



A driving force for health equity

Submitted via electronic mail

June 28, 2024

The Honorable Michelle Steel
U.S. House of Representatives
1127 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Gus Bilirakis
U.S. House of Representatives
2306 Rayburn HOB
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Susie Lee
U.S. House of Representatives
365 Cannon HOB
Washington DC 20515

Re: Support for H.R. 7863 To require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to issue guidance on furnishing behavioral health services via telehealth to individuals with limited English proficiency under Medicare program

Dear Representatives Steel, Bilirakis, and Lee:

On behalf of OCHIN, I appreciate the opportunity to provide support for *H.R. 7863 Ensuring Access to Behavioral Health Services via Telehealth to Individuals with Limited English Proficiency*, which would advance equitable access to behavioral health services via telehealth in the Medicare program. OCHIN is a national nonprofit health information technology innovation and research network that includes **Critical Access Hospitals (CAHs), rural and frontier health clinics as well as federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and local public health agencies** that serve over 2,000 community health care sites with more than 33,000 providers in 43 states, reaching more than 6.1 million patients. Adoption of telehealth flexibilities by Medicare and other federal and state health care programs due to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) yielded an unprecedented amount of evidence demonstrating the value of telehealth to expanding access to care. This legislation will further efforts to reach patients who prefer languages other than English and reduce health disparities by ensuring that Medicare supports the use of evidence-based, best practices in the delivery care through telehealth (interactive video and audio-only) as well as other digital modalities such as texting through guidance.

OCHIN TELHEALTH EXPANSION: ADDRESSING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

For over two decades, OCHIN has advanced health care solutions by leveraging the strength of our network's unique data set and the practical experience of our members to drive technology innovation for patients and providers in rural and other underserved communities. OCHIN offers technology solutions, informatics, evidence-based research, and workforce development and training in addition to policy insights. We provide the clinical insights and tailored technologies needed to expand patient access, connect care teams, and improve the health of rural and medically underserved communities. Of the over 6.1 million patients that we serve through OCHIN Epic, more than 34% preferred care in a language other than English. OCHIN's MyChart patient portal supports 13 languages, from Spanish and Chinese to Portuguese and Russian, to support our patients' access to their electronic medical records and help

champion their own care for better outcomes through the language they prefer. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 22% of people in the United States spoke another language besides English at home with 8.4% reporting speaking English less than “very well.” In the healthcare settings, language barriers can hamper patient decision-making autonomy. Compared to people who speak English, individuals who speak another language aside from English disproportionately experience less access to regular care or be satisfied with their care. They also are at greater risk of adverse effects from poor understanding of diagnoses, low health literacy, and being misunderstood by their physicians. Collecting patients’ self-reported need for interpretation services can help healthcare organizations eliminate guesswork or assumptions on whether their patient needs an interpreter, which improves the patient experience and ensures a more patient-centered process that ultimately helps improve care provided and clinical outcomes. Of the 3.7 million patients that we serve through OCHIN Epic, more than 34% preferred care in a language other than English, a large proportion of whom speak Spanish (24%). OCHIN’s MyChart patient portal supports 13 languages, from Spanish and Chinese to Portuguese and Russian, to support our patients’ access to their electronic medical records and help champion their own care for better outcomes through language they prefer.

OCHIN urges Congress to support legislation that would ensure access to health services via telehealth delivery by bridging the gaps created through language barriers. OCHIN’s network of providers serve communities at a higher risk of having less access to care due to a language barrier and would experience better health outcomes through telehealth modalities.

Please contact me at stollj@ochin.org if we can provide any additional information to support your efforts.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Stoll
Chief External Affairs Officer
External Affairs

