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Healthcare Provider, Consumer, and Business Coalition Promotes Access and Equity for Patients Through Telemedicine

A coalition of 27 healthcare, consumer, and business organizations who make up the Massachusetts Telemedicine Coalition (tMED) today announced the filing of state legislation to advance and promote access to telemedicine services for patients in the commonwealth. The bill, entitled “An Act Advancing and Expanding Access to Telemedicine Services” was filed by Representative John Scibak (D-South Hadley) in the House of Representatives and Senator Jason Lewis (D-Winchester) in the Senate last Friday.

“Telemedicine improves care by giving all patients – whether they live in cities or in more rural areas like South Hadley – convenient access to all levels of healthcare services,” said Rep. Scibak. “It not only improves access to care, but also advances quality, reduces costs, and saves patients time. The bill we filed will eliminate burdensome administrative red tape and establish coverage and reimbursement parity for these important services. It’s simply common sense.”

Telemedicine is the remote diagnosis and treatment of patients through on-line communication. It improves care and makes it more efficient by giving patients more convenient access to primary care providers and greater access to specialists located outside their geographic area. This can be particularly helpful for hard-to-access services such as behavioral health or surgical consults, and for patients with disabilities and mobility limitations, major distance or time barriers, or transportation limitations.

“Expanding statewide access to telemedicine will enhance the ability of all residents to receive critical and life-saving treatment on a timely basis, regardless of economic means, physical ability, or geographic location,” noted Lynn Nicholas, President & CEO of the Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association. “Putting in place the right incentives and removing those rules that limit the use of this innovative technology is crucial to increasing our use of telemedicine in Massachusetts.”

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There is strong evidence that telemedicine is a valid, convenient and time-saving treatment option comparable to in-person care. A 2015 Harvard Medical School study published in the *American Journal of Managed Care* estimated that a typical in-person visit to a doctor consumes 121 minutes of a patient's time, with only 20 minutes of that spent face-to-face with the physician. Based on average hourly income, researchers estimate that each medical visit costs patients \$43 in lost work time – which is more than the average out-of-pocket cost for the care itself at \$32. Furthermore, minorities and unemployed patients spend 25% to 28% longer seeking healthcare, mostly because of longer wait times. The convenience of telemedicine thus offers increased productivity for workers and businesses and increased time in the classroom for children. Local pilot programs have already demonstrated cost-savings to the Massachusetts healthcare system.

In a Health Policy Brief in *Health Affairs* in August 2016, Professor Tony Yang from George Mason University noted that “To reap the benefits of telehealth services, states are likely to move toward full parity laws for telehealth services. Without parity, there are limited incentives for the development of telehealth or for providers to move toward telehealth services. If there are no incentives to use telehealth, then providers will continue to focus on in-person care, which will keep health care costs high, continue to create access issues, and possibly provide lesser standards of care for chronic disease patients who benefit from remote monitoring.”

“Massachusetts has some of the best healthcare services in the nation,” said Sen. Lewis. “But certain antiquated rules have stalled telemedicine’s advancement in the commonwealth, and it’s time to move forward with this legislation. A recent study by the state’s Center for Health Information and Analysis found that parity for coverage of telemedicine will improve the overall delivery of care in Massachusetts and will have no effect on commercial health insurance premiums. In fact, this will reduce healthcare costs for businesses and families. It’s time for coverage for telemedicine services to be treated the same as in-person visits. Massachusetts needs to put aside regulatory barriers that inhibit the widespread adoption of telemedicine here in Massachusetts.”

The organizations endorsing the legislation who comprise of tMED include: the Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association, the Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals, the Massachusetts Council of Community Hospitals, Atrius Health, the MAVEN (Medical Alumni Volunteer Expert Network) Project, the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society, Health Care for All, the ACT!! (Affordable Care Today!!) Coalition, the American Heart Association / the American Stroke Association, the Massachusetts League of Community of Community Health Centers, the Association for Behavioral Healthcare, the Massachusetts Association of Behavioral Health Systems, the Case Management Society of New England, the Seven Hills Foundation, the National Association of Social Workers – Massachusetts Chapter, Planned Parenthood Advocacy Fund of Massachusetts, AMD Global Telemedicine, the Seven Hills Foundation, Avizia, the Hospice & Palliative Care Federation of Massachusetts, the Organization of Nurse Leaders of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire & Connecticut, the Massachusetts Academy of Family Physicians, the Massachusetts Association of Occupational Therapists, Perspectives Health Services, Phillips, the Massachusetts Family Planning Association and 3Derm.

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