July 14, 2020

The Honorable Doris Matsui
2311 Rayburn House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congresswoman Matsui:

The American Psychological Association (APA) is pleased to express strong support for the Telemental Health Expansion Act (H.R. 5201). We urge members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee to swiftly approve the bill at the markup this week to enable Medicare beneficiaries in need of mental and behavioral health services would be able to receive timely and effective telehealth care.

The APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. Our membership includes more than 121,000 clinicians, researchers, educators, consultants and students. APA works to promote the advancement, communication and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives.

As you well know, mental health disorders are among the most common diagnoses for Medicare beneficiaries receiving telehealth services, and despite research indicating the provision of telemental health services is equally effective as in-person mental health care, the accessibility of effective telehealth delivery of mental health services is hampered by current statutory limitations. Such limitations include the receipt of telehealth services in certain clinical settings, such as a doctor’s office or hospital, and solely to beneficiaries living in rural or specific geographic areas with health provider shortages. As you know, while these restrictions have been temporarily lifted amidst the COVID-19 public health emergency, if they are ever reinstated these restrictions will again unnecessarily impede access to essential mental health services.

The APA applauds H.R. 5201 for permanently removing these “geographic and originating site” barriers and allowing older adults the ability to receive psychotherapy and other effective mental health services through telehealth in their own home and regardless of where they live. Furthermore, the bill builds upon your previous leadership in eliminating these restrictions for Medicare beneficiaries with substance use and co-occurring mental health conditions, as enacted in Congress’ historic opioid crisis legislation (SUPPORT Act, P.L. No. 115-271).
Additionally, the bill is consistent with the current COVID-19 public health emergency waivers pertaining to telehealth, and APA continues to ask that Congress ensure CMS has all the necessary authorities to extend and make permanent those flexibilities for mental health services, including audio-only services for psychotherapy and health behavior assessment and intervention services (HBAI).

Again, APA commends you for championing this important bill and is ready to assist your efforts to ensure the telehealth expansion for Medicare beneficiaries with mental and behavioral health conditions will remain in place beyond this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. If you have any questions, please contact Laurel Stine, J.D., M.A., Senior Director of Congressional and Federal Relations and Partnerships at lstine@apa.org

Sincerely,

Katherine B. McGuire
Chief Advocacy Officer