



UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE
FOUNDATION OF CONNECTICUT

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**Testimony Regarding
An Act Concerning Telehealth (LCO # 3614)**

**Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut
July 20, 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut regarding telehealth legislation in this summer 2020 special session of the Connecticut General Assembly.

Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut envisions a health system that is accountable and responsive to the people it serves, that supports our health, takes excellent care of all of us when we are sick at a cost that doesn't threaten our financial security and continues to be an important source of quality employment and vitality in our communities.

One of our policy priorities during this pandemic is to ensure access to coverage and care during this time. We are testifying in regard to the telehealth legislation brought up in this special session of the legislature because it is a critical point of access to the health care system for many.

Amid this pandemic, telehealth has proven to be an important part of the health care delivery system, as many people want to avoid going out in public and to the doctor or may have transportation challenges. Telehealth has helped many retain access to the health care system, even as this pandemic goes on, as well as helped providers continue to deliver care and bring in revenue. We applaud the legislature for taking up this important aspect of access to care.

We support including telephone only (audio only) telehealth, both for Medicaid and in-network providers (for those with private health insurance). Access to both the internet and a device able to conduct telehealth visits via video may be a challenge for many during this pandemic, including and especially low-income people or those struggling with recent job loss. A telephone may be the only reliable form of communication some people have to conduct telehealth visits.

It should be noted, though, that even telephone only (audio only) telehealth is not necessarily accessible to all – some people may have limitations on the minutes of their phone and be unable

to use their phone for this purpose. It is important to retain the ability to see a doctor in person, as telehealth may not be the best way to access health care for everyone.

Ensuring access to telehealth by making it no-cost to the consumer is also a critical component of telehealth, especially during a pandemic. While the Governor's Executive Orders regarding telehealth included language where the consumer was not charged an out-of-pocket cost to access telehealth, this bill does not include that provision.

Cost-sharing (either through co-payments, co-insurance, or applying the deductible) is a barrier to care that is unnecessary and not useful during a pandemic. In fact, we would argue that cost-sharing is a barrier to care even when we are not in a pandemic. We urge the legislature to consider removing consumer cost-sharing from the provision of telehealth, at least through the pandemic, if not permanently.

We are happy to see that payment parity for telehealth is included in the bill language. It is important that providers be compensated for telehealth visits as they would for an in-person visit. Many of the elements of a visit remain the same via telehealth, except the mode of communication. Insurance carriers should not reduce the reimbursement amount to providers just because a visit was conducted via telehealth.

The provision to prohibit the charge of facility fees for telehealth is also favorable – and makes sense, as the patient does not utilize the facility for a telehealth visit. While the doctor may use their own office for telehealth visits, we still agree that a facility fee is inappropriate for telehealth visits.

We are pleased to note that dentists are included in the definition of telehealth provider. Dental care is so often left out of consideration of health care. It is very important to continue to include dentists as part of telehealth, both in this bill, as well as in any future legislation on telehealth.

While we understand that these provisions are temporary until June 30, 2021, as a state we need to consider how to handle telehealth in the future, as telehealth has shown itself to be a critical point of access for many patients, whether there is a pandemic or not. We suggest considering making these provisions longer term or even permanent, as well as removing cost-sharing as a barrier to telehealth access.

Thank you for your time.

Universal Health Care Foundation of Connecticut's mission is to serve as a catalyst that engages residents and communities in shaping a democratic health system that provides universal access to quality, affordable health care and promotes health in Connecticut. We believe that health care is a fundamental right and that our work is part of a broader movement for social and economic justice.