

## DAILY COMMERCIAL

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### Florida Hospital used telemedicine during Irma

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Waterlogged, under curfew or without power, consumers in need of routine health care were in a tough spot during the days immediately before and after Hurricane Irma's arrival. Barring an emergency, landing before a physician was almost to impossible.

Some health providers used the opportunity to lean on telehealth services as a part of their disaster response. Often regarded as more of a luxury than a necessity, the service was offered free of charge statewide by Florida Hospital Centra Care and Baptists Health of South Florida.

The process works simple enough. Once the mobile app is downloaded on a cell phone, patients were able to have live video conversations with a doctor. Hundreds of Florida residents took advantage of the offering, officials said.

"Up to this point, we have only offered it to our own employees at Florida Hospital" — some 20,00 people — "and to a couple of employers in town that we offer strictly as a benefit to their employees.," said Dr. Tim Hendrix, Centra Care's medical director. One of those employers is Disney, he said. "As we've ramped up and figured it out in the last year we've been ready to go statewide and this was a prime time to help people in need."

The Florida Hospital application is called eCare and can be downloaded on most smartphones. The online reviews skew positive with some complaints. Few of those might have occurred around the time of the storm when the \$49 charge was suspended. Hendrix said they aim to have a provider respond within 2 to 4 minutes.

"Since we've started up, we typically did between five and 10 calls a day," Hendrix said. "And since we've launched statewide, prior to the hurricane we were seeing anywhere between 70 to 100 calls a day."

“There’s something to be said for (offering it for) free,” he added.

Baptist Health of South Florida adopted a similar strategy, turning off the \$59 price of its mobile urgent care service for all people in the state of Florida.

“It doesn’t matter where you’re from but you must be in the state of Florida to use the service,” said Ben Mollere, a corporate vice president for Baptist Health South Florida. “The physician could do a consult on you, your loved one, or your child.”

Everyone, from emergency responders to children’s specialists already use telemedicine across the state. But it’s still a regulatory landmine. For one, the state does not yet have a set legal definition for telehealth.

That was one of the reasons the Florida Legislature created a telehealth advisory council last year to study the issue. The 13-member group is expected to deliver a report on how to expand telehealth services to state political leaders by the end of next month.

“What the council has been exploring and what they’ve been asked to do by the legislature is look at the barriers that exist and how does the state position itself to do something about those barriers,” said Mike Smith, a member, and director of telemedicine program development at Florida State University College of Medicine.

So far, Smith said they’ve focused on two areas — licensure and reimbursement. “Licensure in medicine and health care is the Holy Grail in a way,” he said.

It becomes more important when physicians who reside out-of-state want to treat people in Florida. State law requires medical professionals to first obtain a license to practice medicine and take a test. The rise of telehealth puts a strain on that logic.

Smith pointed out that the VA has offered a form of telehealth for years and licenses doctors to work in any hospital in the system nationally.

“Every state is like 50 different experiments (in telehealth). They have different rules for licensure. They have different requirements for continuing medical education,” Smith said. “That means that there is a potentially large

administrative burden placed on the physician.”

If the advantages of telemedicine continue to outweigh the risks, it could play a broader role after major disasters. That’s how two leaders in telehealth — Teladoc and MDLIVE — approached the widespread turmoil created by Hurricane Harvey in Houston.

Hendrix, the medical director of Centra Care, said he hopes consumers’ preference shifts to digital health services good for treating minor illnesses. Both Baptist Health and Florida Hospital will continue offering the service statewide.

“This doesn’t replace that relationship you need with your pediatrician or your family doctor,” Hendrix said. “But there are some simple things that we can manage without you coming in to see the physician.”