



**National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society**

Maine Legislature – Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services
Public Hearing – May 6, 2021
LD 333, LD 323, LD 649, LD 849

Testimony of Laura Hoch,
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Chair Sanborn, Chair Tepler, and members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on telehealth services and how individuals living with multiple sclerosis (MS) are benefiting from them.

MS is an unpredictable, often disabling disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the flow of information within the brain, and between the brain and body. Symptoms vary from person to person and range from numbness and tingling to walking difficulties, fatigue, dizziness, pain, depression, blindness and paralysis. The progress, severity and specific symptoms of MS in any one person cannot yet be predicted, but advances in research and treatment are leading to better understanding and moving us closer to a world free of MS. Nearly 1 million people in the United States and 2.3 million worldwide are currently living with MS.

Telehealth services help provide access to medically necessary care for individuals that may have limited mobility or live in an area where there is a shortage of primary or specialty health care providers. These services allow patients to access healthcare through various platforms including telephone, digital communications, and video chats with their health care providers. Network adequacy is of particular concern for those living with MS, as an individual may require care from a variety of provider types, including neurology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, urology, ophthalmology and more. Telehealth should supplement, not supplant, provider networks.

Telehealth services are instrumental in ensuring that people with MS get the care they need, as they broaden the number of providers that people living with MS have access to while making it easier and less costly to reach those providers for routine consultations. The need for continued access to telemedicine beyond the current public health crisis is crucial. For many people living with MS, getting out of the house is not easy and they may face physical barriers to care. People with MS use mobility devices and may rely on public transportation or disability services to reach appointments. These options are often unreliable and lead to patients missing their time slots. Allowing virtual appointments means that those living with MS and other



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chronic, disabling conditions can access the care they need when they need it. The Society believes that expanded use of these services allows states to implement innovative health policy reforms that improve health care access, achieve significant cost savings, and improve health outcomes for people living with MS, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

In a survey conducted by the National MS Society (Society) over a three-week period in May, 44% of respondents reported that they had utilized telehealth services for their MS care. In more recent surveys of people living with MS and healthcare providers, there is overwhelming support for the continuation of telehealth. 89% of people living with MS and 93% of providers were satisfied with the telehealth appointments they had while 81% of people living with MS and 94% of providers hoped to continue using telehealth services after the COVID-19 pandemic. While respondents generally liked the convenience and ability to keep their appointments with their providers, people with MS noted that some appointments had to be in-person to appropriately assess their concerns. The Society believes an individual should have the opportunity and flexibility to choose, along with their provider, whether they will access care in-person or via telehealth technologies.

The Society is committed to working with people living with MS and their healthcare providers to identify what telehealth should look like moving forward in order to best address their needs. We are aware that there are many bills being heard today that have the potential to increase access to telehealth services, particularly LD 333, LD 323, LD 649, and LD 849. Generally, what we see as important aspects of telehealth in supporting access for Mainers living with MS are:

- **Access to Healthcare Providers and Services:** The Society recommends that people living with MS should have access to a comprehensive network of providers and healthcare services focused on producing the best outcomes at affordable costs. Continued access to expanded telehealth services will ensure that data regarding utilization and patient outcomes is consistent and can be assessed in a timely manner by organization and researchers.
- **Types of Telehealth Providers:** we support allowing all providers to participate in the remote-based delivery of care and medications within each provider's accepted scope of practice.
- **Licensure:** we support increasing access to telehealth by allowing all providers who are licensed and in good-standing to provide remote-based care, regardless of where they are currently located.
- **Reimbursement of Telehealth Encounters and Originating Site (location of patient):** we support proposals and policies that requires providers to be reimbursed equally for the



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delivery of remote care as they would be for services provided in-person (pay parity). Further, the Society opposes any policy that places unreasonable restrictions on the delivery of telehealth, including originating site restrictions, geographic restrictions, and restrictions on the types of providers or services that are eligible for reimbursement.

- **Access to Broadband Internet Connection:** we support efforts to ensure that access to telehealth is as broad as possible. Access to internet connections able to handle video calls for telehealth appointments is limited in minority, rural, and poor communities. Telehealth services should be equitably available through easily useable technologies that are accessible to people with disabilities, with limited English proficiency, and limited technology. When taking steps to expand telehealth support to the country, it is important to ensure that all parts and all people in the nation are able to access it.
- **Audio-only services:** we support the inclusion of telehealth services via audio-only connections. With the inaccessibility of broadband in many communities, including the rural areas of Maine, many people cannot connect to telehealth services that require video communication. According to the census bureau, nearly 36% of Black and 30% of Hispanic households had no broadband or computer access in their homes. Additionally, an inability to use video communications based on disability can lead to more individuals missing virtual appointments.

Many of the bills being heard today, including LD 333, LD 323, LD 649, and LD 849, are great next steps in providing telehealth access to our Mainers. The Society urges this committee – and the larger legislative body – to update current law to improve telehealth in Maine. Allowing individuals, especially those with chronic diseases such as MS, to use telehealth to conveniently access a wide range of providers, will improve the lives and health of many. We look forward to working with your committee and the legislature on this issue.

Please contact me if I can be of further assistance: laura.hoch@nmss.org (860) 913-2550 X52521.