

To: committee members

I am speaking today from more than 30 years' experience working in the behavioral healthcare industry serving in both public and private agencies. I have worked as a provider and as an insurer, providing oversight for Medicare and Medicaid mental health care in MA. I currently serve on the board of VT Mental Health Counselors Association and on the board for a peer-driven social support organization Another Way. I have also recently earned a Distance Counseling Certification that is sponsored by the NBCC, the same national organization that certifies Licensed Mental Health Counselors.

I am testifying on H.50, because of 2 issues –

1) There is a long history of clinicians providing telephonic support to their patients during times of high stress – not necessarily crisis at the level of potential injury to self or others, but during times of immediate distress. The 'check in' telephonic session that fills a gap until a next scheduled appointment fills a niche for acute care. From a parity perspective, these calls are similar in nature as those of the medical community, including follow up calls post-surgery, update on lab or other test result, on-call support, and prescribing. Unlike our medical colleagues, mental health providers have not been paid for this valuable, clinically/medically necessary service. Similar to telemedicine, video conferencing with its added visual connection presents one more invaluable enhancement to the patient/clinician dialogue.

2) Ease of access to experienced specialists is essential. Distance counseling bridges the gap for many people who would access and benefit from services that were more readily available. Such as: those patients who struggle with complex concerns requiring a specialist, are challenged to find time for counseling and the additional time of commuting to counseling, live and work at a long distance from their best fitting provider, struggle with mobility issues, transportation needs or feel embarrassed and stigmatized by receiving mental health care. These and so many other circumstances can inhibit access to specialized care. Finding the best fitting clinician, finding the type of treatment that is most beneficial to each client, having choice is central to effective treatment. Effective mental health treatment is central to improving outcomes and reducing overall healthcare costs. Telemedicine/ Distance Counseling greatly expand treatment availability and specialized options.

Susan Atwell Hall LCMHC, DCC