Telehealth Could Help Bridge the Black Mental Health Divide

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts say telehealth could play a key role in improving mental health outcomes among African Americans as the nation recovers from the coronavirus crisis and beyond, NBC's the Grio reports.

The high-tech topic was the subject of the Advancing Mental Health Policy: BetterTogether Forum, which brought together psychiatrists, app makers and lawmakers from across the country. Forum panelists urged legislator to make a bigger investment in the emerging minority telehealth and mental health industries.

The recommendations result from recent findings by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showing that racial and ethnic minorities experienced the biggest increase in adverse mental health conditions during the pandemic.

The forum also revealed that health care providers fear that when COVID-19 ends, the national focus on mental health and digital innovation will vanish.

"It takes funding. It takes development, but it also takes research," said Fredrick Burns, founder & CEO of RuniT Mobile Apps, which works with Soulace, a virtual therapy app. The tool matches Black people with African-American therapists for talk sessions via video.

Nora Belcher, the executive director of Texas e-health Alliance, called the internet "a social determinant of health."

That said, some mental health experts see a silver-lining in the struggles many Black communities faced this past year. For example, more people are willing to reach out for help. What's more, significantly increased access to remote mental health care now means far more Americans can more easily access support for issues such as depression, substance abuse and anxiety.

Meanwhile, Black technologists note that more research dollars are needed to help them produce mental health apps—not to mention sufficient time to ensure they are high-quality and effective. In addition, groups like Texas e-health Alliance and the Healthcare Leadership Council are lobbying Congress for help to close the gap in telehealth accessibility.

To learn more about how people are using technology to connect at-risk communities to health

care, see “Using Telehealth to Expand to Access to Essential Health Services During the COVID-19-Pandemic.”

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