

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230 The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

On behalf of the American Academy of Audiology (The Academy), I write to highlight for you an issue for consideration as Congress moves forward to address the myriad of economic and healthcare access issues caused the current COVID-19 crisis. The Academy is the world's largest professional organization of, by and for audiologists. Representing the interests of approximately 14,000 audiologists nationwide, the Academy is dedicated to providing quality hearing and balance care services through professional development, education, research, and increased public awareness of hearing and balance disorders.

Allow Audiologists to Provide Services to Medicare Beneficiaries Via Telehealth

Incredible strides have already been made to expand patient access to healthcare providers via telehealth to enable patients to continue to receive needed services while minimizing face to face contact in order to limit transmission of COVID-19. However, the loosening of existing Medicare restrictions regarding the types of providers allowed to provide and be reimbursed for these services has not been fully addressed. Medicare currently lags behind the Veterans Administration, as well as both most private insurance plans and state licensing boards that allow audiology services to be provided via telehealth.

Untreated hearing loss has implications to overall health and can impose significant financial burdens to the healthcare system. Individuals with even mild hearing loss are three times more likely to experience a fall, and falls are the leading cause of fatal injury for Americans over age

65.¹ In addition, research is now emerging indicating that seniors with hearing loss are more likely to develop cognitive decline up to 40% faster than those without hearing loss. In addition, in a time of crisis, it is critical to be able to hear and communicate in order to stay connected with family and caregivers as well as to receive important news updates in order to be safe.

The Department of Veteran Affairs has recognized that providing audiology services via telehealth is an effective way to reach veterans.² “Expanded use of innovative technology is increasing access points to hearing care in remote areas, enabling telehealth providers to expand their reach to patients and their families in satisfying and effective ways,” said Chad Gladden, audiology telehealth coordinator for the Audiology and Speech Pathology National Program Office.³

Creating Opportunities Now for Necessary and Effective Care Technologies (CONNECT) For Health Act of 2019 (S.274/H.R. 4932)

The Academy is a strong supporter of the CONNECT for Health Act, legislation that enjoys bipartisan support and is designed to eliminate many of the barriers that currently exist with regard to telehealth in the Medicare program. Section 3 of this legislation would authorize the Secretary of Health and Human Services to waive restrictions on the types of providers that are currently not permitted to provide and be reimbursed for services delivered via telehealth—including audiologists. In addition, Section 9 would authorize payment for these expanded telehealth services under Section 1834(m) of the Social Security Act during national emergencies—such as the one we are currently experiencing. The American Academy of Audiology would encourage the inclusion of all of the provisions included in the CONNECT for Health Act but particularly Section 3 and Section 9.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6718a1.htm>

² <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/62446/audiology-telehealth-helping-rural-veterans-access-hearing-evaluations/>

³ <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/62446/audiology-telehealth-helping-rural-veterans-access-hearing-evaluations/>

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Conclusion

The Academy appreciates the efforts made to date to loosen existing telepractice restrictions to facilitate patient access to needed healthcare services. As Congress seeks to fine tune and expand upon the success thus far, the Academy urges the inclusion of verbiage that would allow Medicare providers currently unable to provide services via telehealth—including audiology-- to do so. If you have any questions regarding the information included in this letter, please contact Susan Pilch, Senior Director, Government Relations at spilch@audiology.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Catherine Palmer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Catherine V. Palmer, PhD
President, American Academy of Audiology