

January 20, 2021

To whom it may concern:

In 2020, healthcare providers were asked to make changes in the delivery of healthcare to patients in order to help fight the Covid-19 pandemic. As mental healthcare providers, not only did we understand the need to move to telehealth, but also understood the current and coming increased need for mental health services. While we were unsure of the outcome in the beginning, we did what we felt was necessary at the time to keep our patients and ourselves safe by moving all services to telehealth.

Laws for coverage parity for insurance subscribers (patients) already exist in the state of North Dakota, however, we do not have laws for payment parity for those providers offering telehealth services. The federal government through CMS understands that this is an issue and has reimbursed telehealth visits at the same rate as in-person visits throughout the pandemic emergency. Unfortunately, commercial insurance carriers in North Dakota have not followed suit. We knew this was the current reality but felt that the emergency called for it. Ten months later, we have a better understanding of the impact of telehealth on both our patients' care and our healthcare business.

For our patients we have seen an overwhelming adoption of the telehealth mode of providing care. With a caseload of over 400 active patients in March of 2020, we had 3 patients who refused telehealth and required a referral to outside sources. Of the over 100 new patient requests in the past 10 months, only 4 did not make an appointment due to services being provided only through telehealth.

We are also seeing an overwhelming benefit in the last 10 months for our patients' health. Telehealth allows our patients greater flexibility in scheduling and keeping appointments – they can be seen anywhere they have an internet connection. Patients can be seen from anywhere in the state – a patient from a rural, underserved part of our state no longer must take a whole day off work to drive 100 miles for services. We are seeing greater progress with their mental health treatment – they feel more comfortable being seen from their own safe space and do not have to worry about taking more time off work to get to an appointment. Patients have also mentioned they do not have to worry about the stigma (which unfortunately still exists) of going to a mental health appointment.

We have seen a dramatic decrease in cancellations of appointments. Being able to be seen by a provider in the comfort of their own space has helped many patients make their mental health a priority. Patients are better able to work around any scheduling/work/family conflicts to make it to their appointments. This leads to better outcomes for patients – symptom resolution is taking less time which ultimately means a savings for them and their insurance companies, along with improved mental health which means an improvement at work, at home, and in the community at large.

Unfortunately, we are seeing the burdens on our end as well. We are a small, independent clinic. We saw an immediate decrease in our reimbursement from commercial insurances by 20-30% depending on the insurance company. Telehealth visits do not require any less than in-person visits. They require the same level of education, knowledge, and expertise. They require office space for providers, and all the business needs that existed while doing in-person visits. There were also increased business expenses in getting our clinic set up to do telehealth and ongoing additional technology expenses related to doing telehealth.

As a small business in North Dakota, we have been fortunate to have some emergency support during the pandemic. This does not mean that payment parity is not needed. The overwhelming adoption of telehealth and benefits we are seeing means that it is here to stay as a viable option for patients and providers. Unfortunately, without payment parity clinics around the state will struggle to provide much needed services. This also has implications for encouraging additional healthcare providers to relocate here. Why would a healthcare provider choose to work here knowing they will be paid less for the same work? State and local governments work very hard to bring new business to our state; it would be of benefit to everyone to include healthcare businesses in that effort.

Healthcare flourishes when patients have a wide range of options to meet their needs – both small and large clinics, both in-person and telehealth providers. Payment parity from commercial insurances would ensure clinics around the state are able to recruit new providers, continue providing needed services, and be successful businesses providing value to our state.

Thank you for your consideration,

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