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The National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers: COVID-19 Assistance

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Introduction

On January 31, 2020, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) a Public Health Emergency (PHE).[1] During this public health emergency, the Secretary of HHS has taken action to encourage the use of *telehealth*.[2] Telehealth generally refers to a health care provider's use of information and communication technology in the delivery of clinical and nonclinical health care services.[3] The use of telehealth during public health emergencies can assist health care professionals with, for example, reserving in-person care for patients with critical health care needs and diminishing the spread of communicable diseases. Some stakeholders, however, are experiencing challenges with establishing, implementing, and offering virtual health care services through telehealth programs.

This report provides a brief overview of the National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers and describes its capacity to help various stakeholders adapt telehealth to provide care during national public health emergencies.

National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers

The National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers, referred to in this report as the TRC Consortium, is helping stakeholders (e.g., state and local health care facilities, health care administrators, chief financial officers, health care providers, and patients) respond to COVID-19 through the use of telehealth.[4] The TRC Consortium provides short- and long-term assistance, access to telehealth experts, policy analysis, technology assessments, education and training materials, and specialized tools and templates, all of which are generally provided at no cost.[5]

Statutory Authority

The TRC Consortium is the grantee of the Telehealth Resource Center Program.[6] The grant program, which was established by the Health Care Safety Net Amendments of 2002 (P.L. 107-

[1] Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), "Secretary Azar Declares Public Health Emergency for United States for 2019 Novel Coronavirus," press release, January 31, 2020, https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/01/31/secretary-azar-declares-public-health-emergency-us-2019-novel-coronavirus.html. For background information on the COVID-19 outbreak, see CRS In Focus IF11421, *COVID-19: Global Implications and Responses*, and CRS Report R46219, *Overview of U.S. Domestic Response to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. Other CRS products on COVID-19 are accessible at https://www.crs.gov/resources/coronavirus-disease-2019.

[2] HHS, "Secretary Azar Announces Historic Expansion of Telehealth Access to Combat COVID-19," press release, March 17, 2020, https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/03/17/secretary-azar-announces-historic-expansion-of-telehealth-access-to-combat-covid-19.html.

[3] For background information on telehealth, see CRS Report R46239, *Telehealth and Telemedicine: Frequently Asked Questions*.

[4] National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers (TRC Consortium), *About Our Consortium*, https://www.telehealthresourcecenter.org/about-us/.

[5] This list was adapted from TRC Consortium, *A Decade of Service: A Report on Ten Years of Service-With an Eye to the Future*, p. 3, https://www.nrtrc.org/content/article-files/White%20Papers/TRC%2010%20Year%20Report%20digital.pdf (hereinafter referred to as TRC Consortium, *A Decade of Service*).

[6] Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), of HHS, *Telehealth Resource Center Grant Program*, https://www.hrsa.gov/grants/find-funding/hrsa-16-013.

251, as amended), aims to demonstrate how telehealth technologies can be used to serve medically underserved populations in rural areas, frontier communities, and medically underserved areas.[7] Stakeholders outside of these areas can access resources through the TRC Consortium. For example, on March 19, 2020, the TRC Consortium held a webinar on telehealth and COVID-19 for the public.[8]

Appropriations for the TRC Program

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of HHS administers the grant program. The authorization of $20 million in appropriated funds for the TRC program expired in 2002; an appropriation "for such sums as may be necessary" expired in 2006.[9] However, Congress continues to fund the program through annual appropriations. The FY2020 appropriations report language provides $28.5 million to HRSA's overarching Telehealth Program, which includes the TRC program.[10]

Use of Funds

Current law authorizes the TRC Consortium to use funds to pay for salaries, equipment, operation, and other costs for

- providing technical assistance, training, support, and for travel expenses for health care providers and a range of health care entities that provide or will provide telehealth services;
- disseminating information and research findings related to telehealth services;
- promoting effective collaboration among TRCs and the Office for the Advancement of Telehealth (OAT) within HRSA;
- conducting evaluations to determine the best use of telehealth technologies to meet health care needs;
- promoting the integration of the technologies used in clinical information systems with other telehealth technologies;
- fostering the use of telehealth technologies to provide health care information and education for health care providers and consumers in a more effective manner; and
- implementing special projects or studies under the direction of OAT.[11]

P.L. 107-251 allows HRSA to establish TRCs under the TRC program; therefore, the TRC Consortium comprises 2 national TRCs and 12 regional TRCs.

[7] 42 U.S.C. §254c-14; and Section 330I of the Public Health Service Act.

[8] TRC Consortium, *NCTRC Webinar-Telehealth and COVID-19*, https://www.telehealthresourcecenter.org/event/nctrc-webinar-telehealth-and-covid-19/.

[9] 42 U.S.C. §254c-14(s)(2).

[10] H.Rept. 116-62, p. 327. To learn about HRSA's other telehealth programs, see HRSA, *FY2021 Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees*, pp. 324-328, https://www.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/hrsa/about/budget/budget-justification-fy2021.pdf.

[11] This list was adapted from 42 U.S.C. §254c-14(k)(2).

Two National TRCs

There are two national TRCs: (1) the National Telehealth Policy Resource Center (NTRC-P) and (2) the National Telehealth Technology Assessment Resource Center (TTAC). The Center for Connected Health Policy (CCHP) is the federally designated NTRC-P. CCHP provides the public with federal and state laws and reimbursement policies on telehealth, including those related to COVID-19.[12] TTAC is a standalone federally designated organization. TTAC provides information on national standards, clinical application, and technology assessments.[13]

Twelve Regional TRCs

Twelve regional TRCs are responsible for providing U.S. jurisdictions, including U.S. territories, with telehealth-related assistance. **Table 1** lists each of the 12 regional TRCs with the U.S. jurisdictions that the regional TRC covers. The table also includes the publicly accessible websites for each of the TRCs.

Table 1. The 12 Regional Telehealth Resource Centers (TRCs)

Regional TRC	Covered U.S. Jurisdictions	Regional TRC Website
California Telehealth Resource Center	California	http://www.caltrc.org/
Great Plains Telehealth Resource and Assistance Center	Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin	http://www.gptrac.org/
Heartland Telehealth Resource Center	Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma	http://www.heartlandtrc.org/
Mid-Atlantic Telehealth Resource Center	Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey [shared], North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington DC, and West Virginia,	http://www.matrc.org/
Northeast Telehealth Resource Center	New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont), New York, and New Jersey [shared]	https://www.netrc.org/
Northwest Regional Telehealth Resource Center	Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming	https://www.nrtrc.org/
Pacific Basin Telehealth Resource Center	American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands	http://www.pbtrc.org/
South Central Telehealth Resource Center	Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee	https://learntelehealth.org/
Southeast Telehealth Resource Center	Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina	https://www.setrc.us/
Southwest Telehealth Resource Center	Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah	https://southwesttrc.org/

[12] Center for Connected Health Policy, *COVID-19 Telehealth Coverage Policies*, https://www.cchpca.org/resources/covid-19-telehealth-coverage-policies.

[13] National Telehealth Technology Assessment Resource Center, http://telehealthtechnology.org/.

TexLa Telehealth Resource Center	Louisiana and Texas	https://texlatrc.org/
Upper Midwest Telehealth Resource Center	Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio	https://www.umtrc.org/

Source: CRS prepared this table using information from National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers, *Find Your TRC*, https://www.telehealthresourcecenter.org/who-your-trc/.

Examples of TRCs' work, according to the TRC Consortium, include helping stakeholders design clinical protocols, select telehealth technologies, identify federal and state funding opportunities, complete telehealth grant applications, and address licensure and credentialing barriers.[14] Stakeholders, who seek assistance with telehealth related matters, including those related to the COVID-19 outbreak, may visit their respective regional TRC websites. The websites contain the telephone numbers and email addresses for the regional TRCs. Stakeholders may visit the TRC Consortium's website for the telephone numbers of each of the 12 regional TRCs and to contact the TRC Consortium directly for assistance.[15]

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[14] TRC Consortium, *A Decade of Service*, pp. 7 and 13.

[15] To view the telephone numbers of each of the 12 regional TRCs, see TRC Consortium, *Find Your TRC*, https://www.telehealthresourcecenter.org/who-your-trc/. To reach out to the TRC directly, see TRC Consortium, *Contact Us*, https://www.telehealthresourcecenter.org/contact/.