

Dear House Health Care Committee Members,

I am a psychiatrist working in community health clinics and in private practice. Since March 2020 I have been providing my services to patients via telehealth, usually with video and audio combined, but also by phone. I strongly support continuing insurance reimbursement for telephone only services beyond the pandemic emergency.

Most of my patients are in the Northeast Kingdom. I can assure you that access to good quality audio and video over the internet or cell service is difficult for some patients, and those with the greatest mental health need have the hardest time accessing it. They also have difficulty coming to appointments in person. During the pandemic we have discovered that we can effectively help people who can't or won't come to the clinic in person through televideo or telephone visits.

The telephone is a highly effective method for reaching patients "where they are". As medical clinicians we are held to the same standard across mediums for providing appropriate level of care and assessment for the patient. We can choose when a visit type other than telephone is necessary and make arrangements for that visit in person or by video.

A telephone visit expands access to mental health care. It takes the same level of effort, coordination, and medical decision making as other types of visits.

I join my medical colleagues in asking the Vermont legislature to require insurance companies to reimburse for phone-only medical service as a permanent policy beyond the period of the pandemic emergency.

Thank you for your consideration.
Cynthia Swartz, MD