

An evaluation of policies, programs, and practices to increase telehealth access for NC farmworkers



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Nadia Bey¹

¹Duke University

Overview

- Farmworkers face a variety of barriers to accessing health care: work hours, lack of transport, limited health coverage/income, HPSAs
- Telehealth, often proposed as a solution to access issues, has yet to be widely adopted by this population
- Farmworker patients have used telehealth since 2020 but access is hindered by lack of broadband, current reimbursement policies
- State entities like Farmworker Health Program are working to improve access to care + connectivity

Population Characteristics

- Between 80k and 150k NC farmworkers including H-2A migrants (primarily from Mexico) and seasonal workers
- H-2A workers live in employer-owned camps around state (top 5 counties Sampson, Nash, Johnston, Duplin, Bladen)
- At FHP-associated clinics the most prevalent conditions in 2021 were diabetes, hypertension
- Chronic and mental health conditions had most related visits on average in 2021

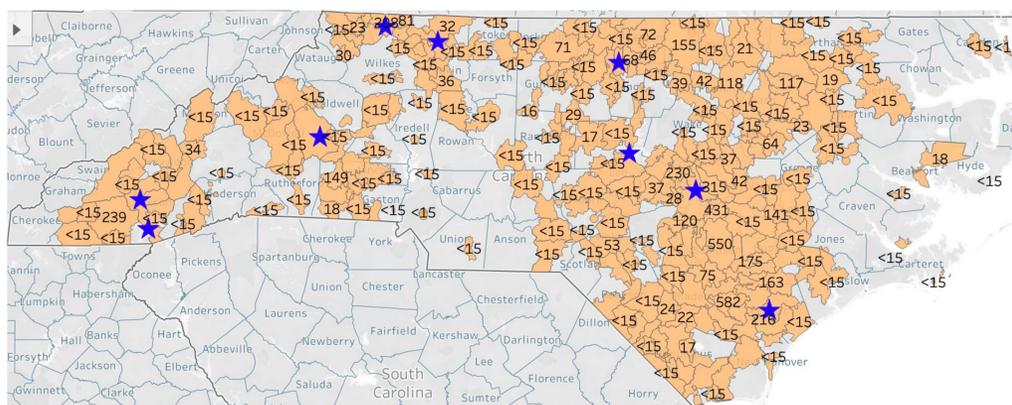


Figure 1. Map showing 2022 locations of Farmworker Health Program clinics and zip codes of origin for patients. Counts suppressed under 15 patients.

Policy Challenges

- Money and time for broadband installation
- Not fully known which areas need broadband connectivity
- Migrant housing not required to have internet + harder to add after the fact
- Lack of telehealth reimbursement especially for audio-only

Qualitative Findings

- One health center shifted away from offering telehealth to farmworkers due to lack of internet
- Farmworker interviewed did not have a regular place for care; people w/o regular places are less likely to use telehealth
- Health centers give farmworkers ways to initiate contact but they may not do so
- Health centers often travel to farm camps to provide care and transportation
- Community organizations expressed need for audio-only telehealth reimbursement
- Limited bilingual (Spanish) telehealth services

Conclusions

- Funding from governmental and nongovernmental entities needed to support broadband connectivity and telehealth implementation
- May be important to prioritize mental health and chronic disease services for farmworkers
- May be necessary to initiate in-person contact before initiating telehealth services

Programs

TeleFuturo

- Partnership between El Futuro in Durham and NC Farmworker Health Program
- Provided teletherapy to over 300 farmworkers since 2019
- Funded by grants, donors, contracts, FFS revenue

Internet Connectivity Project

- Hotspots, internet hubs, and reimbursing growers for broadband installation
- Solely funded by HRSA grant
- Delivery through state agency limited sustainability

Recommendations

- Incentivize nongovernmental entities to partake in the expansion of broadband connectivity and telehealth programs
- Reimbursement parity for all appointment modalities in rural areas
- Require future migrant housing to have internet access
- Recruit more Spanish-speaking providers