



Senate Human Services Committee

SB 2179

January 20, 2021

Chairman Lee and Committee Members, I am Courtney Koebele, the Executive Director of the North Dakota Medical Association. The North Dakota Medical Association is the professional membership organization for North Dakota physicians, residents, and medical students.

NDMA strongly supports SB 2179.

NDMA adopted a policy position in support of telehealth parity at its 2020 policy forum. Payment parity is an issue that is supported by all types of physicians and specialties. To assess the need, NDMA assembled a broad coalition of health care stakeholders, including Essentia Health, CHI St. Alexius, Trinity Health, Altru Health, Mid Dakota Clinic, Bone and Joint, ND Academy of Physician Assistants, Physical Therapy Association of North Dakota, ND Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Mental Health America of North Dakota, and the Mental Health Advocacy Network. Together, this group supports telehealth payment parity legislation that will require health plans to reimburse providers for covered telehealth services delivered to patients at reimbursement rates not less than in-person services.

While telehealth cannot replace all patient care, the extension of telehealth benefits in recent months has rapidly changed the way clinicians see patients and has provided a push for innovation that has allowed clinicians to safely increase access to high quality care.

Patients have reported that telehealth has been a positive experience, which results in fewer "no-shows" than in-person visits. Patients are grateful to have telehealth as an option.

As this committee is aware, North Dakota has a law regarding insurance mandates. That law provides "A legislative measure mandating health insurance coverage of services or payment for specified providers of services may not be

acted on by any committee of the legislative assembly unless the measure is accompanied by a cost-benefit analysis provided by the legislative council.”

SB 2179 provides for neither of those since the proposed changes do not mandate new coverage or provide coverage to new provider types. Telehealth services are already covered services and no new providers are directed in the statute.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

SUPPORT COMPETITIVE, FAIR REIMBURSEMENT RATES FOR TELEHEALTH SB 2179

SB 2179 requires health plans to reimburse providers for all covered telehealth services delivered to patients at reimbursement rates not less than in-person services.

Due to the pandemic, increased flexibilities and broader insurance coverage for telehealth services made it possible for health care professionals to continue treating patients and increase access to care.

- Payment parity – or equal reimbursement rates - would ensure patients have increased access to timely, value-based, and integrated care, especially for rural and underserved communities throughout the state. Under current law, health plans reimburse telehealth services **20% to 40% lower** than in-person services.
- By continuing to utilize virtual visits, health care professionals and hospitals alike will be able to provide three very important elements, which are:
 - Continuity of care – Virtual visits allow patients to be cared for by their care team or an extension of this team – not a third party from a national vendor.
 - Access to the entire patient record – Virtual visits ensure that nothing is left unaddressed with regard to patients’ past medical history, medication lists, previous health events, etc.
 - Access to comprehensive and integrated health care – Virtual visits allow providers to easily hand over care needs to other members of the health care team, such as future testing needs, follow up, or referrals to a specialist – all of which can be done within electronic medical records systems to ensure that the patient is receiving comprehensive care. This is not easily done with a third party like Teledoc or AmWell.

While telehealth cannot replace all patient care, the extension of telehealth benefits in recent months has rapidly changed the way health care professionals see patients. The advancements provided a push for innovation that now allow health care providers to safely increase access to high quality care, particularly in the rural health care setting.

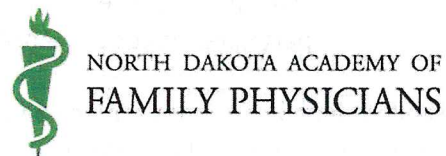
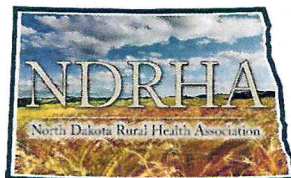
Historically, access to rural health care has been met with challenges and the advancement of telehealth carries its benefits to rural health care professionals and how they are able to treat patients. This revolutionary approach to health care services can reduce or minimize challenges and burdens patients encounter, such as transportation issues related to traveling for specialty

care. Telehealth can also improve monitoring, timeliness, and communications within the healthcare system.

Key telehealth benefits extended to patients provide more accessibility for care:

- For patients who are unable to use video software and patients who lack broadband access or technology for video-only, the current ability to reach patients virtually or over telephone has been critical to ensuring continuity of care.
- When patients have access to timely comprehensive care, chronic medical conditions can be addressed sooner; thus, when treatment is more easily accessible, the need for emergency care services is most likely reduced - resulting in health care cost savings for both the patient and insurers.

We urge you to support payment parity for telehealth services to ensure that these services are reimbursed at the same rate as services provided in-person.



North Dakota Practicing Psychiatrists by City

