



July 21, 2020

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

Thank you for this opportunity to express my support for Bill 3614. My name is Dr. Madhuri Sharma. I am a family medicine physician, and in May of this year, I assumed the role of Director of Telemedicine at Fair Haven Community Health Care, a community health center in New Haven that serves 18,000 patients. For the past few years prior to joining Fair Haven, I practiced telemedicine exclusively, and have had the privilege of serving thousands of patients in 11 states. I urge you to continue to recognize telemedicine as an equal mode of healthcare delivery, and support Bill 3614. Specifically, the State should continue coverage and payment parity for telemedicine visits, including audio-only visits, and support reimbursement of remote patient monitoring programs.

As you know, in June, New York State signed into law Senate bill S8416 which allowed audio-only services in the definition of telemedicine for purposes of reimbursement. This will allow patients – particularly those who are most vulnerable, most feeble, and most likely to delay seeking care due to lack of access – to receive healthcare services remotely, and safely.

We are currently running a pilot project at our community health center to support better access to digital technologies required for successful tele-video visits. We are finding that despite having access to a smart phone, many of our patients are on a prepaid cellular plan that is simply not robust enough to support a tele-video visit. Equitable access to technology and broadband reflect the underlying inequalities in our urban populations and communities of color. Tele-video visits are simply not always feasible, and the opportunity for audio-only visits has been critical to maintaining healthcare access for our patients.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been seeing patients from all over the country and in many of the hot spots, via telemedicine. We have played a critical role in decreasing unnecessary ER visits, supporting social distancing efforts, and continuing to provide comprehensive chronic disease management by utilizing telemedicine. Part of comprehensive care involves monitoring patients' vital signs outside of the office. At Fair Haven Community Health Care, we are embarking on a remote patient monitoring program, which will allow us to receive real-time data about our patients through the use of Bluetooth connected devices in their homes. We are undertaking this project without guarantee of reimbursement, as we feel it is very important for high-quality patient care. However, in order for this service to remain sustainable, there must be reimbursement. 20 other states, including Maine and Vermont, have some sort of remote patient monitoring program reimbursement in their state health programs.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is far from over. We must build on the impactful actions that have been taken already to ensure that both patients and providers do not lose access to telehealth as a mode of healthcare delivery once the public health emergency period ends. We must continue telehealth support through at least June 30, 2021, to continue safely caring for our patients through the inevitable waves of this pandemic, and in the future.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue, and for your continued commitment to expanding access to healthcare for our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M Sharma, MD".

Madhuri Sharma, MD
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Director of Telemedicine
Fair Haven Community Health Care