



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
SERVICES, INC.



May 13, 2020

Governor Greg Abbott
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, TX 78711-2428

Re: Sustaining Telehealth Services beyond the National Emergency Concerning the COVID-19 Outbreak

Dear Governor Abbott:

We are contacting you on behalf of American Psychological Association Services, Inc. and the Texas Psychological Association¹ about the next steps to ensure minimal disruption in the provision of health care services to our state citizens, particularly mental health services provided by licensed psychologists. APA strongly recommends that the expansions in telehealth policies enacted in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency remain in place as our state begins to reopen its economy. As states lift shelter-in-place restrictions and encourage residents to return to the workplace, there will continue to be an increased need for mental and behavioral health care services. A transition period is needed to appropriately evaluate telehealth policies before any decisions are made regarding future changes. We urge you to apply this transition period to both Medicaid and commercial health plans in our state.

We respectfully ask that you extend the temporary emergency waiver for at least 12 months after the President and HHS Secretary end the COVID-19 public health emergency. Even after health care offices are allowed to reopen, the risks of transmission between psychologists and patients, or among patients, remain. Those risks could be greatly minimized by letting psychologists and other mental health providers continue to deliver effective services through telehealth. This is an important public health consideration. There are many individuals in need of mental and behavioral health services with conditions and disorders that prevent them from safely (or without great anxiety) leaving their homes and sharing close personal space with other people. This will be especially burdensome on moderate- and low-income patients who have no choice but to take public transportation or rely on others to get to their health care appointments. The action taken by CMS on Thursday April 30th to allow for reimbursement of mental and behavioral health services by phone only further demonstrates the need to increase access to these services now more than ever. Mental and behavioral health providers will also need time to prepare and modify their office policies, procedures and physical layout to safely resume treating patients through in-person services. Any rollback should carefully consider and be heavily predicated on the mental health access needs of individuals in your communities.

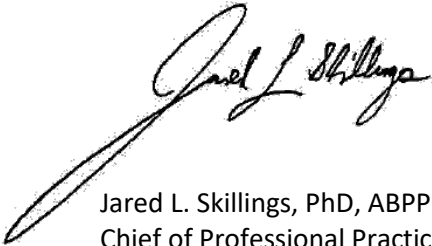
¹ American Psychological Association Services, Inc. is the companion professional organization to the American Psychological Association (APA) serving all members and advocating for psychology. APA represents more than 121,000 members and associates engaged in the practice, research, and teaching of psychology. The Texas Psychological Association represents 1,100 psychologists in the state.

We ask that you follow the actions taken by CMS regarding phone-only services and mandate that Medicaid and commercial health plans reimburse for phone-only services for routine traditional mental and behavioral health services. We urge you to support continuity of care by directing insurers in our state to allow their insureds and providers to continue utilizing telehealth (i.e. videoconferencing) services as they have during the current COVID-19 public health emergency.

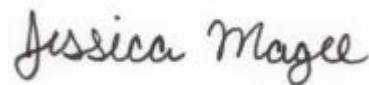
The COVID-19 public health emergency will have a lasting impact on our healthcare system and how mental and behavioral health services are delivered in the future. We would like to collaborate with you and local health care authorities to evaluate which changes made during the COVID-19 public health emergency should remain after the emergency ends.

Please let us know how we can best partner with you moving forward. We are happy to answer any questions about the requested extension. Please contact Jessica Magee, Executive Director (jessica@texaspsyc.org) to discuss next steps in assuring minimal disruption in the provision of health care services to our state citizens during this public health emergency and beyond.

Regards,



Jared L. Skillings, PhD, ABPP
Chief of Professional Practice
APA Services, Inc.



Jessica Magee
Executive Director
Texas Psychological Association

CC: Charles Miller
Heather Fleming
Christopher Smith