

## Health Information Compliance Alert

### Industry Note: Feds Promote Telemedicine for Opioid Abuse Treatment

Congress is hoping to pass "opioid package" legislation that could give both clinicians and patients more flexibility in providing and seeking treatment for opioid addiction with more telehealth options.

**Here's why:** Substance abuse has afflicted Americans for decades, but more and more people are suffering and becoming increasingly sick or dying because of their addiction. On the other hand, more people are seeking treatment for their substance dependence.

"Significantly more people received treatment for substance use disorder in 2017 than in 2016; this was especially true for those with heroin-related opioid use disorders. In addition, the number of people who initiated use of heroin in 2017 was less than half of the number in 2016," says Admiral **Brett P. Giroir, MD**, assistant secretary for health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in a blog post on [healthIT.gov](https://www.healthit.gov).

"While these are promising data, we know there is still much more work to be done, especially in rural areas that have been hard hit by the opioid epidemic. This is particularly true in some rural and remote areas of the country where patients with opioid use disorder [OUD] must travel long distances to receive treatment; and there are too few clinicians available to provide medication-assisted treatment [MAT] - an essential component in the treatment of OUD," Giroir says.

"HHS is committed to improving access to MAT for OUD and is working on a variety of strategies to improve access to this life saving treatment through increased funding to states and communities, payment policy changes, and education, training and technical assistance. One such area is to help providers understand how telemedicine can be used, in certain circumstances, to expand access to buprenorphine-based MAT," he says.

The legislation making its way through Congress could cut some of the red tape that surrounds substance abuse treatment, while expanding access to care. Policymakers see telemedicine as an inexpensive avenue to reach rural areas especially devastated by opioid addiction.

"This will give the opportunity for physicians, through telemedicine, to actually prescribe controlled substances such as what we use in medication assisted treatment," said **Buddy Carter**, Congressional representative for Georgia, at an event on telehealth hosted by The Hill and sponsored by the Health Care Alliance for Patient Safety, according to a Sept. 28, 2018, report by The Hill.