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Rep. Axne Introduces Bipartisan Bill to Catalog Quality and Effectiveness of Telehealth Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Today, Rep. Cindy Axne (IA-03) and Rep. Troy Balderson (OH-12) introduced new bipartisan legislation that would require a formal documentation of the costs, efficiency, and quality of telehealth programs in order to catalog their effectiveness and support the continuation and improvement of telemedicine. These studies will show that telehealth programs are a successful model of health care and should be utilized more in the future.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) public health crisis has shifted many treatments to telehealth, allowing for services like primary care check-ups, physical therapy sessions, and mental health appointments to continue without unnecessary risk to the patient. In particular, policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced barriers to telehealth access for mental health access under Medicare and Medicaid.

The Knowing the Efficiency and Efficacy of Permanent (KEEP) Telehealth Options Act of 2020 would commission studies by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to gather information on telehealth use during COVID-19 in order to support making telehealth options and adjusted reimbursement rates permanent.

“Our doctors, nurses, specialized care administrators, and health care workers have all done a fantastic job adapting to the new normal of COVID-19, and I’m glad that we were able to get an expansion of telehealth services to protect patients and providers in these uncertain times,” said Rep. Axne. “COVID-19 has unexpectedly pulled us into a demonstration of how effective and important telehealth options are for older Iowans or those who live farther from a health center. What we have now is a golden opportunity to document how telehealth services were implemented and where improvements can be made so we can chart a path to keeping these options available for patients who won’t stop needing them when this pandemic is over.”

“Growing up in a rural community, I know firsthand the importance of access to quality healthcare,” said Rep. Balderson. “The coronavirus outbreak has highlighted Ohio’s need for
an array of telehealth services, which have given many the ability to connect to quality care from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Congress must work to enable the permanent expansion of telehealth—as well as the rural broadband infrastructure needed to use it—so Ohioans can continue receiving quality remote care.”

The studies would be required to gather information on telehealth utilization and impact, including an analysis of use using demographic data, and assess the efficiency, cost, management, and fraud risk of expanded telehealth services. The bill would require both studies to be completed in under 220 days and be made available to the public.

The KEEP Telehealth Options Act has been endorsed by the American Hospital Association, National Association for Behavioral Health Care, National Council for Behavior Health, National Alliance on Mental Illness, American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons, National Physical Therapy Association, American Occupational Therapy Association, American Cochlear Implant Alliance, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Alliance for Physical Therapy Quality and Innovation, Nationwide Children’s Hospital, Iowa Medical Society, Iowa Hospital Association, Hospice and Palliative Care Association of Iowa, OrthoForum, Iowa Psychological Association, Association of Mature American Citizens, and more.

“Telehealth services have been an absolutely vital tool in maintaining and expanding access to medical care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the additional flexibilities and payment parity made possible under the state and federal emergency declarations, along with voluntary actions by many commercial payers, Iowa practices have been able to dramatically expand the availability of local telehealth services across our state in a very short period of time. This has allowed high-risk patients to continue seeing their physician from the safety of their home and allowed medical practices to preserve personal protective equipment that is absolutely vital for front-line COVID-19 response efforts,” said Dr. Brian Privett, M.D., President of the Iowa Medical Society. “As scientists, physicians know the value of timely data. This new legislation will help prove what we know to be true – use of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic has expanded access to care, improved health outcomes, and ensured efficient use of scarce healthcare resources. We applaud Congresswoman Axne for her ongoing leadership as we build the case for permanent policy changes to facilitate even greater telehealth utilization in Iowa.”

“Health care providers and their patients have seen how effective telehealth can be during the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Erin Cubit, Director of Government Relations at the Iowa Hospital Association. “It is critical these services remain available and that providers are able to receive the same reimbursement for services provided through telehealth as in person no matter where the patient is located.”

“The KEEP Telehealth Options Act recognizes the importance of collecting and reporting key data that will demonstrate the efficacy and cost effectiveness of enabling licensed health care professionals, such as audiologists and speech-language pathologists, to provide essential services in this manner permanently,” said Theresa Rogers, President of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. “This legislation helps build the foundation for extending this authority beyond the PHE and ensure that seniors continue to have access to
important hearing, balance, speech, language, swallowing, and cognitive care in a manner that promotes the safety of both patients and providers.”

“The advent of COVID-19 has introduced challenges to providing patient care across the healthcare spectrum. As it relates to the mission of the American Cochlear Implant Alliance, the pandemic has prompted the need for transformative and innovative approaches to providing care to cochlear implant patients and candidates,” said Donna Sorkin, MA, Executive Director of the American Cochlear Implant Alliance. “Telehealth has been critical in the provision of patient care during the pandemic. This legislation is an important step towards maintaining this avenue for care after the emergency has passed.”

Rep. Axne has made expansion of telehealth services a key priority to her work helping Iowans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In April, Reps. Axne and Balderson introduced bipartisan legislation to push the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to expand telehealth availability for therapeutic services like physical therapy and speech pathology. Following this push, CMS announced they would expand telehealth reimbursements for those and other health services.

Last month, Rep. Axne also led a bipartisan letter to CMS seeking additional clarity on telehealth reimbursements for rural health care providers.

In March, Rep. Axne voted with a bipartisan majority of the House of Representatives to pass the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, legislation allowing CMS and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to waive requirements and restrictions for telehealth services during the coronavirus public health emergency.