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## Jacksonville telemedicine startups see growth -- and industrywide change on the horizon

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Shortly before the federal government announced it was setting up a COVID-19 testing facility in Jacksonville, a telemedicine startup in Jacksonville realized the city needed a local option — and that they could help.

Telescope Health, which was founded last year by two emergency medicine doctors, reached out to Baptist Health and the city, leading to the creation of a drive-thru testing facility at the Prime Osborne Center. Patients have to first be screened by a doctor online or over the phone, which for some patients might be the first time they've experienced telemedicine.

Before the coronavirus pandemic hit, "there was really no need to set it up or urgency to become comfortable with it, even though we use technology for everything else in our lives," said Dr. [Matthew Thompson](#), one of the founders of Telescope Health. "I think that we've just given everybody a crash course on how useful it can be."

While the use of telemedicine has been growing for years, the pandemic is kicking efforts to have it more widely adopted into high gear. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Acts lifted restrictions on Medicare patients using such services and funds new telehealth initiatives for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We believe the bill reflects the scale of challenges we face as a country and recognizes that expanding virtual care is necessary to defeat COVID-19," said Ann Mond Johnson, the CEO of the American Telemedicine Association, in a press release. "We commend Congress for recognizing the power of telehealth, and the bipartisan effort to lift telehealth barriers in the Medicare program while prioritizing federal funding for telehealth access and infrastructure during this emergency."

Prior to the pandemic, Telescope had fairly low volumes of patients but they were often high-touch encounters that addressed a myriad of problems. Now, the company is handling 200 to 350 patients a day and have had to recruit additional help to handle the new volumes.

So far, they've seen more than 2,400 patients.

Initially Telescope ran into some issues with the technology. Part of the challenge is with work-from-home and stay-at-home mandates, so many people are at home streaming and passing the time online, that there is a strain on servers nationally, Thompson said.

Telescope lobbied to local streaming platforms to reduce the streaming capacity and create more bandwidth for essential services like Telescope. They've also added providers and say things are running smoothly now.

"We've grown to be able to handle a large capacity of patients well beyond what we're seeing right now," said Thompson.

TriageLogic, a Jacksonville-based company that offers triage services online and over the phone have also been experiencing significantly higher volumes and have had to add additional nurses to the staff to keep up, CEO [Charu Raheja](#).

Part of that is just panic, Raheja said.

"There's just a lot of anxiety on the part of the patients," she said.



First responders, medical professionals and people 65 and older are prioritized for testing.

Raheja believes that the pandemic will change the landscape of telemedicine because it will have proven its efficiency, as well as effectiveness.

She said often times people will get sick and immediately call 911 and go to the emergency room. Instead of taking on those expenses, they can simply get online and get in touch with a physician.

Thompson and Rill agreed that many people simply have questions, and telemedicine can offer educations and answers without the added strain on the system.

As emergency doctors, part of the reason the founders of Telescope started the company was to create easier access to health care without putting a strain on existing systems, they said. The idea was to get patients to the right place on the first try, rather than taking weeks and series of appointments to finally get help.

Despite being relatively new, both doctors are confident in the coronavirus screening. Many of those who call in or want to be screened are simply in need of education, rather than a test.

"The possibilities and the amount of conditions that you can diagnose and treat on telemedicine is pretty remarkable and vast," Thompson said. "Just by seeing somebody, a provider, a skilled provider who has emergency medicine training, they can definitely know whether they're sick or ill or need to be immersively seen or not."

Both doctors expect this to be a watershed moment for telemedicine. They've gotten a lot of comments surprised at how easy and personal the experience still is.

"I think that really, health care is gonna look different after," Rill said, "because people are getting used to using the devices at home for things that used to take them a lot of effort and time and sometimes frustration."

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