

Honorable representative Newhouse:

This letter is written in support of the “Increasing Rural Telehealth Access Act of 2021” as proposed by Representative Newhouse et al.

Locally as a program director for a rural training family medicine residency, I see indirectly the effects on the rural population when access to care is unavailable. Nationally we also see that healthcare outcomes are directly related to one’s zip code and rural communities see the brunt of significantly poorer outcomes. The Increasing Rural Telehealth Act offers a needed solution in helping to resolve that deficit by increasing access to much needed healthcare. It is physically impossible and financially non-sustainable to keep needed healthcare providers in smaller communities and this act offers a solution whereby patients with chronic illnesses can still get healthcare interventions through telehealth management opportunities. Patients in these communities most often cannot travel the needed distances to reach direct care particularly if they have challenging illnesses. It is even more of a problem when weather dictates that travel is impossible. In response patients often do not access care and thus they have poorer outcomes. Through telehealth, providers can offer needed access for patients who would not otherwise get the care they need. It increases efficiency, reduces financial burdens, and improves access.

The Increasing Rural Telehealth Act also supports building the infrastructure needed using remote monitoring equipment so that patients can supply needed data from that equipment to those telehealth providers so that appropriate medical decision making can be made. Much critical information is needed from the patients to include simple things like vital signs to help clinicians determine what medical interventions would be most prudent. Through support of development and distribution of needed equipment to patients in rural and remote areas the needed information can be delivered to the clinician when direct access is physically impossible. This process became necessary during the pandemic and continues to prove itself as a viable option in patient access to care. Many communities across the country and in other countries have utilized this type of technology very successfully with improved patient outcomes. It overall decreases systemic healthcare costs by sustaining preventative and ongoing intervention with management of chronic medical conditions in a much more efficient way.

Of note even when the pandemic began to slow with decreasing COVID numbers, hospital census numbers have remained high. In our region this was determined to be mainly caused by decreased access during the pandemic for chronic care management interventions. This resulted in higher level of acuity with those who could not access needed chronic care management. Then their disease process progressed to the point where significantly higher levels of intervention were needed. This continues to stress the hospital infrastructure and is extremely costly to the system as well as the patients themselves. A significant amount of this higher level of care could have been avoided if the patients had access to ongoing care. Through telehealth even in an isolation environment, patients can still get care they need to maintain care of chronic conditions. The pandemic identified where telehealth could make a significant difference in improving patient outcomes and through implementation of this act,

we can implement strategies through lessons learned. Hopefully we can see this act a means to increase access, reduce cost, and improve outcomes. Please feel free to reach out if you have further questions or need more information.

Sincerely;

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