

10 Mar 2022 | News

House Extends Telehealth Benefits In Massive Spending Bill, Sends To Senate

by [Brian Bossetta](#)

The US House has extended to Medicare recipients temporary waivers for telehealth coverage that was put in place at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislation now moves to the Senate where it's also expected to pass.

As the COVID-19 pandemic postponed non-emergency hospital visits, many Americans turned to telehealth for the first time as the frequency of virtual visits skyrocketed.

In response, Congress lifted restrictions on telehealth coverage for Medicare beneficiaries until the end of the public health emergency (PHE), which was declared in March 2020. With those temporary restrictions set to expire at the end of the PHE, the fear was that many patients would lose what has become an essential element of their health care regimens.

Kyle Zebley, VP of public policy at the American Telemedicine Association (ATA), has referred to this approaching cutoff as the “telehealth cliff.”

But now Zebley and the ATA are welcoming the recent passage of a \$1.5tn [omnibus bill](#) in the US House that keeps these temporary waivers in place for at least five months after the PHE ends on 16 April. (Also see "[Omnibus Spending Package Awards \\$102M More To US FDA, But Drops COVID-19 Funding](#)" - Medtech Insight, 9 Mar, 2022.)

The legislation ensures “patients do not fall off a telehealth cliff immediately after the COVID-19 public health emergency ends.” – Kyle Zebley

The waivers the House extended include geographic requirements that allow beneficiaries to receive telehealth services from any location, including their home, and also expands the list of eligible providers that can offer telehealth, such as physical therapists, occupational therapists, special therapists, and audiologists.

The bill also allows federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and rural health clinics (RHCs) to continue providing telehealth services and extends the waiver of the requirement that patients using digital technology for behavioral health see a provider in person prior to their virtual visits.

Zebley has argued, as have others, that telehealth is particularly important in rural areas where there is often a dearth of providers, especially for mental health, which is the one treatment area that telehealth can best meet. In fact, Zebley says virtual visits often yield better outcomes in mental health and in many cases are more popular than traditional visits for both patients and provider. (Also see "[The Pandemic Has Reshaped Telemedicine – And ‘There’s No Going Back’](#)" - Medtech Insight, 9 Feb, 2022.)

He further said the bill, which passed the House 260 to 171, is a step in the right direction. “We commend legislators for including critical telehealth extensions in this must-pass legislation, ensuring that patients do not fall off a telehealth cliff immediately after the COVID-19 public health emergency ends.”

House Energy and Commerce Committee chairs Frank Pallone, D-NJ, and Anna Eshoo, D-CA, also applauded the bill’s passage and its telehealth provisions.

“We’re pleased that the package extends Medicare’s expanded coverage of telehealth services so that seniors nationwide can continue to access care virtually,” they said in a joint [press release](#).

The bill now moves to the Senate where “it will pass in the next few days,” a spokesperson in Pallone’s office promised *Medtech Insight*.