
Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon

June 22, 2020

Co-Chairs Courtney and Kotek and Members of the Joint Interim Committee on the First Special Session of 2020,

While we are just beginning to understand the scope of COVID-19's impact on the immediate and long-term health, well-being, and livelihood of Oregonians, Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon is grateful for the actions our state agencies, the Legislature, and Governor Brown have taken to decrease the spread of the virus and to adapt the health care system to be able to respond to the pandemic while also working to ensure continued access to non-COVID 19 related health care.

Planned Parenthood health centers are critical medical providers in the communities they serve—often functioning as the primary or only provider for many patients. During the pandemic, our affiliates, Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette (PPCW) and Planned Parenthood Southwestern Oregon (PPSO) have played a key role in contributing to the greater public health mission to decrease the spread of the virus, decrease burden on hospital staff, and avoid overwhelming the system. PPCW and PPSO complied with the Governor's orders by delaying or rescheduling appointments that are core to our services, such as annual exams, to preserve personal protection equipment (PPE) and flatten the curve. During that time, health centers focused on more urgent health care, including providing essential health services like medication and surgical abortions that are critical and time-sensitive.

Planned Parenthood health centers also transitioned services to telemedicine wherever possible to maintain and expand access to care. The Oregon Health Authority and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services made critical adjustments to their rules to decrease the barriers for providers and patients to participate in telemedicine. The dramatic increase in virtual visits over the last few months speaks to success of those efforts. However, these gains in access to care are currently at risk. If the COVID-19 State of Emergency ends before we have the opportunity to take legislative action during the 2021 session, the key policies put in place to advance telehealth will revert to a pre-COVID-19 status and will dramatically undercut the ability for patients and providers to participate in telemedicine. We need action during the Special Session to build a bridge to the next iteration of comprehensive telehealth policy.

The following COVID-19 telehealth standards need to be temporarily codified in order to ensure that access to critical health care via telemedicine is maintained as the state continues to grapple with the pandemic and the complexities of re-opening:

1. Expand telemedicine modalities for behavioral, oral and physical health to include: Web-based video conferencing, audio-only (telephone), live chat, and other means.
2. Continue to allow the use of non-HIPPA-compliant modalities when necessary, until the federal government discontinues their permitted use.
3. Maintain the current distant site expansions allowing any providers to deliver care as a distant site directly to the location of the patient.
4. All payors must cover telehealth encounters at parity of access and payment to in-person encounters.
5. Sunset these temporary measures on July 31, 2021.

Providers need certainty that these critical telehealth policies will remain in place to ensure maximum flexibility and ability to meet patient needs while reducing exposure risk for providers and patients and preserving PPE.

Maintaining the changes made to Medicaid payment parity and guidelines for telehealth and applying those standards to all state-regulated plans through at least July 31, 2021 will allow for longer-term conversations about telehealth policy to continue while also ensuring the greatest access to care for all Oregonians in these uncertain times.

Sincerely,

Emily McLain
Executive Director
Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon