

Occupational Therapy via Telehealth for Medicare Beneficiaries *Support the Expanded Telehealth Access Act (H.R.3875/S.2880) and the Telehealth Modernization Act (H.R.7623/S.3967)*

The ability of occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) to provide remote services via telehealth was of critical importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Temporary waivers enacted by Congress and implemented by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) enabled OTPs to provide essential therapy services despite closures and other service disruptions during the public health emergency (PHE) which ran through May 11, 2023. The benefits of telehealth, however, have proven to be far greater than simply enabling people to maintain social distance during a pandemic, and telehealth waivers were extended by Congress through the end of 2024 to maintain these services for Medicare beneficiaries.

To make this policy permanent, Representatives Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ) and Diana Harshbarger (R-TN) and Senators Steve Daines (R-MT) and Tina Smith (D-MN) have reintroduced the Expanded Telehealth Access Act (H.R.3875/S.2880) which would permanently add occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants as Medicare telehealth providers along with physical therapists, speech-language pathologists and audiologists. In addition, Representative Buddy Carter (R-GA) and Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) have included OTPs in their comprehensive telehealth reform bill, the Telehealth Modernization Act (H.R.7623/S.3967). This is essential as CMS has indicated that while it does have the authority to create telehealth CPT codes and has done so already, it does not have the authority to list OTPs or other therapists as telehealth providers in Medicare after Congressional waivers expire at the end of 2024.

Pandemic Experience Demonstrates Effectiveness of OT Services via Telehealth

The rapid expansion of telehealth as a delivery mechanism for OT services during and after the PHE has enabled OTPs to demonstrate the clear value of these services provided alone or in conjunction with in-person services. The use of telehealth to provide a wide array of healthcare services including occupational therapy has been especially beneficial for people in rural and other underserved areas and those for whom travel to receive services was already a barrier to access including people with disabilities.

OTPs have reported that telehealth has reduced cancellations and postponements while making it easier to connect with beneficiary caregivers. **Of critical importance, telehealth “home tours” are a specific OT telehealth benefit that cannot be duplicated in a facility/office setting.** OTPs report that telehealth has enabled in-home “video tours” to identify home safety issues that would never be identified by the patient in a facility/office setting. This can be crucial in preventing falls, addressing functional decline, and avoiding costly emergency room visits and hospital admissions which can reduce the cost of care.

Passage of either bill would enable Medicare beneficiaries to continue to receive OT services via telehealth when appropriate, including those for whom telehealth has emerged as the most practical way to access services.

We urge you to co-sponsor the Expanded Telehealth Access Act by contacting Representative Sherrill or Harshbarger in the House and Senator Daines or Smith in the Senate, and to co-sponsor the Telehealth Modernization Act by contacting Representative Buddy Carter or Senator Scott. This would be beneficial for Medicare beneficiaries who have come to depend on the availability of occupational therapy and other therapy services via telehealth and the therapy professionals who have learned the value and importance of this delivery method.