

July 20, 2020

Testimony in support of increasing access to telehealth services

Katherine Merrick, Farmington, CT

Senator Lesser, Representative Scanlon, Senator Kelly, Representative Pavalock-D'Amato, and distinguished members of the Insurance and Real Estate Committee,

My name is Katherine Merrick and I am a registered voter in Farmington, CT. I am currently a fourth year dual dental medicine and public health student. I am writing to support increasing access to telehealth services including for dental/oral health care. I am writing both as a future dentist concerned about improving access to oral health care and a future public health professional concerned about stopping the spread of COVID-19 and conserving personal protective equipment (PPE).

I am currently working on a virtual internship with Connecticut Oral Health Initiative (COHI) to develop recommendations for bolstering the dental safety-net in the era of COVID-19 and its associated recession. In my research and discussions for this project, telehealth and specifically “teledentistry” have emerged as cutting-edge measures to deliver high-quality care while maintaining public health and safety.

Teledentistry can minimize the number of and length of in-person appointments in this era of COVID-19. We in Connecticut have an older population, and we know that COVID-19 severity increases with age. Allowing older folks and those with medical comorbidities to have an appointment via teledentistry rather than in-person can keep them out of public spaces such as public transportation and waiting rooms.

Teledentistry can help people access oral health care who have not had traditional success in accessing dental care. This may include individuals with transportation difficulties who may be able to more easily meet with their oral health provider via phone or video conference. Dental anxiety can be extremely debilitating for patients. Empowering folks who experience dental anxiety to attend an appointment in their own home may keep them more comfortable and less anxious.

Allowing virtual teledentistry visits rather than in-person visits can preserve PPE and allow dental offices to see more patients in a timely manner. Many dental offices are small businesses who have suffered due to the economic considerations of COVID-19. Allowing providers to see patients via teledentistry can increase the number of patients able to be seen

safely. Additionally, as case rates of COVID-19 continue to surge across the country and the PPE shortage grows more dire, this can allow offices to conserve PPE.

On behalf of both my patients and myself, thank you for your time and for keeping our communities safe and healthy during this time. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or comments.

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