

# Meridian Health Experiences Virtual ‘Game-Changer’

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Meridian Health Services is a progressive, integrated health care system specializing in primary medical care, mental wellness and social well-being. A defining attribute is its focus on “whole-person” care.

In May/June 2019, there were 1,700 behavioral health televisits. One year later, the number jumped to over 50,000. In addition, telehealth primary care visits increased from 25 to 1,300-plus.

“It (the pandemic) was a game-changer for everyone in the industry,” declares president and CEO Hank Milius. “There was an incredible paradigm shift. Telehealth being a primary driver for that. That whole technology has been a real bright spot in this crisis.

“What’s really interesting is, we now have physicians that are connecting with patients at their homes for telehealth. So, the numbers of no-shows and cancellations have dropped dramatically.”

With its corporate office in Muncie and a staff of approximately 1,200, Meridian has multiple locations covering roughly one third of Indiana.

Milius says it’s more important than ever to emphasize mental health amid the pandemic.

“It’s another anxiety-causing crisis. Fear of the unknown. It’s an unseen enemy out there that’s stalking you in some ways. Not to mention, if you’re a business owner, you might feel an impact (on your) financial stability. And relationships. All kinds of relationships are out of the norm now.”

## Moving forward

While taking precautions to protect patients from exposure was/is crucial, Milius expresses a desire to approach things with a different perspective.

“We still have addiction issues. People are still needing to check on their diabetes and cardiovascular issues. In the beginning of the pandemic, the health care industry basically told the patients, including Meridian, ‘Stay away. Don’t come.’

“I think that quite frankly was a real mistake in many ways. What we should have done in hindsight was create a message that provides an alternative – whether it be telehealth or a different location or whatever it might be. But I think we scared the pants off the public about coming in for medical issues! As a result, there are a lot of people that may have had chest pains (for instance)



In 2021 and beyond, Meridian Health Services will continue to expand primary care and behavioral health services. “There is no end point to this (whole-person care) journey,” reflects Hank Milius, president and CEO. “It’s an ongoing way of trying to improve the patient experience ... and trying to connect the dots so they don’t fall into the silos of health care.”



that were hesitant to come in.

“As an industry, we have to do a better job educating the community about how to access health care for their routine medical issues that cannot be ignored. And of course, with addictions, we had an opioid crisis in the past. It’s still there. Nothing’s changed with that.”

Looking ahead, he outlines one of Meridian’s priorities.

“One example that’s open to question is how much brick and mortar we’re going to

need in the future. That’s pretty much the biggest issue we’ll be faced with. We were about to do a facility plan study and were probably going to do some major capital expenses on basic brick-and-mortar projects. With all of the virtual (shifts) going on now, we’re wondering how much brick and mortar we actually need. We probably won’t know until at least six to 12 months after the pandemic.”

What is certain is a continued focus on expanding telehealth services.

**RESOURCE:** Hank Milius, Meridian Health Services, at [www.meridianhs.org](http://www.meridianhs.org)