



Increase Patient Access to Health Services Through Telemedicine (SB 5385)

Background

Telemedicine is when physicians or other clinicians use audio and video technology to diagnose, consult or treat patients in a professional setting. Unlike through emails, phone calls or texts, telemedicine brings providers and patients together, face-to-face. As Washington State struggles with a health care provider shortfall, telemedicine aims to improve access to health services, leading to improvements in health care outcomes. It is a cost-effective and efficient way to deliver care. It is already helping patients get expert mental health consultations, emergency cardiac treatment and stroke interventions.

Telemedicine can be subject to a lower payment rate than in-person health care visits. Further, the use of store-and-forward (asynchronous) technology — in which clinical information is stored for later diagnosis and action by the physician or clinician — is not currently reimbursed unless there is first an in-person visit to the referring provider. The use of store-and-forward technology can replace the need for inpatient or outpatient visits for important services, such as mental health care.

WSHA Position

WSHA strongly supports SB 5385. The bill would increase access to care through telemedicine by allowing providers to bill the same rate for telemedicine services as for in-person visits (establishing telemedicine payment parity). The bill also offers flexibility for hospitals, health systems and large provider groups by allowing them to choose to negotiate a telemedicine payment rate that may be lower than an in-person visit.

The bill also increases patient access to telemedicine services by removing the requirement that a patient must first have an in-person visit with the referring physician before store-and-forward technology is reimbursed.

Key Messages

- Washington State is struggling with a health care provider shortfall in certain areas of the state – mental health providers to other specialty areas of medicine. Delivering care through telemedicine has been identified as one way to increase patient access to services.
- Payment parity is needed to help improve access to services through telemedicine. The bill also bolsters the use of store-and-forward technology, further increasing access to needed services.

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