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Health Care Providers Call on South Carolina State Legislature to Make Telehealth Coverage Permanent

CHARLESTON, S.C. (Mar. 15, 2021) – The South Carolina Telehealth Alliance (SCTA) and Palmetto Care Connections (PCC) released a letter signed by 25 of South Carolina’s major health care systems and associations asking the South Carolina General Assembly to make health insurance coverage for telehealth permanent beyond the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Telehealth refers to a broad scope of health care services, including clinical care, which is delivered remotely, often through a secure online video conference between the health care provider at their office and the patient at home.

The letter calls for legislation that would require health insurance payers to continue covering health care delivered virtually, regardless of where a patient is located in South Carolina or the type of provider providing the service. The SCTA also released an accompanying [video of patient testimonials](#), showcasing the immense value telehealth brings to the citizens of South Carolina.

“Thanks to the leadership and investment of our legislative leaders, coupled with sustained collaboration across health systems, South Carolina has become a leader in the nation in using technology to extend health care across our state,” said Dr. James McElligott, Executive Medical Director of MUSC’s Center for Telehealth and Co-Chair of the SCTA. “Yet there is so much more to do to achieve our mission to provide equitable access to care to all South Carolinians. It is time to solidify telehealth as a foundational element of our health care system by removing inconsistent reimbursement and freeing our care providers to move care out of the office and into the lives of their patients.”

According to the SCTA, prior to the pandemic, some insurers only covered telehealth visits conducted between two clinical sites and restricted that coverage to certain provider types (e.g., physician, nurse practitioner). The lack of reimbursement and variation in payer policies prevented widescale telehealth adoption. This all changed in 2020. During the public health emergency, public and private health insurance payers eased restrictions on telehealth provider types and patient sites, which in turn dramatically increased patient access to primary care, mental health, and specialty services. This was especially true for patients living in rural communities.

“Before the COVID-19 pandemic, rural health care providers could not provide services directly to their patients via telehealth and get paid,” said Kathy Schwarting, Chief Executive Officer of PCC and Co-Chair of the SCTA. “Loosened regulations now allow both rural health clinics and federally qualified health centers to provide direct to consumer care virtually. We cannot go back to where we were before the pandemic and expect to meet the needs of our rural citizens.”

South Carolina has received national recognition for its programs, but despite this the [Center for Connected Health Policy](#) indicates it is one of the last states in the country without telehealth insurance coverage legislation in place. In the letter, the organizations note health care access for patients may be lost if immediate and swift legislative action is not taken: “If we do not advocate for major insurance payers to extend temporary telehealth policies, health care providers and patients will lose this critical tool in addressing health care needs across our state.”

A full version of the letter, including a list of all the organizations that have signed it, and a link to the patient testimonial video are available on the SCTA website, www.sctelehealth.org.

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The SCTA is a collaboration of health systems, primary and specialty care providers, state agencies, and other shared-mission support organizations that work together to improve the lives of all South Carolinians through telehealth. In recognition of this collaboration, the American Telemedicine Association awarded the SCTA its President’s Award for Transformation in Healthcare Delivery in 2019. The SCTA includes close to 600 connected care sites throughout the state and is administratively headquartered at the MUSC Center for Telehealth, one of only two Telehealth Centers of Excellence in the nation.

Established in 2010, PCC is a non-profit organization that provides technology, broadband, and telehealth support services to health care providers in rural and underserved areas of South Carolina. PCC leads South Carolina’s broadband consortium which facilitates broadband connections throughout the state. PCC co-chairs the South Carolina Telehealth Alliance, along with the Medical University of South Carolina, partnering with health care organizations and providers to improve health care access and delivery for all South Carolinians.