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Op-Ed: A call to bolster telehealth, even after the pandemic

BRIAN FITZGERALD | OCTOBER 30, 2020 | [OPINION, HEALTH CARE](#)

Telehealth services have proven their enduring value during the crisis, especially for those with mental health needs



Brian Fitzgerald

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on many aspects of our health care system, but it also drove some positive change. One of the most striking was Gov. Phil Murphy's emergency executive order expanding access to telehealth services for all New Jerseyans and ensuring "pay parity" for practitioners. This means that a doctor, therapist, or any other licensed professional that provides a service virtually can be paid the same amount as if the appointment happened in person. This was not the case prior to the pandemic here in New Jersey.

Telehealth services have proved to be an invaluable tool in ensuring that the pandemic would not limit access to medical care like mental health counseling and other critical services that ensure the well-being of countless New Jerseyans. When the public health emergency ends — which could be deemed the case at any time — these rules will expire. And when they do, this will only impede the availability of this powerful health care tool and make access to care for some of our state's most vulnerable residents more difficult.

Consider the case of Giovanna, who has struggled with mental illness her whole life and experienced homelessness and related problems as a result. In recent years, she was approved to join one of our mental health residences. With support from Easterseals New Jersey caseworkers, she became accountable for her medication and medical needs, went to school, and was recently approved to get her own apartment. Since March, Giovanna is continuing to succeed in life because of the services she is receiving via telehealth. To lose that support likely means a return to hopelessness and the tragedy that comes with it.

Change in the law is needed

This is why we are encouraging our state Legislature to pass [A-4179/S-2559](#). This bill would ensure equal reimbursement for telehealth services and prohibit benefits plans from imposing a "place of service" requirement, indicating where the medical service is provided. It is essential that critical services currently being provided remotely continue to be available to those who need it.

This is a particularly significant issue for those receiving mental health services. Since in-person services were ordered closed in March, thousands of New Jersey residents have received critical mental health services remotely from Easterseals New Jersey and similar providers. Factor in the amplified negative impact on mental health resulting from the pandemic itself, which will be felt long after it is over, and the significance of making telehealth services available and cost-efficient cannot be overstated.

The proposed legislation also includes a provision ensuring that telehealth services may take place at any site for both the provider and the patient. Emergency rules enacted as a response to the pandemic removed burdensome site requirements and enabled providers to offer more accessible and timely care. These rules allowing providers to work remotely have protected them and their clients from potential exposure to COVID-19. They have also made

telehealth and tele-mental health services more readily available, which could literally mean the difference between life and death for someone in crisis who is seeking help. In these situations, every minute counts.

Ensuring pay parity is a critical safeguard that will ensure the availability and viability of telehealth services to all. By continuing to make telehealth readily available, we are protecting our state's most vulnerable residents, their caregivers, and service providers from undue exposure to COVID-19 in the short term. In the long term, we can make certain that all New Jerseyans have access to telehealth services for years to come.

While there are countless issues vying for legislative attention today, health and safety must be put first, especially for those who need it the most. A total of 29 states plus the District of Columbia already have similar laws in place. It is time New Jersey caught up to the majority of our nation.

We encourage all New Jersey citizens to sign our petition and help us help those in need. Visit eastersealsnj.org/otherside to learn more about how you can change lives for people with disabilities through our "On the Other Side" Campaign.

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