

Session: 67th Legislative Assembly, Regular Session (2021)
Bill: SB 2179
Committee: Senate Human Services Committee
Hearing: Wednesday, January 20th, 2021 at 2:30 p.m.
Testimony: Written Only
Witness: Brian Balstad, Lobbyist for North Dakota Psychological Association

Chairwoman Lee and Members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Brian Balstad. I am submitting written testimony on behalf of the North Dakota Psychological Association, the professional association for psychologists in the State of North Dakota. Telehealth serves an important role in providing mental health services for North Dakotans. Telehealth has made mental health services accessible to North Dakotans living in rural areas and North Dakotans with limited mobility. It has made mental health services accessible to North Dakotans during the COVID-19 pandemic without risking harm to the patient/client, mental health service provider, or the public. It has made mental health services more accessible to North Dakotans overall. It is for these reasons the North Dakota Psychological Association has supported and continues to support telehealth.

An issue encountered when providing mental health services using telehealth is the disparate treatment of telehealth by some insurance companies. The services provided using telehealth are the same services provided in-person yet some insurance companies provide lower rates of reimbursement, i.e. pay less, for services provided using telehealth than for services provided in-person. Thus, not only do mental health service providers incur additional cost to provide services using telehealth, mental health service providers are also paid less for services provided using telehealth by some insurance companies. As services provided using telehealth are the same services provided in-person, the rates of reimbursement should be the same. SB 2179 addresses this issue. In addition to addressing the disparate treatment of telehealth in regard to

payments and reimbursement, SB 2179 also addresses the disparate treatment of telehealth in regard to coinsurance, copayments, deductibles, and utilization management requirements.

Imposing requirements for in-person consultations or in-person contact before a patient/client may receive mental health services using telehealth makes receiving mental health services more difficult and makes mental health services less accessible for North Dakotans. SB 2179 addresses this issue by prohibiting such requirements.

SB 2179 also makes mental health services more accessible by extending coverage of telehealth services to residential facilities and group homes and by expanding telehealth to include audio-only telephone.

For these reasons, the North Dakota Psychological Association supports SB 2179. Thank you for your time and consideration. Also, thank you Chairwoman Lee, Senator Anderson, Senator Roers, Representative Dobervich, and Representative Westlind for sponsoring this bill.