



## Support Permanent Access to Telehealth by Qualified Rehabilitation Professionals

The National Association of Rehabilitation Providers and Agencies (NARA) believes that telehealth has played a crucial role in providing needed care to patients during the pandemic. On March 10, 2022, Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2022, which includes an extension of current Medicare telehealth waivers for 151 days beyond the expiration of the public health emergency (PHE). It has become increasingly clear that telehealth's many benefits should and must be utilized well beyond the COVID-19 health emergency in order to meet beneficiary needs for best outcomes.

**The Expanded Telehealth Access Act of 2021 (H.R. 2168/S. 3193)**, introduced by Reps. Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ) and David McKinley (R-WV); and by Senators Steve Daines (R-MT), Tina Smith (D-MN), Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Jacky Rosen (D-NV) these bi-partisan bills would add qualified private practice and facility-based rehabilitation professionals as permanent authorized providers of telehealth under the Medicare program. NARA believes that adding physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, audiologists, speech language pathologists, and facilities that furnish outpatient therapy as eligible providers of telehealth under Medicare is a key step in making telehealth a permanent tool for providers.

Rehabilitation providers have found several benefits of telehealth for patients when used as a supplement to their plan of care:

- Guiding patients through prescribed exercises, analyzing patients' performance, and instructing modifications of care plans;
- Assess a patient's home environment and recommend adjustments to improve safety and navigation preventing further risks to the patients' health – this access is not available through typical outpatient therapy;
- Reduce the number of in-clinic visits and still maintain important monitoring and follow-up care. This is especially important for Medicare patients who lack transportation or socio-economic means for multidiscipline in person visits;
- Co-treat with another clinician who is treating via real-time audio and video technology;
- Conduct evaluations, when necessary, to prevent delays in essential care;
- Supervise treatment being provided by an assistant in a patient's home.

Telehealth is well-suited for rehabilitation therapies, especially when used as an enhancement to services rather than exclusively as a replacement. Education and home exercise programs, including those focused on activities of daily living and fall prevention are particularly well suited for telehealth because the therapist can evaluate and treat the patient within the real-life context of their home environment. A patient and/or caregiver's ability to interact in their own environment with a therapist when they are facing a challenge, rather than waiting for the next appointment, can be invaluable in supporting the adoption of effective strategies to improve function, enhance safety, and promote engagement.

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Additional benefits of telehealth as a tool in rehabilitation:

- Telehealth has been shown to improve access to care for patients who live in rural areas. It has allowed patients to gain desired outcomes for a variety of health problems, including post-traumatic stress syndrome, chronic pain, stroke, and other neurological and musculoskeletal conditions. Patients who live in rural areas and have to travel some distance for care are more likely to forgo care due to the hardship caused by traveling.
- A 2019 study examined the efficacy of home-based telehealth versus in-clinic therapy for adults after stroke, finding that post stroke activity-based training resulted in substantial gains in patients' arm motor function, whether provided via telerehabilitation or in person.<sup>1</sup>
- Increasing access to rehabilitation therapy services, including through audio and video telecommunications technology can decrease healthcare costs by reducing hospital admissions, and readmissions, emergency department visits, and urgent care visits. Patients have improved compliance to clinical care with better clinical outcomes.
- The National Association of Rehabilitation Providers and Agencies strongly supports **The Expanded Telehealth Access Act of 2021 (H.R. 2168/S. 3193)** and urge you to cosponsor this legislation. This bill is also endorsed by the American Physical Therapy Association, the American Telehealth Association, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, the American Occupational Therapy Association, the eHealth Initiative and Foundation, the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, Inc., the Personal Connected Health Alliance, and the Alliance for Connected Care.

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*NARA is the trade association representing 90+ organizations consisting of over 80,000 healthcare professionals dedicated to providing a multitude of skilled rehabilitation therapy services to individuals in a variety of settings including inpatient, outpatient, skilled care, assisted living, educational systems, industry/occupational health.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31233135/>