

February 10, 2021

The Honorable Deb Patterson Chair, Senate Committee on Health Care
900 Court St. NE
Salem OR 97301

RE: SB 697

Dear Chair Patterson and members of the Senate Committee on Health Care,

We appreciate the opportunity to express both support for the vast opportunities presented by telehealth services and concerns about payment parity provisions that often accompany discussions of expanding access. Kaiser Permanente exists to provide high-quality, affordable health care services and to improve the health of our members and the communities we serve. As payers, providers, and the State work together to contain growth in the total cost of care we respectfully request that the Legislature not unnecessarily limit the tools available to increase value and lower the cost of care. While we firmly believe virtual care, including audio only, should be reimbursed, mandating that it be paid at parity to an in-person visit overlooks potential cost savings opportunities critical to our state's efforts in capping the rate of growth of health care costs.

Kaiser Permanente was an early and enthusiastic adopter of telehealth. Prior to the pandemic, over 20 percent of our primary care visits were provided through virtual means. The pandemic has reinforced how valuable telehealth is for ensuring that patients across the country can receive needed health care in all settings, including their homes. Easing restrictions on telehealth (at both the state and federal levels) expanded the ability of providers to offer these services and continue to care for their patients remotely. These flexibilities were aimed at rapid expansion of telehealth; as a result, the use of telehealth in ambulatory care has increased just as face-to-face visits in primary care, behavioral health and specialty care declined. In 2020, we experienced a 60 percent increase in members' usage across all telehealth services. We are steadily maintaining over 50 percent of all care being delivered virtually to members. For mental health needs specifically, members' telehealth visits soared to 96 percent and remain steady at 80 percent. Kaiser Permanente will continue to offer telehealth services to provide expanded access and convenience for our members.

With this rapid expansion of telehealth, we have found that;

- Offering more video and phone visits allows patients to access ambulatory care as they shelter at home and increases the number of patients we can treat safely.
- Allowing people to stay home and still get care helps address the community spread of COVID-19 and eases the global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE): masks, gowns, and gloves.
- Giving patients a choice of phone, video or in-person visits with appropriate technical support improves access to care. We encourage patients to phone or securely email their doctor with any questions about their ongoing care needs or use our on-line portal. If the patient has difficulty with one modality, providing other options can help, such as switching from video to telephone, vice-versa, and/or providing a means to chat with a physician, nurse or other provider when using an online appointment.

- Expanding 24/7 self-care tools for patients to safely address their concerns and be guided, when appropriate to a provider, has eased their concerns and allowed questions about their health to be addressed.
- Launching of the COVID eVisit – an online symptom checker – and other tools in KP.org has helped direct members to access care and testing.
- Understanding linguistic preferences and accommodations for disability are important pieces of information to guide which virtual visit is most appropriate.

We look forward to continued conversation to ensure that providers are paid for the time they spend delivering care through virtual modes while recognizing the opportunities for cost savings through telehealth.

Sincerely,

Amy Fauver
Director, Government and Community Relations
Kaiser Permanente Northwest