

Joe Baldacci
Bangor
LD 361

Representative Meyer and fellow members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Service, thank you for the opportunity to speak as sponsor of LD 361, in support of the bill. As you know, the bill as printed was a concept draft to increase MaineCare reimbursement for electronic consultations, often referred to as “e-consulting services” or “eConsults.”

Working with the Department of Health and Human Services, St. Joseph Healthcare in Bangor and providers of primary medical care in rural areas across the State have been pioneering the use of eConsults as a way to bring specialty services to patients who might otherwise go without critically important access to specialists, due to the shortage of specialty care and providers, particularly in the most rural pockets of our State. Through this service, a primary care provider (“PCP”) can consult with a specialist regarding a patient’s condition electronically and receive detailed patient care and treatment advice that often is sufficient to provide the right care for a patient’s condition through interaction between the PCP and the patient, without a direct visit with the specialist. Even when in-person follow-up is needed, an eConsult may enable the primary care provider to begin treatment in a timelier fashion, reducing the delay in addressing the patient’s underlying condition and preventing extended suffering of community members awaiting access to overburdened specialists.

In the initial efforts to deploy e-consulting, the Department of Health and Human Services has been a leader, supporting a current federally funded initiative to expand availability of eConsults in our State. Already, the positive results of providing this service are readily apparent. Unfortunately, the current, inadequate MaineCare reimbursement for e-consulting visits has been an impediment to expanding the availability of this service. In addition, we are aware of only one commercial health plan in the State, Anthem Blue Cross, that consistently covers and pays for eConsults. This bill seeks to accelerate the availability of improved access to specialty care in the rural parts of our state by moving beyond the current limited access and coverage as quickly as possible.

Working with St. Joseph Healthcare, I have fleshed out a draft amendment for the bill, a copy of which is attached, but both St. Joseph and I recognize that collaboration with the Office of MaineCare Services would produce a more workable piece of legislation. Due to the Department’s extremely heavy workload, however, a meeting to discuss the ideas behind this bill did not take place until yesterday. I’m pleased to report that the meeting was very successful, with both parties committed to working toward an outcome that will advance my objective in presenting this bill while recognizing the methods and structure that the Legislature has recently enacted to improve MaineCare’s rate-setting process. As a result, I urge the Committee to give the parties a brief period of time, before the work session, to fashion and present a revised draft for your consideration. As I understand it, the revised draft will aim to describe a process by which MaineCare can consider enhancing the rate paid for e-consults, while also considering whether any changes are needed in current telehealth law to ensure that all commercial payors consistently cover e-consulting services.

For the reasons I have briefly noted and in light of the additional facts that other supporters will provide, I urge you to give serious consideration to the revised amendment that will be presented to you by St. Joseph’s Healthcare after they have had an opportunity for further discussion with the Office of MaineCare Services. Thank you again for your time and attention. I would be pleased to respond to any questions.