



To: Members of the Public Health and Insurance & Real Estate Committees

From: Roberta J. Cook, President and CEO

**Re: H.B. 5596 An Act Concerning Telehealth and
S.B. 1022 An Act Concerning Telehealth**

Date: March 15, 2021

Good morning Senator Lesser, Senator Abrams, Representative Wood, Representative Steinberg, Senator Hwang, Senator Somers, Representative Pavalock-D'Amato, Representative Petit, and those from our service area, Senator Cabrera, Representative Comey, Representative Klarides-Ditria, Representative Parker, Representative Perillo, Representative Rochelle, Representative Scanlon, and members of the Insurance & Real Estate and Public Health Committees:

My name is Roberta Cook and I'm the President/CEO of BHcare, a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic serving more than 3,000 adults, children, and families in the Greater New Haven, Shoreline and Lower Naugatuck Valley area. These individuals are struggling with chronic mental health disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression, opioid use disorder, or other substance use disorders. The children we work with are struggling with behavioral disorders, risky behaviors, and substance use disorders.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **support of H.B. 5596 and S.B. 1022**, Acts Concerning Telehealth. We support efforts in the legislature to codify the expansion of telehealth services that has occurred over the last year, ensuring that Connecticut:

- 1. Continues to pay for telehealth at the same rate as in-person visits and allows services to be delivered from any setting:** Payment should be based on the treatment provided, not the location where the service is provided. Telehealth has added costs to providers who are maintaining physical offices as well as paying costs for telehealth.
- 2. Allows telephonic/audio only sessions:** This is important to ensuring access to care for people who do not have access to technology needed for video conferencing.

3. **Allows the use any HIPAA compliant platform:** This allows providers to meet clients where they are, on platforms they are comfortable with and knowledgeable using.

When the pandemic hit last year, we quickly sprang into action and developed a telehealth system to ensure continuity of care for our clients. We incurred massive, unplanned expenses purchasing laptops, online security and privacy systems, virtual meeting platform licenses, and hotspots for those without access to reliable WiFi, but it was all necessary to ensure safe and continued services for the individuals and families we serve.

Telehealth has been a lifeline for the people we serve. Lockdowns exasperated their symptoms, treating them virtually, quite literally saved lives.

Telehealth has proven to be effective and should continue. The availability of telehealth helped us engage difficult to reach clients. Many who were reluctant to come in for treatment, primarily due to severe anxiety, are now engaged in services because they can do so from their homes. Also, many of our clients lack access to reliable transportation and therefore miss in-person visits. Telehealth allows them to keep their appointments and we've experienced a 10 percent decrease in our no-show rate since the implementation of telehealth.

Providers should have the ability to provide treatment both in-person and via telehealth to ensure access to services for all who need them.

While the end of COVID-19 lockdown is in sight, telehealth should be here to stay. We urge the Committees to pass robust telehealth legislation that guarantees all people in Connecticut will continue to have access to telehealth services using the device of their choosing, and that providers continue to be paid at the same rate as in-person services moving into the future.

Thank you for your consideration.