



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

Legislative Testimony

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By

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SB 2645 SD1 – RELATING TO ACCESS TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES

Chair Baker, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today. The John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) **supports SB 2645 SD1** which permits, but does not require, Medicaid, insurance providers and health maintenance organizations to cover telephonic behavioral health services under certain circumstances.

Since 1999, the use and expansion of telehealth services and technology in Hawai'i has been recognized as a way to increase access and reduce delays to health care, particularly in rural areas of the state. Many of the highest-risk patients reside in Medically Underserved Areas (MUA), are part of Medically Underserved Populations (MUP), or reside in federally-designated health professional shortage areas. Telehealth via telephonic communication benefits many in these communities. Elderly, as well as medically- and socially-complex patients often face transportation barriers and difficulty navigating our collective system of health care. Patients with behavioral health issues are especially vulnerable and frequently require immediate attention. The inability of behavioral health and other patients to access the internet presents an even greater barrier to much needed health care. We note that Medicare and Medicaid pay equally for telephonic and telehealth services, recognizing the importance of telephonic services. 42 CFR § 410.78 defining telehealth services provides as follows:

“(3) Interactive telecommunications system means, except as otherwise provided in this paragraph, multimedia communications equipment that includes, at a minimum, audio and video equipment permitting two-way, real-time interactive communication between the patient and distant site physician or practitioner. For services furnished for purposes of diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a mental health disorder to a patient in their home, **interactive telecommunications may include two-way, real-time audio-only communication technology if the distant site physician or practitioner is technically capable to use an**

interactive telecommunications system as defined in the previous sentence, but the patient is not capable of, or does not consent to, the use of video technology. A modifier designated by CMS must be appended to the claim for services described in this paragraph to verify that these conditions have been met.” Emphasis added.

One of the realities for Hawai'i is that many of those most in need of telephonic care (limited means to travel, poor or absent internet coverage, residence remote from care providers, infirm with limited mobility, immune compromise in the age of COVID, etc.) suffer the most from a lack of provider reimbursement for telephonic coverage. Without telephonic coverage, these at-risk individuals must travel from their residence to clinics and emergency departments at great personal expense or choose to do without care guidance altogether. SB 2645 is a positive step toward recognizing the value of telephonic health care services.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this bill.