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Congress Acts to Make Telemedicine Available to Seniors During Coronavirus

March 5, 2020 – Today, Congress moved to help seniors access telehealth during the Coronavirus emergency without having to leave their homes.

Telehealth is covered in Medicare only under very limited circumstances. Through the *Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act*, Congress gave the Secretary authority to waive telehealth restrictions in Medicare, thereby creating a new pathway for some seniors to get care during this crisis.

While a positive step forward, the language is limited to seniors and providers who have established an existing relationship within the past three years. Also, the provision may not apply to seniors who became Medicare-eligible within the last three years.

“Although there will be implementation challenges, this is a strike against Coronavirus. It is a relief to medical providers who want to triage and treat their patients, and patients who want to avoid congregating in waiting rooms,” said Krista Drobac, Executive Director of the Alliance for Connected Care.

“The Alliance thanks all the congressional champions of telehealth, and leadership in the House and Senate who fought for this provision. We look forward to working with HHS to operationalize and implement this critical new authority to ensure that as many seniors as possible benefit,” Drobac said.

“The congressional provision is a step in the right direction and improves our ability to safely and effectively respond to this outbreak. Unfortunately, the limitations of the current provision will significantly limit our ability to see patients who we have not seen before, or who haven't been engaged in the healthcare system in the past three years. Once we are past this crisis, we urge Congress to open telehealth access for the benefit of Medicare patients,” said Dr. Lawrence “Rusty” Hofmann, Medical Director, Digital Health, Stanford Health Care

“Support for telehealth to combat COVID-19 is an important national development especially for health systems who can now use it to serve their Medicare patients,” said Dr. Roy Schoenberg, President and CEO of AmWell, “While we are concerned that the ‘pre-existing relationship’ constraint may confuse patients, the initiative is a good step in the right direction.”

“Access to care through telehealth increases safety and equity in our communities. Being able to see a doctor without worry of transportation, childcare and whether the office or hospital increases the risk of getting sick means better care delivery to more of our patients,” said Dr. Ethan Booker, Medical Director for the MedStar Telehealth Innovation Center.



“The use of telemedicine will address patient needs while limiting the spread of COVID-19. We are grateful Congress passed this important provision as it will enable us to use our clinical, evidence-based guidelines to support and treat patients with all kinds of needs during this crisis,” said Michael Farrell, SVP & GM Hospital and Health Systems, MD Live.