

Delivering for Families with Autism during COVID-19

The Quick Pivot to Telehealth for Applied Behavioral Analysis Services

Executive Summary: Across the country in mid-March, Federal, state, and local governments began grasping the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Federal government began passing legislation to buffer the coming economic calamity, governors issued stay-at-home advisories and local governments shuttered public schools. New England ABA (NEABA), a provider of home and community-based Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) services, experienced families becoming increasingly uncertain about in-person services being delivered in homes. In response, NEABA developed an immediate action plan to continue to deliver legally mandated and clinically necessary ABA services to its clients. A key part of our approach was the rapid introduction of a telehealth solution for ABA services to ensure that children, adolescents, and their families had the best opportunities to stay on track during this period of disruption. Now one month into the stay-at-home advisories, NEABA is providing telehealth services to 79% of its customer base, while continuing to provide home-based services when appropriate.

COVID-19: The Challenge for NEABA to Deliver Home and Community Based ABA Services

As a result of emergency home sheltering orders imposed by state and local governments, schools, clinics, and home-based services were significantly interrupted for millions of children receiving traditional in-person ABA services. Further, while ABA services were deemed essential during the home sheltering orders, many parents and families exercised caution with regard to continued in-home services. In response, the U.S. Department of Education, state health and education departments and regulators, and state license boards took rapid action to provide guidance on telehealth as an alternative service modality and to relax the enforcement of HIPAA guidelines. Emergency guidance was provided by MassHealth, commercial, and Medicaid Managed Care insurance payers regarding clinical, administrative, and payment guidelines for telehealth services. Based on this guidance, NEABA immediately began to work closely with its customers to implement telehealth solutions.

The Pivot to Telehealth Services

While the clinical efficacy for supervisory ABA services delivered via telehealth is generally consistent with in-person delivery, there is a clear preference by insurance payers, children, and parents for the latter. Moreover, direct treatment by Behavioral Technicians is almost exclusively delivered in-person making extensive use of telehealth a novel concept. With COVID-19 all but eliminating in-person behavioral services, the telehealth option became the essential tool to continue care for all affected children. The NEABA team believed that a virtual service delivery model could be implemented quickly with robust clinical standards and limited interruption in services.

NEABA developed a telehealth solution that allows the provision of ABA services to continue to children and families in their homes using a secure video-conferencing platform. NEABA adopted Google Meet as a HIPAA-compliant software solution. NEABA's employees already had

familiarity with the Google platform, and had all of the hardware and software already in their possession, smoothing the transition for both children and clinicians.

Every NEABA department mobilized rapidly to support telehealth, implementing several training and staff development initiatives to prepare clinical staff for the effective use of the telehealth platform. The NEABA Clinical Leadership team established practice standards, protocols, and guidelines for the use of telehealth. Certain NEABA clinical team members with telehealth experience were designated as subject matter experts to assist with answering clinical telehealth questions.

NEABA's operations team also ensured that clinical staff had access to all appropriate technology tools, developed and administered training tools, and provided guidelines on best practices and frequently asked questions to therapists, clients, parents, and guardians.

Maintaining Quality Services and Customer Service During COVID-19

Leveraging NEABA's telehealth solution allows clients to continue receiving ABA services to stay on track and progress toward their goals. Procedures are in place to collect the required documentation and data, as well as to coordinate scheduling and consent forms with parents. With these tools, and NEABA's operational infrastructure and support, clients can continue to progress as expected despite not receiving services in person. NEABA is able to offer these telehealth services at no additional cost to the insurance payer or family.

NEABA is committed to providing telehealth technical training, clinical training, resources and ongoing support to its clients as the company continues to pursue its mission of changing lives, one family at a time during this unprecedented time.

New England ABA is part of The Stepping Stones Group, a leading provider of therapeutic and behavioral health services to children including those with special needs and autism.