

UW School of Medicine and Public Health: Study looks to keep nursing homes safe during COVID-19 with telehealth

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MADISON, Wis. – A new research study at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health seeks to reduce COVID-19 spread in Wisconsin nursing homes by collaborating with community and academic partners to expand telehealth infrastructure.

Dr. Christopher Crnich, associate professor of infectious disease, is the lead on the study. He believes now is a good time to evaluate and improve telemedicine in nursing homes.

COVID-19 has impacted nursing homes significantly during the pandemic. Because residents live closely together and are at a higher risk of COVID-19 complications, outbreaks within long-term care facilities have occurred throughout the country. One of the ways nursing homes worked to prevent this was switching many in-person appointments to virtual meetings.

“We saw this as an opportunity to study how telehealth implementation occurs; the barriers and challenges with rapid implementation, and the opportunities to redesign the telehealth work model in nursing home to make it more efficient and effective,” Dr. Crnich said.

The goal of the study is to gather data that will allow his team to design and implement a new telehealth model in nursing homes. Researchers are conducting a workflow analysis, interviewing staff, and observing telehealth encounters between

providers and residents at four nursing homes in Dane County. Preliminary data shows the complexity of implementing telehealth in nursing homes. For example, organizing telehealth meetings is just one of the vast number of tasks staff are responsible for within nursing homes.

“There are challenges, but improved telehealth could mean fewer costly clinic visits for nursing home residents and more frequent assessments that can facilitate faster patient care,” said Dr. Crnich.

This study, “Improving and Evaluating Virtual Health to Enhance Physical Distancing Measures in Wisconsin Nursing Homes,” is funded by the [UW Institute for Clinical and Translational Research \(ICTR\)](#) and [Wisconsin Partnership Program 2020 COVID-19 Response Grant Award](#).

Dr. Elizabeth Chapman and Dr. Ann Braus, clinical assistant professors, Geriatrics and Gerontology; and James H. Ford II, PhD, assistant professor, School of Pharmacy, are also collaborators on the study.