

Senate Bill 534 - Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023

SUPPORT

Senate Finance Committee

February 22, 2023

Patient access to medical care was significantly enhanced through the use of telehealth. We learned during the pandemic that telehealth offers the opportunity to mitigate risks, particularly with regards to the spread of infectious diseases. Removing the requirement for face-to-face interaction protects both patients and healthcare workers from potential viral exposure. Minimizing the use of health facilities creates lower density care environments with less crowding.

Beyond the acute risks for Covid-19 or other virus transmission, there are additional benefits of telehealth that minimize barriers to healthcare. Transportation to medical appointments is often an issue for patients in both rural and urban areas. Employed adults frequently have difficulty obtaining medical care due to time constraints with their work. The flexibility that telehealth offers is a major advantage.

As addiction specialists, we believe telehealth is a particularly helpful tool to treat patients with substance use disorders. Given the overlapping opioid epidemic, expanding health care access at a time when many doors have shut is of utmost importance. While there are concerns about opioid misuse for patients receiving remote medical care, evidence in fact supports telehealth as an equivalent modality as far as both treatment retention and avoiding additional substance use. Although there are limitations to telemedicine, national organizations provide excellent guidance and strategies for effective use.

Continuing access to health care utilizing telehealth must also be understood from a health equity perspective. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted large care gaps for our most vulnerable populations, which includes older adults, patients with limited English proficiency, low-income families, and racial minorities. These groups can benefit greatly from telehealth but have limited access to video capabilities. It is imperative that audio-only telehealth be protected as a provision in this legislation, given that advanced technology is not available to many of the patients with the greatest need for expanded remote medical care.

We respectfully request a favorable report.