

Memorandum

To: Chair Prusak, Vice-Chair Salinas and Vice-Chair Hayden and Members of the House Committee on Health Care

From: Kathleen Carter, Health Services Director, Outside In

Date: February 3, 2021

Re: Support HB 2508

On behalf of Outside In, I write to share our strong support of House Bill 2508. HB 2508 will increase coverage and reimbursement by Oregon Medicaid and commercial payers of health services delivered using telemedicine.

Outside In helps marginalized and vulnerable populations access the care and services they need to improve their health and lead an independent and self-sustaining life. Each year, our team serves approximately 11,000 patients and clients at seven locations in Multnomah and Clackamas Counties. The agency operates a Health Care for the Homeless Federally Qualified Health Center and provides integrated care, including primary, behavioral health, pharmacy, and a MAT program to approximately 5,000 patients. Outside In also provides specialty behavioral health services through our licensed mental health and substance use treatment programs. As a Community Health Center, we are providers within the CCO networks, delivering care to Oregon's underserved populations, including one in four Oregon Health Plan members.

As COVID-19 began to spread across the country in early 2020, Outside In's clinic volume decreased by 50% due to patient fear of contracting the virus. In late March 2020, our team of providers, in collaboration with IT staff, quickly transitioned to telemedicine, including both video and phone visits with patients in the span of one week. At that time, the agency did not have assurance from Medicare, Medicaid, and a few other insurers that these interactions would be reimbursed. Despite this, Outside In remained committed to eliminating barriers to care for its patients and developed an entirely new care delivery system that allowed patients to access care safely via telemedicine.

Many of our patients lack means for transportation and remain isolated because of the pandemic. Telemedicine has been a game changer for them. Without it, they would have no access to care at all. Video and phone visits help our providers continue to support and monitor patients with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure. This reduces the overall cost of care as patients can access providers in our low-cost setting instead of hospital emergency departments. Today, approximately 55% of primary care patient visits are completed using telemedicine (31% by phone alone). In our specialty behavioral health services, we are providing 95% of our services via video and phone encounters. Our ability to deliver mental health therapy has increased by 20% since the onset of the pandemic, and we attribute that to our nimble transition to delivering services in different modalities while assuring safety of both clients and staff.

Eliminating telephone payment parity reduces access for people experiencing homelessness and the low-income elderly. These effects are particularly felt for people of color who have poor Wi-Fi access, low computer literacy, and chronic health conditions.

Telemedicine offers a critically convenient option for patients who are working and often don't have the ability to take the time off of work to attend an in-person appointment. Phone appointments eliminate many stressors for patients, including a cluster of barriers around transportation (access, cost, timeliness, and the stressors of navigating the city).

Moreover, some of our patients find phone appointments to be less stress inducing than in-person visits, particularly those who are neurodiverse or struggle with anxiety or communication. These visits are efficient and effective, and overall result in a lower rate of late arrivals, missed appointments or no shows.

COVID has taught us some valuable lessons about health care delivery. Every industry has been changed by what we have learned from COVID, even health care. There is no reason to try re-establish an archaic payment system when the industry has moved on and better care is available.

Thank you for taking time to read our testimony in support of HB 2508. We believe that expanding telemedicine to all Oregonians is the next step in transforming health care in Oregon, and we respectfully urge you to vote "YES" on this critical legislation because all Oregonians deserve equal access to telemedicine.