

Amazon jumps into health care with telemedicine initiative

March 17 2021, by Matthew Barakat



This artist rendering provided by Amazon shows the next phase of the company's

headquarters redevelopment to be built in Arlington, Va. The plans released Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021, features a 350-foot helix-shaped office tower that can be climbed from the outside like a mountain hike. Amazon is making its first foray into providing health care services, announcing Wednesday, March 17, 2021, that it will be offering its Amazon Care telemedicine program to employers nationwide. (NBBJ/Amazon via AP, File)

Amazon is making its first foray into providing health care services, announcing Wednesday that it will be offering its Amazon Care telemedicine program to employers nationwide.

Currently available to the company's employees in Washington state, Amazon Care is an app that connects users virtually with doctors, nurse practitioners and nurses who can provide services and treatment over the phone 24 hours a day. In the Seattle area, it's supplemented with in-person services such as pharmacy delivery and house-call services from nurses who can take blood work and provide similar services.

On Wednesday, the tech giant announced it will immediately expand the service to interested employers in Washington who want to purchase the service for their employees. By the summer, Amazon Care will expand nationally to all Amazon workers, and to private employers across the country who want to join.

In the Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia market, where Amazon is building a second headquarters that will house more than 25,000 workers, Amazon Care will include the in-person services that are currently limited to Seattle.

"Making this available to other employers is a big step," said Amazon Care Director Kristen Helton in a phone interview. "It's an opportunity

for other forward-thinking employers to offer a service that helps bring high-quality care, convenience and peace of mind."

Amazon launched the service 18 months ago for its Washington state employees. Helton said users have given it superior reviews, and business customers were inquiring about being able to buy into the service for their own workers.

Helton said the product is designed to be a supplement or an additional benefit to existing coverage provided by an employer.

Consumer demand for telemedicine and virtual health care has exploded during the pandemic. Stephen Morgan, a medical professor at Virginia Tech and chief medical information officer at the Carilion Clinic in southwest Virginia, said virtual visits increased there from about 100 a month before the pandemic to about 800 a day within a two-week span.

He said research has shown that telemedicine can provide quality on par with traditional in-person care, all while making services available to people who otherwise might not be able to get them or would have to travel great distances to do so.

But he said it's critical that providers build in checks and balances to ensure that quality does not suffer.

"It is a concern that anyone who wants to do telemedicine, Amazon included, puts those checks and balances in place," he said.

Helton said that when users log in to the Amazon Care app, they are asked a couple of questions that serve to triage the call, and route it to a nurse, nurse practitioner or physician as appropriate. She said it usually takes 60 seconds or less to connect to a health professional.

The health care providers are supplied by Care Medical, a contractor that works with Amazon on an exclusive contract.

While Amazon has launched initiatives in the health field such as Amazon Pharmacy and Amazon Halo, a wristband that measures vital statistics, Amazon Care will be the tech giant's first foray into providing health care services beyond its own workforce, Helton said.

Many employers and insurers have started taking a more direct role in providing care to the people they cover instead of waiting to pay claims as they come in. They were expanding telemedicine access before the pandemic hit, and big employers also were adding or expanding clinics on or near their work sites.

Ensuring quick access to care can help keep patients healthy and on the job. It also can prevent an illness from growing worse and becoming more expensive to treat. Employers have been struggling for years to gain more control over health care costs that consistently rise faster than wages and inflation.

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