



Testimony Before the Pennsylvania House Majority Policy Committee

Submitted April 22, 2021

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Chairman Causer and members of the Pennsylvania House Majority Policy Committee: Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide testimony on the impact of COVID-related regulatory waivers here in Pennsylvania. At the outset, I'd like to thank the members of this committee, and the entire legislature, for the leadership and support you have all demonstrated to our Commonwealth during this difficult past year. The waivers we're discussing today, as well as the other support the state provided, were invaluable in our efforts to care for our family, friends and neighbors affected directly and indirectly by COVID-19.

My name is Dr. David Vega, and I am the Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer for the medical group at WellSpan Health. I'll be focusing my testimony on the tremendous impact telehealth waivers provided by the Commonwealth have had, and I hope will continue to have, on patient care and experience.

For background, WellSpan Health is an integrated delivery system of 20,000 team members and a clinically integrated network of 2,600 physicians and advanced practice providers. We provide both primary and specialty care in south central Pennsylvania at more than 200 patient care locations and eight hospitals. We are one of the largest providers of behavioral health care in Pennsylvania, with more than 200 inpatient beds and more than 25 outpatient and community-based programs, including comprehensive addiction services and the WellSpan Philhaven Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities. In addition, our services extend into the community through our home care programs and remote monitoring solutions.

We are guided by our vision to be a trusted partner who reimagines healthcare and inspires health.

That vision was tested during the COVID-19 pandemic, when WellSpan Health harnessed the power of technology to bring care directly to our patients through digital platforms and telemedicine. We expanded those innovations quickly and scaled them up to handle the rapidly growing need for tools that would allow patients to be cared for in the comfort and safety of their homes and to avoid the serious and long-term consequences of delaying much needed care.

The telehealth waivers granted during the COVID-19 pandemic were invaluable in this effort and have given WellSpan Health the flexibility to ensure our patients receive the right care, at the right time, in the right setting. For example, these telehealth advancements:



- Allowed telehealth services to be covered for patients in any geographic location and at any site, including the patient's home.
- Expanded the types of practitioners who can provide telehealth services and expanded the types of services that can be provided via telehealth.
- Allowed certain telehealth services to be furnished via audio-only and waived the restrictions on the type of technology that may be used to provide telehealth via everyday communications technologies, such as FaceTime or Skype.

These waivers empowered us to meet the challenge of COVID-19 head-on and laid the groundwork for improving the delivery of health care services to Pennsylvanians in the future.

We ask you to seize this opportunity to retain this flexibility and innovation and to enhance Pennsylvania's health care delivery system. I can assure you, these tools have helped us strengthen WellSpan Health's commitment to providing our patients with the care they need – when, where and how they want it.

How did the waivers do this? Here is the WellSpan experience.

First, there is consistent and growing evidence that putting greater emphasis on primary care means spending less on hospitalizations for chronic conditions and emergency department services. According to a 2019 report by the Patient-Centered Primary Care Collaborative, there is a correlation between better primary care access and fewer hospitalizations and emergency department visits, especially for patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, high blood pressure and congestive heart failure.

As an emergency physician, I have far too often seen the unfortunate results of limited access to care and untreated or undiagnosed medical conditions. I see first-hand the unnecessary suffering that happens when a healthcare system has failed to connect people with the right level of care. This is especially true for conditions that are relatively easy to treat early on but can become debilitating or fatal when not addressed early enough. These are real people, our friends and neighbors in Pennsylvania, not just statistics. We have to do better.

At WellSpan Health, we have quantitative and qualitative data demonstrating that telehealth greatly improves people's ability to access both primary care and behavioral health care. As you have undoubtedly seen in your own communities, our clinicians have seen increasing physical and behavioral health problems among their patients

We believe the access to care that WellSpan Health was able to create, specifically to primary and behavioral health care, was a direct result of the state-level telehealth waivers.



Because of these waivers, we were able to accelerate our vision to reimagine healthcare during the pandemic by rapidly scaling up our telehealth offerings. The results speak for themselves:

- WellSpan Health conducted 325,000 video visits in 2020—a 170x increase from 2019.
- From mid-March to mid-April 2020, WellSpan Health logged more than 35,000 video visits, compared to 47 video visits during the previous 30-day period.
- We expanded from 6 to 400 medical practices using video visits in a matter of weeks.
- The age of those using telehealth services ranges from newborns to 103. In fact, 20 percent of our telehealth appointments are scheduled by those over the age of 60.
- In a recent survey of patients who used video visits, more than 70 percent indicated they would be interested in using video visits in the future.

These dramatic increases in use of telehealth came across a variety of care settings and services—primary and urgent care, as well as in-hospital uses that minimized the need for travel and personal protective equipment (PPE) use. We saw virtual access to behavioral health increase by 25x during the first couple months of the pandemic. We also were able to use technology tools to assist in monitoring lower-acuity COVID-tested patients while they waited for test results and beyond. Telehealth has been a game-changer for our patients and providers.

Our data and experience demonstrate we should make these state-level waivers permanent. Supporting and strengthening the ability to provide expanded telehealth services like those described here will have a long-term positive benefit on overall healthcare costs and lead to better and more convenient care for our patients and your constituents.

Ending the waivers could have dramatic consequences. For example, these waivers provided payment of telemedicine services at the same rate as in-person services. Providing equivalent payment for telehealth services enabled our providers to quickly ramp up capabilities and focus on what truly mattered—providing patient access to the right care, at the right time, in the right setting.

If we take a step backward, and telehealth is not reimbursed the same as in-person care, we put our providers in the unenviable position of making a choice between providing care through the most appropriate, accessible means or burdening patients with needing to come into the office for even the most basic care needs like medication checks and test follow-ups.

WellSpan Health has demonstrated how equivalent payment can accelerate the use of telehealth and improve access to care. Today, I ask that you not constrain access to primary care, behavioral health and low-acuity health care by repealing the waivers. The decisions this legislature makes



regarding these waivers will determine whether we can provide even greater access to care or once again relegate telehealth to the periphery of our healthcare system.

The WellSpan Health experience demonstrates that with telehealth, we can build a healthcare system that provides faster care delivery, more affordable care, more accessible and convenient care, and improved chronic disease management and outcomes for the patients we serve.

Thank you, again, to the members of the House Majority Policy Committee for focusing your efforts on this critically important topic and for the opportunity to provide WellSpan's perspective and experience. Thank you all, as well, for your service to the citizens of your districts and the Commonwealth. I look forward to your questions.