

**Testimony from the Colorado Rural Health Center in Support of:
SB20-212 Reimbursement for Telehealth Services**

House Health & Insurance Committee, June 10, 2020

Madam Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the Colorado Rural Health Center (CRHC). CRHC is the nonprofit, nonpartisan State Office of Rural Health and Rural Health Association. Our members are hospitals, clinics, providers and communities in rural Colorado. We provide resources, education and advocacy to ensure that all rural Coloradans have access to comprehensive, affordable, high quality healthcare. CRHC is writing to ask for your support of SB20-212 Reimbursement for Telehealth Services.

750,230 Coloradans live in a rural or frontier county, and of Colorado's 64 counties, 73% are frontier or rural. Recent research suggests that where people live significantly impacts health outcomes. Real differences exist between urban and rural areas of the state, and rural citizens face a variety of health inequities. Poverty and unemployment rates are higher in rural counties with median household income 29% lower in rural areas compared to urban areas. Residents on public insurance is 32% higher in rural areas and those who are uninsured is 11.4% compared to 6.7% in urban Colorado. These factors are social determinants of health that manifest themselves in poorer health rankings and higher chronic disease prevalence. These health and economic factors are increasingly more critical due to the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) and subsequent economic downturn.

Luckily, in the wake of COVID-19, the state passed emergency provisions to make telehealth services more widely available. Telehealth services are vital in order for rural Coloradans to receive timely, affordable and quality healthcare. This bill keeps patients and healthcare workers safe and promotes convenient, personalized care. Rural healthcare providers across the state are using telehealth for variety of services, including:

- Primary care visits, especially for those at high-risk for COVID-19 complications

- Oncology
- Therapy and counseling
- Stroke assessment
- Home health
- Infectious disease control
- Chronic pain visits
- Visits with long-term care residents

It is critical we continue this momentum of supporting telehealth by supporting this bill. CRHC and our membership can empathize and understand the dire financial situation the state is facing, but if we do not provide equitable access to healthcare across our state by protecting telehealth services, rural Coloradans who already have poorer socioeconomic and health outcomes, will be the ones who continue to lose out.

Based on our research and member feedback, we know that utilization does not increase when patients have a telehealth option, rather, patients simply replace in-person visits with this safer option. Further, we understand that payers may prefer to pay less than in-person rates for telehealth services, however, we want to assure committee members that it costs providers no less to provide telehealth visits. Providers must still maintain office facilities, liability insurance, pay staff and other overhead. Not to mention the significant upfront costs associated with purchasing a telehealth platform and regular maintenance and licensing fees. Fortunately, telehealth may provide patients with cost-savings by no longer requiring transportation or extended periods away from work or family. Additionally, we know better access to care, namely primary care, reduces costly ER visits and increases long-term healthcare cost-savings. This may result in a direct cost-savings to the state Medicaid program.

Our rural healthcare providers have given us some thoughtful feedback about delivering telehealth services in the wake of COVID-19:

- *“We are hoping the relaxed rules stay in place after the COVID restrictions are lifted. It is an enormous benefit to our patients that live out of town and travel sometimes an hour to get to the office. We see less stress on our staff with the televisits, our furniture and equipment.”*–Peak Family Medicine, Montrose
- *“Our providers and patients have adapted well. We foresee some patients wanting to stay with telehealth (psych and neurology) because they don’t like coming into the clinic. We really need phone visits to pay equally as an audio/video visit when the note is comparable to an E/M visit.”* –Heart of the Rockies Regional Medical Center, Salida
- *“[Telehealth] is a work in progress as we serve a large elderly population in a rural area. It is a great option to help ensure patient and staff safety during this pandemic.”* –Spanish Peaks Regional Medical Center, Walsenburg
- *“We are hoping to integrate telehealth services for the long term.”* –Melissa Memorial Hospital, Holyoke
- *“We have been lucky that the majority of patients have been open and comfortable to with telemedicine. It’s just a question of will we get paid or not. Again, we are lucky we have the majority of Medicaid patients and Medicaid is paying and doing well on this end. We are trying to think out of the box and keep revenue coming in plus provide the same great services when patients need us. As well as keeping staff healthy and safe.”* –Pediatric Associates, Durango
- *“We only started [offering telehealth services] due to COVID out of necessity. Looking forward to seeing its potential going forward.”* -Custer County Medical Center, Westcliffe
- *“[Telehealth revenue] is not a lot but at least it’s something and gives our patients options.”* – Yuma District Hospital

Please support safe, comprehensive access to telehealth services by voting yes on this bill.

Thank you the opportunity to provide testimony on this issue, for your consideration on this bill and for your support to rural Colorado communities. We are happy to answer any questions or continue this conversation, please contact Policy & Advocacy Manager Kelly Erb at ke@coruralhealth.org or by phone at 507.828.4174.

Thank you.