

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 4

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH

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Hearing Date: March 31, 2021 8:00 AM

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Heidi Weber, RDH

TDHA

Fort Worth, TX

I am in support of having telemedicine and dentistry to expand access to care for our under served population.

Sandi Bennett

Self

Garland, TX

My concern is about telemedicine related to behavioral health. Page 2 of the bill on line 14 talks about using audio-only for behavioral health services. I don't believe a doctor can accurately assess a patient for behavioral health care just by audio.

In 2017, I went to a psychiatric hospital for care. I talked to someone by video. This was the telemed "exam". It lasted just a few minutes. I don't feel the doctor understood my issues. A lot of my care didn't seem to make sense. In fact, I was marked as bulimic when I am a good 200lbs!

Telemed applications for mental health are not a good idea. If they are going to be used there should at least be a record of the audio or video. That way a person could refer back to it and take better charge of their care.

Thank you

Pat Curry, Dental hygienist

Dental hygienists

Carrollton, TX

I support.

Shelby Schwing, License Clinical Social Worker

Self

Kerrville, TX

Elderly, individuals without transportation, individuals severely depressed sometimes have difficulty making it to a office location, therefore not getting mental health services. Telemedicine for psychotherapy is strongly needed.

Sydney Carter, Mental Health Policy Fellow

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Network of Behavioral Health Providers

Houston, TX

My name is Sydney Carter, and I am the Mental Health Policy Fellow at the Network of Behavioral Health Providers (NBHP). NBHP is a collaborative of the leadership of over 40 public and private, for-profit and non-profit mental health and substance use disorder services providers in greater Houston. I am pleased to be writing you in support of HB 4.

Telehealth has been utilized during the pandemic at an unprecedented rate across the nation, including in Texas. A recent study found that 4.5 million Texans began using telehealth during the pandemic. Several studies have found that tele-behavioral health is as effective as in-person therapy. Furthermore, telehealth services can reduce service wait times for patients, as well increase the number who receive needed tests and treatments. Studies also suggest that telehealth services can save patients both time and money related to travel, as well as reduce provider no-show rates. , Governor Abbott issued several temporary emergency rules to encourage telehealth utilization during the pandemic, though many—including allowing reimbursement of audio-only tele-behavioral health services—are set to expire.

HB 4 would allow Medicaid Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) to reimburse for home telemonitoring services, including assessment and service coordination activities for members receiving home services, and specifically reimbursement for audio-only tele-behavioral health services. Many Texans do not have access to high-speed broadband internet connection, making audio-only (phone call) telehealth the most viable option during the pandemic and beyond for receiving virtual health care services. The availability of this option is especially important for behavioral health services, as sometimes there are numerous barriers to accessing care beyond stigma. Examples of these barriers include traveling far distances to the provider (due to the behavioral health provider workforce shortage across Texas), finding childcare, taking time off work, and more.

Additionally, we ask that you consider amending HB 4 to require MCOs to reimburse at the same rate for tele-health services as for in-person services. Providing payment parity would help to incentivize providers to adopt the use of telehealth services. This increased number of available providers is crucial to maintaining the level of access to care that has become available during the pandemic through telehealth. Many of these patients would likely not be able to access quality behavioral health care without the availability of the tele-behavioral health option, even beyond the pandemic.

High utilization rates of telehealth during the pandemic have proven that Texans do utilize and are satisfied with receiving care through telemedicine. Nearly all respondents to a study – 94% - said they would continue to use telehealth services after the pandemic, and 45% said that they now trust telehealth options as much as in-person visits. Maintaining this increased

Sydney Carter, Mental Health Policy Fellow

Network of Behavioral Health Providers

Houston, TX

Maintaining this increased access to care, through the pandemic and beyond, via telehealth, is vitally important to the health and wellbeing of Texans, especially Medicaid Managed Care recipients.

We urge you to help expand telehealth access to vulnerable populations by passing HB 4 out of committee.

Christine Bryan

Clarity Child Guidance Center

San Antonio, TX

Clarity Child Guidance Center is in full support of HB 4. Clarity is a children-only not-profit providing inpatient and outpatient behavioral health services. Clarity's patient census is comprised of 70% low-income, state-supported children through Medicaid, CHIP, STARHealth, STARKids and low-cost contracts with area local mental health authorities.

During the difficult times of COVID, we have been able to provide continuous care through our outpatient services by telehealth, such as therapy and medication management. During this period, we also saw an increase in our "appointment show" rate for all

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outpatient services. Our physicians have found that the audio-only is very efficient for medication management check-ins.

We know that if kids continue with their outpatient services, they are less likely to need our inpatient services. We have heard from families with childcare or transportation issues that telehealth makes it easier to maintain services and prevents gaps in treatment. As things have started to open, we have families who continue to prefer telehealth, and we are happy to offer it as another avenue to access our services as a patient choice. On behalf of our kids and families, we ask you please make the governor's emergency orders regarding behavioral health telehealth services permanent.

Colleen Horton, Director of Policy  
Hogg Foundation for Mental Health  
Austin, TX

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need to expand access to mental health/substance use services through telehealth delivery models. Telemedicine/telehealth are healthcare services delivered using telecommunication technologies while the provider and the recipient of the services are in different locations.

While telehealth is not optimal for everyone, recent flexibilities resulting from the pandemic have expanded access to mental health services. Many individuals face transportation, childcare, and other challenges related to in-person services. Additionally, the use of expanded telemedicine/telehealth has helped to address the significant mental health workforce shortages impacting rural and frontier areas of Texas.

Both the federal and state governments have expanded the allowable use of telehealth services during the emergency period. Additionally, on September 1, 2020, Congressman Roger Williams (R-TX) introduced the Ensuring Telehealth Expansion Act that would extend the telehealth provisions of the CARES Act until December 31, 2025. This legislation would remove site restrictions to allow patients to receive services in their homes, and would require providers be reimbursed at the same rate as face-to-face visits.

As Texas moves forward, it is important that audio-only service delivery for mental health telehealth services continue. Many Texans live in rural areas of the state where many circumstances impact their access to mental health care, including access to child care, transportation, computer technology, and adequate broadband service. Many of these individuals have been able to access needed mental health services during the relaxation of telehealth rules generated to support access to care during the pandemic.

As stated by Lori Uscher-Pines, a leading policy researcher at RAND, "Eliminating coverage for audio-only telemedicine visits would disproportionately impact underserved communities that may face barriers to accessing video technology." Arthur Evans, the CEO of the American Psychological Association affirms that, "Allowing patients to receive mental health services by audio-only telephone is a matter of health equity for underserved populations." Expanding telehealth delivery options offers Texas new opportunities to reach underserved Texans and ensure access to mental health services. This is an important step available to Texas to address systemic inequities in our health delivery systems.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue flexibilities allowed during the emergency period.
- Continue to allow audio-only telehealth mental health services to ensure access to rural communities without adequate broadband access.
- Continue to allow the use of telemedicine/telehealth (including telephonic-only use) to establish physician-patient relationships.
- Ensure reimbursement parity for mental health services.

Jan Friese  
Texas Counseling Association  
Austin, TX

I am Jan Friese, representing the Texas Counseling Association which includes more than 6,000 professional counselors working

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in an array of settings across Texas. TCA strongly supports HB 4. Adding the use of the telephone to access telehealth (mental health services) is essential -- especially for our Medicaid and CHIP recipients. The recent pandemic has identified a huge gap in access to broadband and internet services making it difficult -- and in many cases impossible -- for vulnerable clients to receive the counseling services they need. While emergency rules enacted during the pandemic helped to increase access to behavioral health professionals for these vulnerable citizens, it is essential that those temporary and emergency rules become permanent. HB 4 is a strong solution that will help address the mental health workforce shortages in a majority of Texas counties by allowing clients and providers to work together -- regardless of their locations or internet access -- to address those clients' mental health and emotional challenges and help them engage in their studies, remain in the workforce and continue to contribute to both their economic well-being and that of their communities. Thank you for your support of HB 4.

Martin Gutierrez, Mr.

San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

San Antonio, TX

For over 91 years, the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (SAHCC) has been San Antonio's leading advocate for Hispanic businesses and Hispanics in business. We pride ourselves on five pillars of success: small business, economic development, international trade, education, and leadership. On behalf of the Hispanic Chamber's more than 900 members, I write to you today to express our support for HB 4, which will permanently expand telehealth and telemedicine in Texas. One of our longstanding legislative priorities has been to expand access to quality, affordable health care.

Telemedicine has been an innovative way of delivering care to patients, while increasing access, reducing cost and enhancing the quality of care. Telemedicine allows providers and patients to bridge the distance and time barriers that separate them. Skipping vital care often leads to larger problems that result in higher costs for both insurance companies and patients, not to mention the deteriorating quality of life, lost wages, and other impacts associated with surgeries and hospitalizations. Telemedicine is a proven cost-effective method of care that benefits providers and patients.

It is important that we continue to expand access to telehealth and telemedicine as additional means to deliver quality, affordable health care. The San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce urges you to support HB 4.

Dawn Messina, Registered Dental Hygienist

Self

Kemah, TX

I've been in dentistry for many years. I currently see patients in the lower income bracket. Most of my younger patients are not seen on a regular recall schedule due to many reasons. I've been instrumental in recognizing 3 different cases she's 12, 14, 16 years old of juvenile diabetes. Unfortunately all 3 cases presented with severe bone loss resulting in tooth loss. All 3 cases have not returned for periodic exams. Teledentistry would allow us to identify dental and health issues early on so intervention, treatment and follow up could significantly improve community health.

Flavia Lecavalier, RDH

Self, RDH

San Antonio, TX

I agree with telemedicine, telehealth and technology related to dental care services.

Teresa Washington-Bellow, RDH

Self - Registered Dental Hygienist

Missouri City, TX

Teledentistry will certainly enhance access to oral care. It can be a beneficial tool used by hygienists and assistants through

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mobile or portable dentistry. Patients in alternate settings deserve attention for their dental needs. Texas hygienists should be allowed to independently or collaboratively provide this care. Teledentistry will fit well into this effort. Hopefully Texas decision makers will join forces with the rest of the technology forward moving states. Please view an email below that I sent to TSBDE. Teledentistry could be a perfect solution to allowing hygienists in the state of Texas to have ownership of mobile hygiene practices.

Dear TSBDE,

My name is Teresa Washington-Bellow. I am a practicing dental hygienist of over 23 years. I worked as a dental assistant for 11 years prior to that in almost all specialty areas of dentistry. For about 8 years now I have been working for mobile dental companies that provide nursing facility, adult day-hab & private in home dental services. I enjoy my profession and I'm proud of the care I can offer the undeserved community through mobile/portable dentistry.

Today I am reaching out to you guys with a few questions. As I mentioned before I love what I do and I would like to take it a step further just as other hygienist are doing in other states around the country. I would like to know my options in terms of becoming a business owner. As a licensed Texas RDH am I allowed to promote and independently provide oral care to residents in nursing facility and personal care homes? My focus will be on the special needs community that cannot adequately care for themselves. We know most of these residents go for days to months without any oral care at all.

From my understanding though as an independent provider I will not be allowed to do a prophylaxis & F1 varnish in the state of Texas so I'm asking you the TSBDE exactly what am I allowed to do if anything at all? Am I allowed to charge for my oral care visits as a business sole proprietor RDH in Texas?

As of now my planned services will consist of OHI, regular and modified teeth brushing, flossing, soaking & scrubbing dentures. I will use over the counter antiseptic rinses & fluorides to swab and clean the gums, cheeks and tongue. A toothbrush and product samples will be provided for each client as well.

Sincerely,

Teresa Washington-Bellow, RDH

RHONDA FREESE

Sacred Heart Dental Clinic

Pflugerville, TX

I participated in an affiliated Practice program in Arizona for 5 years. This was specifically targeted to high school age 18 that no longer had Medicaid dental coverage ,and or were living as homeless having aged out of foster care system. We were able to serve them with preventive care services that they would have otherwise been unable to receive. They were seen in a free community clinic and triaged to area dentists that were participating as our affiliated partner. These type of outreaches to many unserved populations, nursing homes, indigent ,homebound are hindered because we can not communicate with dentists via tele dental connections. As a RDH I highly recommend the support of this bill.

Tiffany Dancer

self

Sherman, TX

Please support HB 4. As an LPC that has provided mental health services throughout this pandemic to clients that live in rural Texas, I can attest to the importance of allowing audio-only telehealth. It has allowed clients to continue to receive much need mental health services that they otherwise would not have been able to receive.

Marilyn Hartman

Member and Advocate, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Central Texas

Austin, TX

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I support this bill. Please pass it.

Melinda Gossett, Ms  
Child and Family Guidance Center  
Sherman, TX

As an employee of an outpatient mental health agency that has provided mental health services throughout this pandemic to clients that live in rural Texas, I can attest to the importance of allowing audio-only telehealth. It has allowed clients to continue to receive much needed mental health services that they otherwise would not have been able to receive

Melissa Gary  
Self  
Tomball, TX

We need this for Texans!

John SHIRLEY, Mr.  
Texas Counseling Association  
Bastrop, TX

By reporting this bill to the entire House for consideration you will be greatly enhancing the alternatives available for delivery of mental health services for all Texans. There is a great need in so many counties of this state for increased, effective mental health services and this bill would provide another layer of support in meeting these needs. Your support is greatly appreciated! John Shirley

Charity Martin, Family Nurse Practitioner  
Self- APRN, FNP-C  
Troy, TX

Please allow APRNs to practice this without restriction

Thomas Hujar, Dr/DDS  
Self  
Tomball, TX

Texas needs telesentistry for emergencies

Tom Kowalski, President  
Texas Healthcare and Bioscience Institute (THBI)  
Austin, TX

Dear Chair Klick and Honorable Committee Members,

The Texas Healthcare and Bioscience Institute (THBI) is the Texas public policy voice for the healthcare and bioscience industry. Our membership consists of biopharmaceutical companies, research institutions, medical device companies, economic development entities and service companies providing unparalleled networking and synergy to effectively address the public

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policy needs of Texas' growing life sciences community.

The Texas life sciences industry is committed to expanding the boundaries of science by discovering, developing and delivering innovative and needed medications to patients. It is the patient that is the ultimate beneficiary of such advances. The membership of THBI is dedicated to creating an environment where such discoveries flourish and thrive.

On behalf of the member companies of the Texas Healthcare and Bioscience Institute (THBI), we write to express our support of House Bill 4 by State Representative Four Price. The passing of HB 4 will provide for timely patient access to telemedicine and telehealth services that Texans rely on, and THBI is committed to safeguarding and preserving that access. We would like to thank Representative Price for his leadership and applaud him for his tireless efforts on this issue.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with you during the 87th Legislative Session.

Sincerely,

Tom Kowalski  
President & CEO