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Testimony of Planned Parenthood of Southern New England
in support of LCO No. 3614 *An Act Concerning Telehealth*
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Senator Lesser, Representative Scanlon and honorable members of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee, my name is Gretchen Raffa, Senior Director of Public Policy, Advocacy and Organizing at Planned Parenthood of Southern New England (PPSNE) testifying in support of *LCO No. 3614 An Act Concerning Telehealth*. As the state's largest provider of family planning and sexual and reproductive health care to over 70,000 patients every year at 16 health centers across the state, Planned Parenthood believes all people should have access to quality, affordable health care — regardless of who you are, where you live, your income or if you have health insurance.

At PPSNE, we know people's sexual and reproductive health care can't wait—especially during a public health crisis. As our state's health care system was impacted by the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic, patients in Connecticut were often left with the difficult decision to potentially defer care and treatment. While the pandemic continues to widen and worsen existing inequities in health care access, telehealth services prevent delays and setbacks in care that could impact people's long-term health for years to come. Our ability to offer telehealth as an option to provide essential sexual and reproductive health care and primary care services are crucial to keeping people home, keeping people safe, and keeping people healthy.

PPSNE's virtual telehealth visits allow patients to take charge of their health. Telehealth provides uninterrupted access to birth control, STD/STI testing and treatment, gender-affirming hormone therapy, primary care, HIV prevention medication, and treatment for a range of chronic and acute conditions and connects patients to the health care providers they know and trust. Since March 2020, PPSNE has conducted more than 7,500 telehealth visits — reaching patients who might otherwise have struggled to take time off or arrange transportation or childcare to come in-person to a health center.

Our telehealth services expand access to high-quality and affordable sexual and reproductive care, especially for those who often face systemic barriers to health care. Preliminary patient demographic data through May 31 indicates that a majority of patients served through telehealth—55%—identify as people of color; 30% are Black/African American and 23% are Latino/a/x. Young people under the age of 30 account for more than 60% of telehealth patients at PPSNE. We know the pandemic disproportionately impacts communities in color and, specifically, Black and Latino/a/x residents are more than three times as likely to contract this coronavirus than white residents in Connecticut. Black and Latino/a/x patients in Connecticut are almost twice as likely to die from COVID-19 as white patients. While COVID-19 ravages communities of color, it is essential we continue to use telehealth to make sure people can access the care they need and support those measures that keep people safe and limit potential exposure.

Diagnosis and treatment through telehealth virtual visits helps conserve public health resources in our communities and keeps people out of hospitals, community health centers, and urgent care centers. Telehealth also allows health care providers like PPSNE to provide continued care for patients with chronic conditions like asthma and diabetes who could be at risk of life-threatening complications if exposed to COVID-19.

We know that increasing access to telehealth will not address all the inequities in health care access and coverage and will not, nor should not, replace in-person visits. We urge the committee to also consider the need to expand

telehealth capacity and accessibility as a necessary step to ensure broader access to essential sexual and reproductive health care services. We know that gaps in internet accessibility and reliable broadband connections are issues for certain regions of the state and, in particular, Connecticut's rural communities. These technology limitations especially impact people with low incomes and young people and may prevent them from fully realizing the benefits of telehealth. It is imperative that the state invests in expanding broadband and wireless access as well as support providers and patients through financial assistance for the equipment necessary to deliver telehealth while safeguarding privacy of protected health information (PHI).

We are thankful for the state and federal government's immediate action steps taken to make telehealth more accessible during this public health crisis which has ensured more people access to health care. We urge passage of this legislation to help extend access to telehealth in the months to come. All people need and deserve equal access to comprehensive health care, including sexual and reproductive health care. Telehealth has been one option to ensure continued access to care at PPSNE for thousands of patients through this public health crisis, which is why we support *LCO No. 3614 An Act Concerning Telehealth* as a short-term solution until the General Assembly can take up a more permanent policy solution in future legislative sessions.