

Thank you for the opportunity to support H.5. 5596 and S.B. 1022, Acts Concerning Telehealth. CCGC supports the efforts of the legislature to codify the expansion of telehealth services which has occurred over the past year, to ensure 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.
2. Allows telephonic/audio sessions: Many of our clients are not equipped to engage in telehealth and have depended on the use of their phones for ongoing treatment.
3. Allows the use of any HIPAA compliant platform: CCGC has paid for all costs of telehealth including ensuring HIPAA compliance and the availability of a significant number of telehealth accounts, while maintaining physical office space.

Since COVID-19 required agencies to shift to remote service delivery, the decreased risk to our clients is immeasurable. They have avoided sitting in waiting rooms and have been able to engage in sessions regardless of any possible recent exposure to the virus on their or the clinicians' parts.

Overall, clients have appreciated the opportunity to receive services remotely. While in-home services are gradually being re-introduced to families as the primary means of treatment, there are clear benefits to having alternative options to "see" families during weeks when a family member is ill, conditions in the home are unsafe or unhealthy (e.g., bedbugs), inclement weather prevents driving, last minute cancellations occur and other unforeseen circumstances prevent in-home visits. More consistent engagement and treatment can be provided. Family members who are not within driving distance can also more actively participate in the child's treatment.

Because the authorization to provide telehealth services in Connecticut's Medicaid program came out the day before the state largely closed in March, and nonprofits primarily serve Medicaid members, most community providers did not have a robust telehealth infrastructure in place prior to the pandemic. They had to design a system overnight, including the purchasing of laptops, online security and privacy systems, virtual meeting platform licenses, issuance of smartphones to regular patients. These investments have been made at enormous expense, much of it unplanned, with promising results that suggest continuing to use these systems after reopening the state will lead to increased service delivery, efficiency and effectiveness. Not only did these developments enable employees to connect with clients, but staff meetings, supervision and oversight have been conducted for the most part remotely for a year. While in-home visits are a priority, it is a relief to have an alternative way to meet with clients as needed, for their protection, as well as the clients'.

The use of telehealth services will continue to be important during the transition period during which community-based programs resume full in-person operations, but some families will continue to experience anxiety in meeting face-to-face. For other families, the availability of telehealth services have dramatically increased their engagement in services and treatment and broken down barriers like transportation, child-care and more. We expect some families will continue to use telehealth request telehealth services after the pandemic emergency ends.

While the end of COVID-19 lockdown is in sight, telehealth is 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 of this important issue.

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