

Virginia Board of Physical Therapy Guidance on Telehealth

Section One: Preamble

The Board of Physical Therapy recognizes that using telehealth services in the delivery of physical therapy services offers potential benefits in the provision of care. Advancements in technology have created expanded and innovative treatment options for physical therapist and clients. The appropriate application of these services can enhance care by facilitating communication between practitioners, other health care providers, and their clients. The delivery of physical therapy services by or under the supervision of a physical therapist via telehealth in physical therapy falls under the purview of the existing regulatory body and the respective practice act and regulations. The Virginia General Assembly has not established statutory parameters regarding the provision and delivery of telehealth services by physical therapy practitioners. Therefore, physical therapy practitioners must apply existing laws and regulations to the provision of telehealth services.

To reiterate, telehealth is used as a means to deliver physical therapy services already authorized within the scope of practice of physical therapy and within the standards for care and supervision established by the Board's laws and regulations. The use of telehealth, even during the course of a declared public health emergency, does not constitute a waiver of a practitioner's duty to follow existing standards of practice.

The Board issues this guidance document to assist practitioners with the application of current laws to telehealth service practices. These guidelines should not be construed to alter the scope of physical therapy practice or authorize the delivery of health care services in a setting, or in a manner, not authorized by law. For clarity, a physical therapist using telehealth services must take appropriate steps to establish the practitioner-patient (client) relationship and conduct all appropriate evaluations and history of the client consistent with traditional standards of care for the particular client presentation. As such, some situations and client presentations are appropriate for the utilization of telehealth services as a component of, or in lieu of, in-person provision of physical therapy care, while others are not. The practitioner is responsible for making this determination, and in doing so must adhere to applicable laws and standards of care.

The Board has developed these guidelines to educate licensees as to the appropriate use of telehealth services in the practice of physical therapy. The Board is committed to ensuring patient access to the convenience and benefits afforded by telehealth services, while promoting the responsible provision of physical therapy services.

It is the expectation of the Board that practitioners who provide physical therapy care, electronically or otherwise, maintain the highest degree of professionalism and should:

- Place the welfare of the client first;
- Maintain acceptable and appropriate standards of practice;

- Adhere to recognized ethical codes governing the physical therapy profession;
- Adhere to applicable laws and regulations;
- Properly supervise PTA's and support personnel;
- Protect client confidentiality.

Section Two: Definition

Telehealth is the use of electronic technology or media including interactive audio or video to engage in the practice of physical therapy. In this guidance document, “telehealth” does not include an audio-only telephone call, electronic mail message, facsimile transmission, or online questionnaire, where these communications are intended to be simple client communications rather than the practice or rendering of physical therapy services.

Section Three: Responsibility for and Appropriate Use of Technology

A client's appropriateness for evaluation and treatment via telehealth should be determined by the physical therapist on a case-by-case basis, with selections based on physical therapist judgment, client preference, technology availability, risks and benefits, and professional standards of care. A PT is responsible for all aspects of physical therapy care provided to a client, and should determine and document the technology used in the provision of physical therapy. Additionally, the PT is responsible for assuring the technological proficiency of those involved in the client's care.

Section Four: Responsibility for and Appropriate Evaluation and Supervision

A PT's evaluation and supervisory responsibilities do not change with the use of telehealth to deliver physical therapy services.

Likewise, the role of the PTA does not change with provision of services through telehealth. A PTA may assist the PT in performing selected components of physical therapy intervention to include treatment, measurement, and data collection, but not to include the performance of an evaluation as defined in the Board's regulations. *See* 18VAC112-20-10 (definition of “evaluation”).

Section Five: Verification of Identity and Location

Given that in the telehealth clinical setting the client and therapist are not in the same location and may not have established a prior in-person relationship, it is critical, at least initially, that the identities of the physical therapy providers and client be verified. Photo identification is recommended for both the client and all parties who may be involved in the delivery of care to the client. The photo identification, at minimum, should include the name of the individual; however, personal information such as driver's license number does not have to be shared or revealed. The physical therapy practitioner should verify the location of and emergency contact information for the client prior to the start of the telehealth session, as this information may be necessary to summon assistance in the event of an emergency.

The client may utilize current means, such as state websites, to verify the physical therapy provider is licensed in the originating jurisdiction (where the client is located and receiving telehealth services).

Section Six: Informed Consent

Clients should be made aware of any limitations that telehealth services present as compared to an in-person encounter for that client's situation, such as the inability to perform hands-on examination, assessment and treatment, clients should give consent to such services and evidence documenting appropriate client informed consent for the use of telehealth services should be obtained and maintained. Appropriate informed consent should, as a baseline, include the following:

- Identification of the client, the practitioner, and the practitioner's credentials;
- Types of activities permitted using telehealth services (e.g. such as photography, recording or videotaping the client.);
- Details on security measures taken with the use of telehealth services, as well as potential risks to privacy notwithstanding such measures;
- Hold harmless clause for information lost due to technical failures; and
- Requirement for express client consent to forward client-identifiable information to a third party.

Section Seven: Physical therapist/Client Relationship

Developing a physical therapist/client relationship is relevant regardless of the delivery method of the physical therapy services. As alternative delivery methods such as telehealth emerge, it bears stating that the PT/client relationship can be established in the absence of actual physical contact between the PT and client. Just as in a traditional (in-person) encounter, once the relationship is established, the therapist has an obligation to adhere to the reasonable standards of care for the client (duty of care).

Section Eight: Licensure

Unless otherwise provided for telehealth services delivered during declared public health emergencies to ensure continuity of care, the practice of physical therapy occurs where the client is located at the time telehealth services are provided. A practitioner must be licensed by, or under the jurisdiction of, the regulatory board of the state where the client is located. Practitioners who evaluate or treat through online service sites must possess appropriate licensure or compact privileges in all jurisdictions where clients receive care.

Section Nine: Standards of Care

It is the responsibility of the PT to ensure the standard of care required both professionally and legally is met. As such, it is incumbent upon the PT to determine which clients and therapeutic interventions are appropriate for the utilization of technology as a component of, or in lieu of, in-person provision of physical therapy care. Physical therapy providers should be guided by

professional discipline, best available evidence, and any existing clinical practice guidelines when practicing via telehealth. Physical therapy interventions and/or referrals/consultations made using technology will be held to the same standards of care as those in traditional (in-person) settings. The documentation of the telehealth encounter should be held at minimum to the standards of an in-person encounter. Additionally, any aspects of the care unique to the telehealth encounter, such as the specific technology used, should be noted.

Section Ten: Privacy and Security of Client Records and Exchange of Information

In any physical therapy encounter, steps should be taken to ensure compliance with all relevant laws, regulations and codes for confidentiality and integrity of identifiable client health information. Written policies and procedures should be maintained for documentation, maintenance, and transmission of the records of encounters using telehealth services. Such policies and procedures should address (1) privacy, (2) health-care personnel (in addition to the practitioner addressee) who will process messages, (3) hours of operation, (4) types of transactions that will be permitted electronically, (5) required client information to be included in the communication, such as client name, identification number and type of transaction, (6) archival and retrieval, and (7) quality oversight mechanisms. Policies and procedures should be periodically evaluated for currency and be maintained in an accessible and readily available manner for review.

Section Eleven: Client Records

The client record should include, if applicable, copies of all client-related electronic communications, including client-practitioner communication, prescriptions, laboratory and test results, evaluations and consultations, records of past care, and instructions obtained or produced in connection with the utilization of telehealth services. Informed consents obtained in connection with an encounter involving telehealth services should also be filed in the medical record. The client record established during the use of telehealth services should be accessible to both the practitioner and the client, and consistent with all established laws and regulations governing client healthcare records.

Section Twelve: Technical Guidelines

Physical therapy providers need to have the level of understanding of the technology that ensures safe, effective delivery of care. Providers should be fully aware of the capabilities and limitations of the technology they intend to use and that the equipment is sufficient to support the telehealth encounter, is available and functioning properly and all personnel are trained in equipment operation, troubleshooting, and necessary hardware/software updates. Additionally, arrangements should be made to ensure access to appropriate technological support as needed.

Section Thirteen: Client Emergencies and Safety Procedures

When providing physical therapy services, it is essential to have procedures in place to address technical, medical, or clinical emergencies. Emergency procedures need to take into account local emergency plans. Alternate methods of communication between both parties should be

established prior to providing telehealth services in case of technical complications. It is the responsibility of the provider to have all needed information to activate emergency medical services to the clients' physical location if needed at time of the services are being provided. If during the provision of services the provider feels that the client might be experiencing any medical or clinical complications or emergencies, services should be terminated and the client referred to an appropriate level of service.

Section Fourteen: Guidance Document Limitations

Nothing in this document shall be construed to limit the authority of the Board to investigate, discipline, or regulate its licensees pursuant to applicable Virginia statutes and regulations. Additionally, nothing in this document shall be construed to limit the Board's ability to review the delivery or use of telehealth services by its licensees for adherence to the standard of care and compliance with the requirements set forth in the laws and regulations of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Furthermore, this document does not limit the Board's ability to determine that certain situations fail to meet the standard of care or standards set forth in laws and regulations despite technical adherence to the guidance produced herein. The guidance in this document does not extend to billing for telehealth services.