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PAHO telehealth project promises to expand services for people with noncommunicable diseases in Latin America and the Caribbean

Acceleration of telemedicine during COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to the US Government-supported program



In Santiago, Chile, in May 2022, PAHO supported an international conference (“Connectathon”) focused on helping Latin American and Caribbean countries prepare for use of telehealth platforms to provide virtual medical consultations for patients unable to receive in-person care. Photo credit: PAHO 2022

In Suriname’s remote Amazonian communities, getting specialized medical care has often required lengthy travel by boat, small plane, or all-terrain vehicle to the coastal capital of Paramaribo. However, due to financial and technical support provided by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), many of these communities will soon have improved access to medical specialists through telecommunications-enabled health care (telehealth).

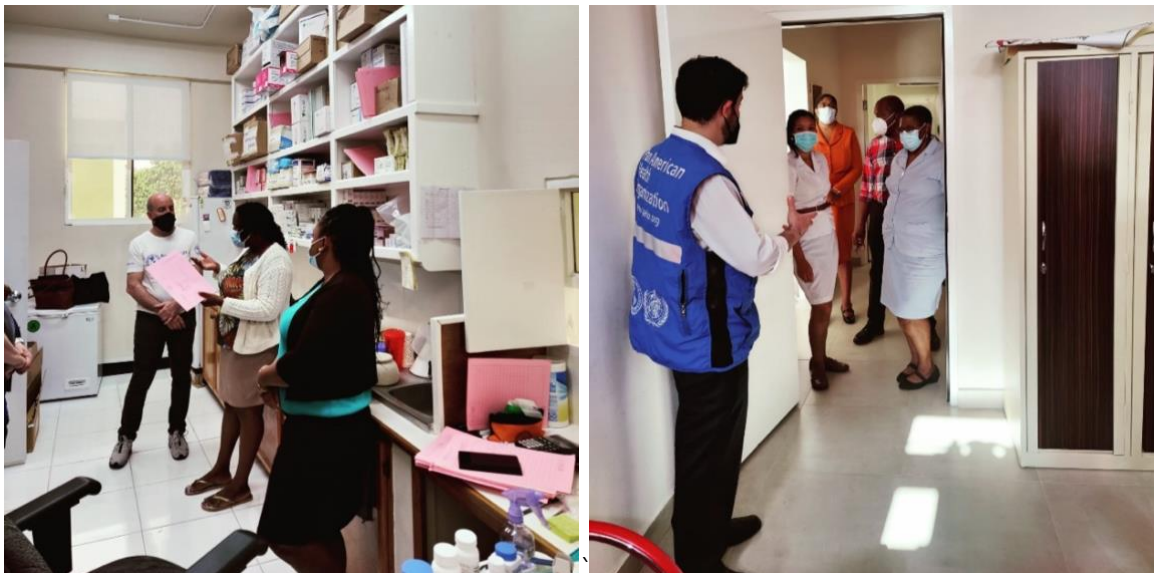
With support from a US Government (USG) financial contribution, PAHO has supplied Suriname’s Ministry of Health (MoH) with 20 desktop computers, 10 notebooks with high definition and multimedia capacity, five tablets, and two 50-inch smart TVs. Suriname’s Medical Mission, a non-governmental organization (NGO) mandated by the MoH to provide primary care services throughout Amazonian communities, will distribute the equipment to three clinics with stable

internet access, allowing them to offer virtual consultations with medical specialists to thousands of nearby residents. Two of the clinics are in the Para district, home to indigenous communities, and one is in Brownsweg, where Surinamese Maroons (also Marrons or Businenge) live.

“If you can provide visualization, the specialist can get more accurate knowledge about the medical situation and make better decisions about treatment,” said Dr. Maureen van Dijk, Director of Medical Affairs for Medical Mission. “For the people, if you can prevent them from having to come to Paramaribo and pay travel costs, for which they do not have the money, they will be less resistant to seeing a specialist,” she said, adding that Medical Mission is grateful to PAHO and the United States for assisting Suriname to increase access to health care through telehealth.

Telehealth for noncommunicable diseases

The procurement of equipment for Suriname is part of PAHO’s 2022 efforts to expand services for people with noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) through increased use of telehealth in Latin America and the Caribbean. NCDs are the leading cause of death and disability in the region. The telehealth project has used the USG financial contribution to procure digital equipment for ministries of health and develop software that will allow them to create their own telehealth platforms.



Earlier this year, PAHO visited Dominica to assess the country’s readiness for use of telehealth and to identify clinics and hospitals that could become sites for pilot programs. Photo credit: PAHO 2022

Through these “all-in-one” platforms, health providers will be able to conduct virtual consultations with patients and second-opinion consultations with other doctors. They will be able to access open medical data and artificial intelligence models without licensing costs or restrictions on use. PAHO is also developing online courses in how to use the software and provide effective telemedicine. The courses, intended to widely disseminate telehealth knowledge, will be adapted for everyone involved in the process – doctors, nurses, biomedical information specialists, and health care policy makers, among them.

Starting in December 2022, the software, which is in the testing phase, will be available free of cost to ministries of health in the 11 countries participating in the first round of the program – The Bahamas, Dominica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay, as well as Suriname. Other countries are expected to participate in later rounds.



An infographic from one of the online telehealth training courses that PAHO is developing.

Pandemic-generated momentum for telehealth expansion

Telehealth is well suited for the diagnosis and control of NCDs, which kill about 5.5 million people annually in the Americas. Telehealth can be used to monitor diabetes, hypertension, obesity, cardiovascular conditions, and provide mental health care and prescription management.

Telehealth has the potential to be transformational for the tens of millions of people in Latin America and the Caribbean who are isolated from the more state-of-the-art medical facilities. Telehealth can help overcome multiple barriers to access to essential health care and quality care such as out-of-pocket travel costs, long wait times for public health services, bureaucratic requirements as well as physical distance from medical specialists and major health facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for PAHO's program to expand NCD services through telehealth. Throughout the pandemic, telehealth has allowed medical providers to continue caring for people without exposing them to the SARS-CoV-2 virus during office or hospital visits. Taking advantage of the momentum generated by this use, PAHO launched the Telehealth for NCDs program in the early months of 2022. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is also a partner in the program.