

United States Senate

June 15, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

As you continue your work on critical legislation to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, we write to ask that you make permanent the provisions from our bipartisan CONNECT for Health Act that were included in previous COVID-19 legislation. These provisions have resulted in an important expansion of access to telehealth services for Medicare beneficiaries during the pandemic.

We have long advocated for increasing access to telehealth because of its potential to expand access to health care, reduce costs, and improve health outcomes.¹ Telehealth has proven to be pivotal for many patients during the current pandemic, ensuring they receive the care they need while reducing the risk of infection and the further spread of COVID-19. We have all heard from our constituents about how effective and convenient it is. Expanded Medicare coverage of telehealth services on a permanent basis—where clinically appropriate and with appropriate guardrails and beneficiary protections in place—would ensure that telehealth continues to be an option for all Medicare beneficiaries after the pandemic ends.

As you know, the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020 and the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act included provisions from the CONNECT for Health Act to increase access to telehealth services for Medicare beneficiaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, these laws provide the Secretary of Health and Human Services the authority to waive telehealth requirements under Section 1834(m) of the Social Security Act, allow Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and Rural Health Clinics (RHCs) to provide distant site telehealth services, and allow for the use of telehealth to conduct the face-to-face visit required to recertify a patient's eligibility for hospice care.

Because of these new authorities provided by Congress, Medicare has expanded coverage of telehealth services for the duration of the pandemic to include all areas of the country—as well as allowing a patient's home to serve as an originating site for telehealth. In addition, more types of health care providers—including FQHCs and RHCs that provide primary care in rural and underserved areas—are able to furnish and bill Medicare for telehealth services. These changes have already contributed to a dramatic increase in the use of telehealth services in Medicare. Available data show that the number of Medicare beneficiaries using telehealth services during the pandemic increased 11,718 percent in just a month and a half.²

¹ For example: https://www.cchpca.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/HRSA_Cost_Efficiency_Studies.pdf and <https://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/cer-216-telehealth-final-report.pdf>.

² <https://www.healthcarediver.com/news/medicare-seniors-telehealth-covid-coronavirus-cms-trump/578685/>.

Americans have benefited significantly from this expansion of telehealth and have come to rely on its availability. Congress should expand access to telehealth services on a permanent basis so that telehealth remains an option for all Medicare beneficiaries both now and after the pandemic. Doing so would assure patients that their care will not be interrupted when the pandemic ends. It would also provide certainty to health care providers that the costs to prepare for and use telehealth would be a sound long-term investment.

In addition, given the recent flexibilities provided by both Congress and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and the increased use of telehealth during the pandemic, we believe now is an important time to measure the impact of telehealth on Medicare. Specifically, the federal government should collect and analyze data on the impact of telehealth on utilization, quality, health outcomes, and spending during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is currently a scarcity of data available regarding the impact of telehealth on the Medicare program. This data would assist Congress in crafting additional policies to improve health outcomes and use resources more effectively.

Thank you for your continued leadership during the present crisis. We look forward to continuing to work together to increase access to telehealth.

Sincerely,

/s/ Brian Schatz
BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senator

/s/ Roger F. Wicker
ROGER F. WICKER
United States Senator

/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin
BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
United States Senator

/s/ Mark R. Warner
MARK R. WARNER
United States Senator

/s/ Cindy Hyde-Smith
CINDY HYDE-SMITH
United States Senator

/s/ Doug Jones
DOUG JONES
United States Senator

/s/ Shelley Moore Capito
SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO
United States Senator

/s/ Angus S. King, Jr.
ANGUS S. KING, JR.
United States Senator

/s/ Bill Cassidy
BILL CASSIDY
United States Senator

/s/ Kyrsten Sinema
KYRSTEN SINEMA
United States Senator

/s/ Jeanne Shaheen
JEANNE SHAHEEN
United States Senator

/s/ Susan M. Collins
SUSAN M. COLLINS
United States Senator

/s/ Jon Tester
JON TESTER
United States Senator

/s/ M. Michael Rounds
M. MICHAEL ROUNDS
United States Senator

/s/ Michael F. Bennet
MICHAEL F. BENNET
United States Senator

/s/ Lisa Murkowski
LISA MURKOWSKI
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine
TIM KAINE
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Scott
TIM SCOTT
United States Senator

/s/ Jacky Rosen
JACKY ROSEN
United States Senator

/s/ Amy Klobuchar
AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senator

/s/ Martha McSally
MARTHA MCSALLY
United States Senator

/s/ Margaret Wood Hassan
MARGARET WOOD HASSAN
United States Senator

/s/ Sheldon Whitehouse
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE
United States Senator

/s/ Steve Daines
STEVE DAINES
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher S. Murphy
CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
United States Senator

/s/ Kevin Cramer
KEVIN CRAMER
United States Senator

/s/ Christopher A. Coons
CHRISTOPHER A. COONS
United States Senator

/s/ Lindsey O. Graham
LINDSEY O. GRAHAM
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
TINA SMITH
United States Senator

/s/ Cory Gardner
CORY GARDNER
United States Senator