



January 21, 2022

Representatives Liz Snyder & Tiffany Zulkosky
Co-Chairs
House Health & Social Services Committee
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Re: HB 265 Telehealth Legislation

Dear Co-Chairs & Committee Members:

On behalf of U.S. Renal Care (USRC) and the 346 Alaskans that receive life- saving dialysis treatments and services from USRC, we are writing in support of legislative efforts related to parity for Telehealth to the benefit of our Alaskan patients. Our own experience with use of Telehealth over the last several years has shown that, when used effectively, it is an important tool to improve outcomes and quality of life for patients, improve effectiveness of healthcare delivery, and lower costs for all payors – including State Medicaid, Federal Medicare, and private insurance.

While the pandemic has expanded use of Telehealth at various levels, our team has already been using it as an effective tool for our home health patients here in Alaska. These Alaskans are able to manage many aspects of their own care at home themselves, rather than incurring the time and expense of coming in-person to one of our clinics three days each week. Our care team has long-standing relationships with these patients, and a great track record of success in answering their questions and helping them manage their own care while living more independent lives.

The helpful role that Telehealth already provides many of our patients can be expanded into other areas of care for these Alaskans through the provisions of HB 265. This could benefit Alaskan patients across the state.

In particular, we have had several patients in the Mat-Su Valley that have already benefited from Telehealth. We have been able to interview and assist patients who were in quarantine during the Covid pandemic. However, telehealth has had a far reaching positive impact over and above addressing the immediate pandemic.

Transportation for people living in the valley who cannot drive and have no family or friends to assist them is limited to taxi, local transport companies and Senior assistance programs. These patients have been overwhelmed by their inability to afford a taxi, limited scheduling and often no service to their area from other public transport systems. There are also times when these dialysis patients who do drive are not able to drive in the dark or in a storm. These weather conditions can be unpredictable -- and the opportunity for all patients to communicate with their doctor is invaluable whether is a result of economic or weather-related barriers.

Page Two
January 21, 2022

Some further specific examples of the benefits of telehealth for individual Alaskans we serve have included:

- An elderly woman who has no family to drive her, has no car and cannot drive, not Medicaid eligible for assistance and has multiple medical issues. She also requires oxygen during transport. Routine telehealth allows her to be assessed and still be comfortable at home.
- A gentleman has a cabin in the copper river area. He has seasonal access to this property and when he has a chance to be out there it can be difficult and expensive for him to return to town. Telehealth allows him to continue to visit this property despite his health challenges.
- Another gentleman has property outside of Kotzebue. He chose home dialysis so he could return to this area. He is not Medicaid eligible for travel assistance, and it is very expensive, not to mention difficult. to get up the river to Kotzebue to fly back to Wasilla for a 30-minute routine appt. Telehealth makes it possible for him to stay in his home.
- A woman living alone in the Houston area is snowed-in on the day of her appointment. She must wait for the snowplow. which could take a couple of days. She can still see her physician via telehealth.
- Finally, those Alaskans on hospice of end of life can receive care without the pain and difficulty of traveling to the clinic.

We believe that legislative efforts to expand use of Telehealth in Alaska more widely has great potential to replicate the benefits of these above examples we have seen in dialysis care across many other aspects of healthcare -- beyond just those services we provide. USRC supports your ongoing work on this important and much-needed legislative improvement to Alaska's overall healthcare system.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:
Thomas L. Weinberg
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Thomas L. Weinberg
Executive Vice President and General Counsel

cc: House Health & Social Services Committee