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August 18, 2021

The Honorable Dean Phillips
United States House of Representatives
2452 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Steve Chabot
United States House of Representatives
2408 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Phillips and Chabot:

On behalf of our physician and medical student members, the American Medical Association (AMA) is writing to express our strong support for H.R. 4480, “the Telehealth Coverage and Payment Parity Act.” Telehealth services have emerged as a critical tool during the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) to help ensure access to necessary care for millions of Americans. However, the ability to access needed care through telehealth may remain limited for many patients through the duration of the PHE and beyond without legislative action requiring health plans regulated under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA) to cover telehealth services.

Access to care via telehealth throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been a vital lifeline for millions of Americans, proving particularly important for the elderly, individuals with chronic conditions, and patients with special mental health needs. It is critical that access to these services remains beyond the PHE to ensure that patients who have come to rely on telehealth services can continue to use them when necessary. While some health plans have taken voluntary steps to permanently increase access to telehealth services, many efforts remain insufficient. Limited access and a lack of uniformity remain among plans governed by ERISA. This leaves physicians and other health care professionals unsure of whom, and under what conditions, they are permitted to provide medical services via telehealth. For example, health plans frequently have separate telehealth networks that may not include physicians who normally provide in-person care. In this situation, physicians may not be given the option to continue seeing their patients via telehealth, despite being best suited to provide care due to their extensive knowledge of an individual’s medical history and clinical circumstances. This can also lead to a disruption in continuity of care and creates additional anxiety and confusion for patients. In other instances, the plan’s credentialing process to allow physicians to provide telehealth services is slow and cumbersome, leading to a long delay in much needed care.

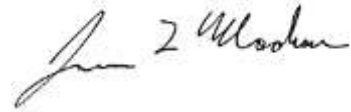
It is vitally important that telehealth coverage is permanently provided to all patients, including those covered by ERISA plans. As outlined in H.R. 4480, this coverage should include requiring that services provided via telehealth be reimbursed at the same rate as in-person services, allowing for the use of expanded modalities for the provision of telehealth to include telephone visits in addition to common audio-video technology where appropriate, and enabling physicians to offer telehealth services to new and established patients. These changes will make it possible for ERISA plan patients to access the care they need wherever they are located.

Telehealth is a vital tool for physicians and other health care professionals in caring for their patients while helping to increase access to those in underserved areas and has been invaluable in helping patients

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reduce their exposure to COVID-19 during the PHE. Congress has an important role to play to help safeguard the health and safety of millions of Americans who are currently covered under ERISA plans by ensuring that they have access to care via telehealth. For these reasons, the AMA urges Congress to pass H.R. 4480. Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James L. Madara". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "M".

James L. Madara, MD