

APTA Private Practice

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PERMANENT MEDICARE COVERAGE OF PHYSICAL THERAPY PROVIDED VIA TELEHEALTH

RECOMMENDATION: APTA Private Practice, a Section of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) urges Congress to pass the bipartisan *Expanded Telehealth Access Act (H.R. 3875)* to ensure physical therapists can continue to use telehealth to provide physical therapy services to Medicare beneficiaries.

BACKGROUND:

Under current law, physical therapists and physical therapist assistants are not able to bill Medicare for care provided via telehealth.

The *CARES Act*, enacted March 27, 2020, granted CMS the authority to waive statutory restrictions and allow for flexibility of how care could be provided to Medicare beneficiaries and paid for by Medicare during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE). For the duration of the PHE, CMS used this *CARES Act* waiver authority to enable physical therapists to bill for telehealth services furnished to Medicare Part B beneficiaries. Extensions enacted in 2023 has allowed these flexibilities to remain in place until December 31, 2024.

CMS does not have the regulatory authority to *permanently* extend payment to these providers. Unless Congress act, Medicare coverage of telehealth remains temporary. **To achieve permanent coverage, Congress must enact legislation** to ensure that Medicare beneficiaries can continue accessing their physical therapy care via telehealth, in addition to traditional in-person care.

While the use of telehealth clearly does not eliminate the need for in-person visits, it can enhance both the delivery and coordination of care reduce barriers, and increase access to a greater variety of providers. Studies have shown that physical therapist use of telehealth for telerehabilitation can result in cost savings, improved outcomes, increased access, and higher patient satisfaction. By providing assessments, care, and interventions via telehealth, physical therapists can improve access to care, prevent falls, reduce functional decline, avoid costly emergency room visits, and reduce hospital admissions as well as readmissions—all while reducing disparities in care.

The bipartisan *Expanded Telehealth Access Act*:

- Seeks to lift current statutory restrictions by amending Title XVIII of the Social Security Act to expand the scope of practitioners eligible for payment for telehealth services under the Medicare program.
- Thereby allowing physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, audiologists, and speech language pathologists to be added to the list of practitioners eligible to be paid for telehealth services provided to Medicare beneficiaries.
- Is endorsed by the American Physical Therapy Association, the American Occupational Therapy Association, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, more.

Using telehealth to provide physical therapy has been shown to provide access to safe and effective care which also results in high-quality outcomes. Legislation is needed to allow Medicare beneficiaries to permanently access therapy care via telehealth in addition to traditional in-person care.

Please contact Julie Jochem in Representative Sherrill's office at julie.jochem@mail.house.gov or (202) 225-5034 to cosponsor H.R. 3875.