

CMS Acute Hospital Care at Home Waiver 101

BACKGROUND

In response to the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE), the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) issued several flexibilities via its waiver and regulatory authorities aimed at helping hospitals maximize their capacity to treat patients. To create the AHCAH program, CMS waived two additional requirements that had not yet been waived under the broader Hospitals without Walls Initiative. Typically, as conditions of receiving payment for hospital services, Medicare requires hospitals to provide 24-hour nursing care services and immediate patient access to nurses on the physical premises of the hospital. CMS waived these requirements for the AHCAH program, allowing hospitals approved for the waiver to provide a combination of in-person and virtual patient visits and requiring that the hospital provide virtual access to the care team on a 24/7 basis. The waiver program allows participating hospital providers to deliver inpatient-level care for certain conditions to patients at home and still receive hospital reimbursement rates for those services.

ACUTE HOSPITAL CARE AT HOME: A Specific Program to Treat Certain Acute Conditions at Home

As part of the broader initiative to allow hospitals to provide care outside their walls and still receive hospital reimbursement rates for that care, CMS created an additional program – the Acute Hospital Care at Home (AHCAH) program – that specifically enables participating hospitals to provide inpatient-level care for certain specified conditions to patients in their homes. The program allows hospitals to treat more than 60 different acute conditions, such as asthma, congestive heart failure, pneumonia, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), appropriately and safely in patients' homes with proper monitoring and treatment protocols.

To participate, hospitals must apply for an individual waiver from CMS (i.e., there is not a blanket waiver that allows all hospitals to participate). Hospitals that have substantial prior experience implementing hospital at home programs can apply via an expedited process, to allow experienced hospitals to rapidly expand care to Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries. These hospitals must submit certain monitoring data monthly, including the AHCAH patient census, escalations requiring the patient to transition from care in the home to care in the hospital, and unanticipated mortality. Hospitals with limited or no prior experience providing at-home acute hospital services must submit a more detailed application and must submit monitoring data weekly. As of April 25, 2022, 215 hospitals in 34 states are currently participating in the AHCAH program.

MAIN REQUIREMENTS

The main requirements of AHCAH program are as follows:

Patient screening
Restricted Admissions
Patient Evaluation

Daily patient visits
Services provided in the
home

Reporting
Patient choice