

MaineHealth

MaineHealth Local Health Systems

Franklin Community
Health Network
LincolnHealth
MaineHealth Care At Home
Maine Behavioral Healthcare
Memorial Hospital
Maine Medical Center
Mid Coast-Parkview Health
NorDx
Pen Bay Medical Center
Southern Maine Health Care
Synernet
Waldo County General Hospital
Western Maine Health

Part of the MaineHealth Family

MaineHealth Accountable
Care Organization

MaineHealth Affiliates

MaineGeneral Health
New England Rehabilitation
Hospital of Portland
St. Mary's Health System

Sarah Calder, MaineHealth

Testimony in Support of LD 1758

“An Act Regarding Access to Telehealth Behavioral Health Services during Public Health Emergencies”

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, my name is Sarah Calder, Director of Government Affairs at MaineHealth, and I am here today to testify in strong support of LD 1758, “An Act Regarding Access to Telehealth Behavioral Health Services during Public Health Emergencies.”

MaineHealth is a non-profit health care system that provides the full continuum of health care services to the residents of eleven counties in Maine and one in New Hampshire. As part of our mission of “Working Together So Maine’s Communities are the Healthiest in America,” MaineHealth, which includes Maine Behavioral Healthcare (MBH), is committed to creating a seamless system of behavioral healthcare across Maine, coordinating hospital psychiatric care with community-based treatment services, and better access to behavioral healthcare through integration with primary care services.

Since the start of the Public Health Emergency, Maine Behavioral Healthcare has made significant investments to meet our clients’ needs in a setting and modality that works best for the client and their clinical needs. While telehealth is used broadly across the MaineHealth system, it has been incredibly important in meeting the needs of our behavioral health clients. It has proven to be very effective for many clients, with no-show rates reduced and with high patient satisfaction scores. With 70% of our visits with clients now conducted over video or telephone, telehealth has also allowed us to expand our capacity and serve more Mainers in need of behavioral health care or substance use disorder treatment – at a time when the need has never been greater. In fact, we have seen a 20% increase in the number of client visits each week compared to the time prior to the pandemic.

With that said, we are grateful that the Legislature and Administration have supported the use of telehealth through MaineCare and commercial health plans. The bill before you today simply lifts the Maine Division of Licensing and Certification requirement that a provider collect written consent, and, instead, allows for verbal consent to treat a behavioral health or substance use disorder client during a federally declared Public Health Emergency. It is important to note that MaineCare already allows for verbal consent (not tied to a Public Health Emergency), and that verbal consent must be documented in the patient’s medical record.

Many of our clients struggle with transportation, and do not have access to technology like a printer or scanner. For this vulnerable population, the simple process of coming into the office to provide a signature or scanning their signature can be a significant and unnecessary barrier to accessing care. A wet signature should not be the barrier to providing timely and effective care remotely to a vulnerable population that might otherwise not be able to get treatment without telehealth. When we segment services based on patient resources we decrease the access to care for patients without adequate resources and increase the digital divide.

Our providers and patients have reported great success from the expanded use of telehealth during the pandemic. With that said, we urge the Legislature to support temporarily allowing the collection of verbal consent to treat behavioral health and substance use disorder clients.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.