Opinion: Internet access is a critical telehealth, equity issue

Image: McDermott Will & Emery LLP

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McDermott Will & Emery LLP

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Covid-19 served as a major pivot event for the adoption of virtual healthcare solutions. As stay-at-home orders swept the country and the pandemic forced physical isolation, telehealth tools were rapidly rolled out to safely provide necessary services. The reality on the ground forced overnight adoption of virtual care services that otherwise likely would have plodded along for decades.

Patients, clinicians and policymakers alike have cheered on this telehealth transformation. The new landscape increases convenience, safety and access to care. But to truly succeed, this movement must accelerate equitably across communities.

Image: McDermott Will & Emery

<u>Enlarge</u>

Stephen Bernstein is a partner and co-chair of McDermott Will & Emery LLP's digital health practice.

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As with education, grocery shopping, telework and every other aspect of our recent rapid digitalization, the telehealth revolution has not been absolute. Many Americans lack access to broadband, technology and digital tools to make this new world part of their day-to-day reality. While providers and technology companies have innovated to address these access gaps, more can be done to ensure fair and equal availability in the future.

The disparities are multifold and thus require nuanced policy solutions. According to the FCC's latest January 2021 *Broadband Deployment Report*, more than 18 million Americans still lack speedy, reliable Internet, and some officials caution that the actual number is likely even higher. Affordability is also a major contributor to the digital divide. Even when in-home high-speed internet is available, many low-income households struggle to pay for it. And unfortunately, smartphones can't be relied upon to guarantee access either, as procuring sufficient data and minutes to power mobile devices is an expense that is too often out of reach for low- and middle-income Americans.

The disconnect disproportionately affects those living in lower socioeconomic status and people of color in both rural and urban communities, making the least connected communities the same populations who face the highest rates of chronic disease. And, during the pandemic, these were the same groups who are disproportionately affected by Covid-19. We cannot allow lack of connectivity to become one more health risk factor for the most vulnerable.

The federal government has spent billions of dollars over the last decade to deploy broadband infrastructure to underserved regions of the country, and further investment in broadband will likely be included as part of President Biden's Build Back Better recovery plan, which will be taken up by Congress later this year. In addition, his month, Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.) and U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minnesota) introduced a $94 billion bill entitled the Accessible Affordable Internet for All Act. The legislation is intended to improve broadband access for underserved and unserved communities.

The December 2020 coronavirus aid package included one of the most substantial one-time broadband investments in U.S. history with $7 billion to help Americans connect to high-speed internet and pay monthly bills. President Biden has also promised to work with the FCC to reform the Lifeline program to offer more low-income Americans the subsidies needed to access high-speed internet and to work with Congress to pass the Digital Equity Act to help communities tackle the digital divide, but legislation has yet to be crafted.

Universal internet access is a critical equity and healthcare issue and as a nation, we are at a digital tipping point. Local, state, and federal officials must work together with healthcare and technology providers to guarantee that everyone has access to remote care solutions to ensure that lack of connectivity doesn't further exacerbate health disparities. Improving connectivity and access to digital solutions is a critical component of fulfilling the president's equity promises.

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T H E L I S T

Largest Robotics Companies in Massachusetts

Ranked by Number of Massachusetts employees as of Feb. 1, 2021

Rank	Company	Number of Massachusetts employees as of Feb. 1, 2021
1	**iRobot Corp.**	698
2	**Brooks Automation Inc.**	600
3	**QinetiQ Inc.**	350

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