Expand Access to Telehealth in Medicare

Recommendation: RPA urges Congress to expand access to telehealth in Medicare by enacting the CONNECT for Health Act of 2021 (S. 1512/H.R. 2903), to permanently eliminate originating site and geographic restrictions.

It is estimated approximately 37 million Americans suffer from chronic kidney disease (CKD), including more than 500,000 individuals with end-stage renal disease (ESRD) or kidney failure, who require kidney replacement therapy, in the form of dialysis or a kidney transplant, to sustain life. Most commonly caused by diabetes or high blood pressure, kidney failure is expected to claim more than 2 million lives by 2030. Without dialysis or a kidney transplant, patients suffering from kidney failure will not survive. Since transplant organs are in short supply, most patients undergo dialysis which mechanically filters body wastes and excess fluids from the bloodstream three to four times per week, but does not provide the physiologic equivalent of the native kidneys.

Providing care to patients with CKD or ESRD was substantially advanced during the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) through the use of temporary waivers that eliminated restrictions such as those governing originating sites or allowable geography for the use of telehealth in Medicare. These changes enabled Medicare beneficiaries with CKD or ESRD to receive care such as evaluation and management (E&M) services and ongoing monthly dialysis assessments from their homes, significantly reducing transportation requirements to access needed care.

Legislation such as the CONNECT Act would address these concerns by not only eliminating the originating site and geographic restrictions but also by providing additional funding for: (1) provider and beneficiary education on telehealth, including to support underserved and high-risk populations; (2) resources to the HHS Office of Inspector General for telehealth oversight activities; and (3) research on telehealth utilization during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of telehealth waivers in CMS Innovation Center models.

To expand access to telehealth services by eliminating originating site and geographic restrictions and to promote education and research on telehealth utilization, Congress should enact the CONNECT Act (S. 1512/H.R. 2903)

The Renal Physicians Association (RPA) is the professional organization of nephrologists whose goal is to ensure quality care under the highest standards of medical practice for patients with kidney disease and related disorders. For further information, please contact Robert Blaser, RPA’s Director of Public Policy, at 301-468-3515 or rblaser@renalmd.org