



July 27, 2020

The Honorable Jerry Moran, Chairman
The Honorable Jon Tester, Ranking Member
United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Tester:

The Healthcare Leadership Council (HLC) commends the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for holding its hearing on, "VA Telehealth During and Beyond COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities in Rural America.' The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a number of challenges to increased access to telehealth services. These challenges are a significant roadblock to greater health care access, particularly in rural communities.

HLC is a coalition of chief executives from all disciplines within American healthcare. It is the exclusive forum for the nation's healthcare leaders to jointly develop policies, plans, and programs to achieve their vision of a 21st century healthcare system that makes affordable high-quality care accessible to all Americans. Members of HLC – hospitals, academic health centers, health plans, pharmaceutical companies, medical device manufacturers, laboratories, biotech firms, health product distributors, post-acute care providers, home care providers, and information technology companies – advocate for measures to increase the quality and efficiency of healthcare through a patient-centered approach.

Increased access to telehealth services has become a health priority during the COVID-19 health pandemic. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities have experienced a significant increase in telehealth appointments since the beginning of the health pandemic, seeing a 1,000% increase in telehealth visits. HLC members appreciate flexibilities created by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to increase utilization of telehealth services. Rural communities, however, continue to struggle in receiving these services and any discussion of improved telehealth use should ensure that rural communities are not left behind.

The issue of broadband connectivity is one of the most significant challenges for rural communities in obtaining quality telehealth services. Approximately 46 million

Americans live in these areas and struggle to access telehealth services due to broadband inadequacies in their communities. HLC is appreciative of the \$200 million appropriated to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) under the CARES Act to improve broadband connectivity and telehealth access for rural areas.

Rural communities also suffer from a shortage of providers and often have to travel miles to receive care. While increased telehealth access has helped to alleviate this burden, existing state licensure requirements prevent providers from offering telehealth services to patients in states they are not currently licensed to practice in, despite offering identical services in other states. Creating greater licensure flexibility for providers will help to further close the provider gap in rural communities and ensure that rural patients receive the care they need.

Improving access to telehealth services for rural areas should be a priority to ensure these vulnerable communities are not left behind. Given the essential role of VA facilities in these communities, they have an opportunity to improve existing forms of care delivery, working with additional stakeholders to identify ways to better improve rural health care access. HLC looks forward to working with the committee on its shared priorities to improve rural access to telehealth services. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Tina Grande at tgrande@hlc.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary R. Grealy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mary" being the most prominent.

Mary R. Grealy
President