- Diabetic Retinopathy Screening
- Primary Care Integrated Services
 - Nutrition Counseling
 - Psychiatry

DESCRIPTION

Primary Care Support services are specifically designed to unite distant and local providers to leverage primary care in our state. Through this strategy domain, South Carolina communities are equipped with additional primary care resources to enhance the way their patients receive care, without bypassing their local healthcare infrastructure.



Throughout 2021, **South Carolina's Project ECHO/Telementoring programs**, held 88 sessions, with approximately 2,887 participants. These programs focus on empowering rural healthcare providers to provide specialty-informed care for patients with specific needs through regular case and didactic sessions.



South Carolina's Diabetic Remote Patient Monitoring (RPM) program has enrolled over 1,500 patients since the program started, and supports over 40 clinic locations and free clinics during the year. This program allows providers to continuously monitor patients' blood glucose levels from afar while the patient is at home or in a clinical setting using the appropriate telehealth equipment. If levels are abnormal, the provider can quickly alert the patient or clinic staff to resolve the issue.

HEALTH EQUITY

OBJECTIVE

Targeted, novel initiatives will close the gap in access to health care services for high-priority health disparities. Health Equity services will make progress towards achieving health equity across the state in identified areas of health disparity.

EXAMPLE SERVICES

- School-Based Telehealth
- Women's Reproductive Behavioral Health
- Medication Assisted Treatment Telehealth (Tele-MAT)
- Maternal Fetal Medicine
- Health Care for the Homeless
- Pediatric Intensive Care Telehealth
- Telehealth Resilience and Recovery Program

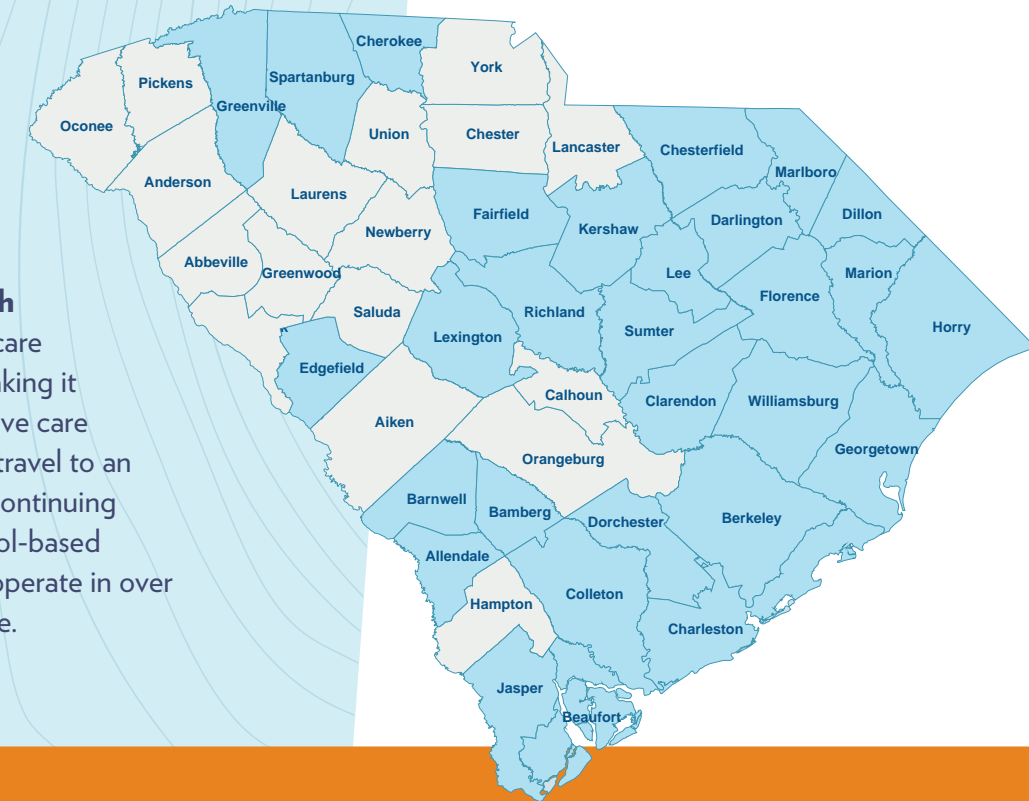
DESCRIPTION

Health Equity is a unique strategy domain, focusing on the “why” of telehealth use cases. Services included in this domain aim to fill the gaps in care that are otherwise vacant under the current healthcare system. These services target the most vulnerable populations in the state, requiring the collaboration of several parties to make an impactful change.



School-Based Telehealth

brings high-quality healthcare into the school setting, making it easier for students to receive care without missing school to travel to an appointment elsewhere. Continuing to expand each year, school-based telehealth programs now operate in over 178 schools across the state.



Horry and Georgetown County Boards of Disabilities and Special Needs experienced great success with their new Emergency Coverage Telehealth Program in 2021. Out of a total of 163 patient visits in its first year, the program estimated to have prevented 155 Emergency Room trips.



Scan to watch an educational video on **MUSC's Telehealth for the Homeless Program.**

This program aims to increase access to care for people experiencing homelessness through the use of telehealth. This program continues to serve as a vital resource for this population, as 40% of patients experiencing homelessness who received telehealth care said they otherwise would have made a trip to the ER.



BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

EXPANDING BROADBAND ACCESS

Palmetto Care Connections (PCC) plays a critical role in assisting health care providers and patients in accessing broadband subsidies through various federal programs. These subsidies allow health care entities to increase broadband to provide telehealth services. In 2021, PCC submitted subsidy applications for 19 new health care organizations with over 160 new physical locations, and received funding commitment letters for approximately 90% of the funding requests.

As the SCTA's leaders in broadband access and advocacy, PCC not only continued its important work in broadband subsidy filings during 2021, but also continued to work directly with internet service providers, and advocate at the federal and state level to expand broadband access in South Carolina.

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

PCC was awarded the National Cooperative of Health Networks Association's (NCHN) 2021 Outstanding Health Network award, recognizing its valuable work in improving access to health services through their work in increasing broadband access and digital literacy efforts.



33,000+
telehealth learning
experiences occurred in
South Carolina
during 2021

TRAINING & EDUCATION

The need for high-quality telehealth training and education continued through 2021, as South Carolina providers and patients continued to leverage telehealth as a vital piece of the health care continuum. During the year, educational and training opportunities such as PCC's 9th Annual Telehealth Summit of South Carolina and Webinar Wednesdays, in addition to the in-depth training modules continuously updated by SC AHEC helped South Carolinians to learn and become increasingly familiar with different telehealth modalities, the changing policy landscape, best practices in service delivery, and billing and compliance for telehealth visits. Moving forward, as telehealth programs help our healthcare system emerge from COVID-19 stronger than ever, robust training and educational opportunities will continue to be vital for providers and patients in South Carolina.

Digital Literacy Outreach and Training

Recognizing that community members' ability to operate technology is integral for accessing telehealth services and advancing equity, PCC used grant funds from the Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and additional funding from the S.C. Office on Aging to implement a digital inclusion pilot program for seniors in five counties in South Carolina. Participants in the program learned many important components of using a tablet. Additional funds have now allowed the digital literacy program to expand to senior citizens in six additional rural counties.



IN 2021 PCC received funding commitments for over \$11 million in broadband subsidies for South Carolina health care providers.

350+ Participants at the 9th Annual Telehealth Summit of South Carolina, hosted by PCC in November.

RESEARCH & OUTCOMES

MUSC HEALTH CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

The MUSC Center for Telehealth is one of two federally recognized National Telehealth Centers of Excellence (COE) as designated by the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) in 2017. In 2021, the COE was renewed for another 5 years and will receive a total of \$16.25 million to fill important gaps in the national telehealth landscape through a combination of ongoing regional and national collaborations, as well as proactive dissemination of telehealth resources. The COE supports over 50 faculty and staff who will be working on 16+ subprojects over the next five years focused on telehealth economic evaluation, improving quality of care via telehealth, and improving health system and provider experience with telehealth.

SC CENTER FOR RURAL AND PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

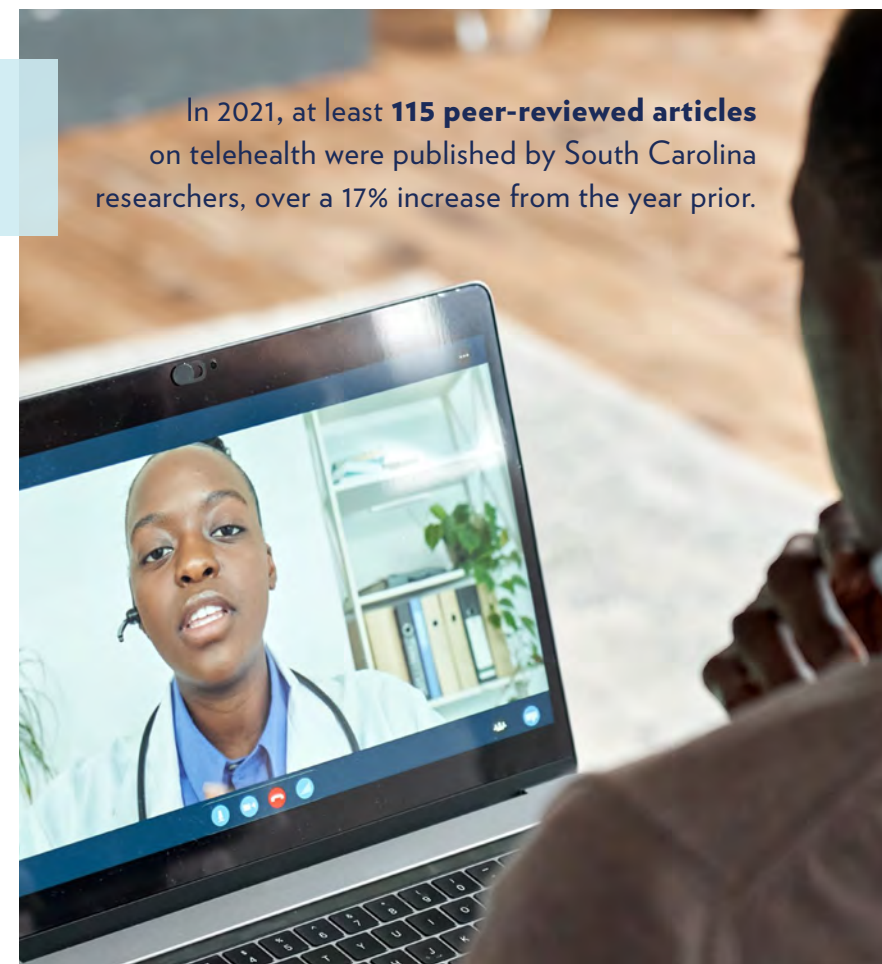


The SCTA continued its partnership with the SC Center for Rural and Primary Health Care (CRPH) at the USC School of Medicine, to support telehealth research and innovation, with a particular focus on rural and primary care practices. Early in the year, CRPH built upon the previous work of the SCTA and the Office of the National Coordinator for Health to assess the barriers and facilitators of successful telehealth adoption among small rural and primary healthcare practices in South Carolina amidst the pandemic. Results will help inform future policy changes, assess the impact of COVID-19 on telehealth use, and identify key resources needed to support telehealth services for rural South Carolina.

SC TELEHEALTH RESEARCH PILOT GRANTS

The SCTA partnered with the SC Clinical and Translational Research Institute (SCTR) again in 2021, to award two \$25,000 Telehealth Research Pilot Grants with the aim to accelerate the adoption, utilization, and investigation of telehealth interventions in South Carolina:

- BioWare to Enhance Treatment for Alcohol Use Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, **Amber Jarnecke, MD (MUSC)**
- Adapting a Program of SUPPORT for Telehealth Delivery in Advanced Lung Disease, **Kathleen Lindell, MD (MUSC)**



In 2021, at least **115 peer-reviewed articles** on telehealth were published by South Carolina researchers, over a 17% increase from the year prior.

PROMOTIONS & AWARENESS

In 2021, SCETV created 46 unique podcasts, videos, and news stories about telehealth in South Carolina. Distribution points included broadcasts on South Carolina ETV, South Carolina Public Radio, and digital channels including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. The South Carolina Public Radio stories reach all major markets including Charlotte, Augusta, and Savannah, airing twice per week, and reaching 1.1 million weekly listeners.

- In December, SCETV posted that Care South Carolina is leading the transformation of community-centered care. That post had a reach of 1,700 and garnered 395 engagements.
- SCETV's top stories for the year featured patient-centered care, from Charleston Promise Neighborhood's telehealth program to Spartanburg's Nurse Family Partnership.
- SCETV received an Emmy nomination in 2021 for their MyTelehealth feature story of a mobile app created by MUSC's Dr. Moreland, which helps therapists deliver mental health support to firefighters. Watch the Emmy-nominated video and read the full story here!

The SCTA served as a key player in the first-ever national Telehealth Awareness Week (TAW). Five years after launching TAW in South Carolina, the team continued by building out a collaborative strategy with assets to match. During the one week of TAW alone, the team utilized digital media to drive conversations on the need to incorporate telehealth as a regular healthcare practice. Twitter and Facebook reached over 5,500 individuals – that one-week count exceeds the total reach achieved by those same social media handles in 4 different months from the past year.



With telehealth, it's been a life-saver for us. It definitely has opened the doors for us to be able to keep the lines of communication open and to give [mothers] the information that they need, even though we are not able to be in the home."

Debbie Brush, RN, speaking about Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System's Nurse Family Partnership Telehealth Program



SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWER GROWTH 2021



+17%



+21%

SUSTAINABILITY

The Public Health Emergency (PHE), originally declared in March 2020, was renewed every 90 days through 2021, continuing the temporary telehealth coverage flexibilities from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) South Carolina Medicaid, and private payers. This expanded coverage and reimbursement have made telehealth an important piece of the care continuum, as providers and patients who previously may not have considered a telehealth visit have now acclimated to using technology to provide and receive healthcare. Not only are South Carolinians using telehealth more regularly, but telehealth visits have become a necessary component to delivering high-quality care. Although the PHE continues into 2022, SC providers and payers agree that going back to pre-pandemic telehealth coverage policies is not an option. To assist SC Medicaid and other state-level payers in evaluating long-term coverage plans, the SCTA produced a document with recommendations and supporting evidence for sustained telehealth reimbursement and coverage after the eventual expiration of the PHE declaration.

Recommendations included:

- Permanently remove originating site restrictions
- Cover all CMS approved mental health and registered dietician provider types as well as rehabilitation therapists
- Permanently allow federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and rural health centers (RHCs) serve as distant sites for telehealth
- Continue coverage of virtual check-ins and audio-only telehealth services
- Cover chronic care remote patient monitoring codes currently covered by Medicare
- Cover interprofessional internet consultation (e-Consult) codes covered by Medicare
- Cover behavioral health integration codes (including CoCM) covered by Medicare

The SCTA's recommendations directly informed SC Medicaid's FY21-22 Proviso Telehealth Report, which echoed many of the SCTA's highest priorities, and outlined areas of alignment between the SCTA recommendations and Medicaid Managed Care Organizations (MCOs). Looking forward, we expect strong collaboration among providers, payers, and policy makers to work toward a more sustainable, permanent telehealth reimbursement landscape in our state.



To see the **full** SCTA Payer Priority document, scan the code above.



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