

CHA Key Messages

Comprehensive Modernization of Telehealth Policies Will Increase Access to Care, Hold Costs Down

- 1. Modern technology has the capacity to expand access to necessary medical care for Californians living in rural communities and to reduce health care costs for all Californians.**
 - Care delivered via telehealth mitigates access and cost barriers by using technology to maximize clinician time and expertise, as well as connect patients to their providers more quickly, efficiently, and conveniently. In one study, telehealth consultations offered to those who called 911 resulted in a 6.7% reduction in potentially unnecessary emergency department visits and a savings of over \$100 per patient.
 - Telehealth has long been a key tool in expanding access to rural and underserved communities by offering more timely care for those who might otherwise have to wait weeks for an appointment and travel long distances.
 - Patients in urban and suburban areas also benefit, especially vulnerable patients without reliable access to transportation, for whom virtual follow-up visits could be key to managing chronic conditions.
 - Hospitals have used telehealth to create new connections with patients – such as virtual check-ins for those with chronic conditions, and quicker identification of social determinants of health that can be addressed to improve well-being.
- 2. Regulatory flexibilities and enhanced reimbursement provided during the COVID-19 pandemic have proven telehealth should remain a valuable tool to improve care delivery and hold costs in check.**
 - According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, before the public health emergency about 13,000 Medicare fee-for-service beneficiaries received telehealth services in a given week. In the last week of April 2020, due to the pandemic, that number skyrocketed as 1.7 million people received telehealth services.
 - In response to the waivers of outdated restrictions on telehealth, hospitals and health systems have invested in technology, training, and patient education to meet projections for greater demand for telehealth services beyond the pandemic.
- 3. Policy makers should ensure that patients who have come to rely on telehealth services can continue to access them.**
 - Regulatory flexibilities granted for telehealth during the pandemic have expanded the use of innovative modes of care and proven their effectiveness. Those flexibilities — such as expanding the range of available providers and services and ensuring reimbursement —

should be extended permanently to recognize the importance of telehealth in the care delivery system.

- Because telehealth services require significant investments in technology, as well as clinician time and expertise they should be adequately and appropriately reimbursed.
- Disparities in access must be addressed. This includes expanding internet services in remote, rural areas, and addressing the digital divide for people in underserved communities. Nearly 22% of Californians lack an adequate internet connection, and more than one-third of people living in rural communities nationwide do not have home broadband access.