

May 5, 2021

Re: Support – LD 333: An Act Regarding Telehealth

Dear Members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services,

On behalf of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), I am writing in support of LD 333, An Act Regarding Telehealth.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) is the national professional association representing the interests of more than 213,000 occupational therapists, students of occupational therapy, and occupational therapy assistants. The practice of occupational therapy is science-driven, evidence-based, and enables people of all ages to live life to its fullest by promoting health and minimizing the functional effects of illness, injury, and disability. Occupational therapy practitioners help to improve the quality of life and participation in meaningful life occupations for millions of Americans.

The coronavirus pandemic has required health care policymakers, payers, and providers alike to reconsider how care is delivered. We greatly appreciate the expansions and flexibilities that Maine has adopted for occupational therapy services in this newly imagined healthcare landscape to this point. The ability to supplement or replace in-clinic occupational therapy sessions with those provided through telehealth has been especially beneficial for patients who have mobility issues and find it difficult to leave their homes without assistance, who lack transportation, and/or need to travel long distances.

Therapy interventions delivered through electronic or digital media have the potential to prevent falls, functional decline, costly emergency room visits, and hospital admissions and readmissions. Telehealth as an optional adjunct to in-person care can be a critical healthcare solution that helps beneficiaries overcome access barriers caused by distance, lack of availability of providers, and impaired mobility; and can prevent unnecessary exposure during a pandemic, epidemic, or even the annual flu season, especially for vulnerable, immunocompromised patients.

The very nature of OT services makes them well-suited to telehealth, especially when used as an adjunct, or enhancement, to service delivery rather than a replacement. Education and home exercise programs, including those focused on falls prevention, function particularly well with telehealth because the practitioner is able to evaluate and treat the patient within the real-life context of their home environment, something that is not easy to replicate in the clinic. Patient and caregiver self-efficacy are inherent goals of care provided by occupational therapy practitioners. A patient's ability to interact in their home environment with a therapist where they can immediately identify a challenge with activities of daily living, for example, rather than waiting for the next face-to-face appointment, can be invaluable in supporting the adoption of effective rehabilitative strategies to improve function, enhance safety, and promote engagement.

Benefits of telehealth include increased access to OT services for children and adults who live in remote areas, the prevention of unnecessary delays in receiving services, and coordinated care among team members in different locations. Telehealth transcends geographic limitations and provides an opportunity to match patients' needs with practitioners' areas of expertise. Telehealth provides increased educational opportunities for caregivers, decreased need for travel; decreased health risks for patients with compromised immune systems; and for some, increased attention and decreased behavioral challenges when using a technology platform for intervention.

The expansion of telehealth payment and practice policies on the state and federal level during the public health emergency has demonstrated not only that many needs can be met effectively through the use of technology but that patients also have improved access to skilled care by leveraging

telehealth resources. Health professionals, including OT practitioners, who had to rapidly deploy telehealth services were still able to support patients and positively impact outcomes.

The provisions in LD 333, which would change provisions governing health insurance coverage of telehealth, will allow for more access to telehealth services. I urge you to please support the passage of LD 333 which will allow for more access to occupational therapy services for individuals in Maine.

Please contact me at 301-652-6611 x1921 or via email at mpudeler@aota.org if you have any questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Meghan Pudeler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Meghan Pudeler
Manager, State Affairs
American Occupational Therapy Association