

## **Tele-Mental Health Improvement Act** **Senator Tina Smith (D-Minn.) and Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska)**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges that are negatively impacting the mental health of Americans. Social distancing measures have led to increased social isolation and job loss. Essential workers on the frontline are experiencing increased pressure and burnout in the face of this crisis. In addition, Americans have increased anxiety as they worry about themselves or their loved ones contracting the coronavirus. In fact, 45 percent of adults in the United States reported increased stress and worry due to the public health and economic implications of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

Even before the pandemic, Americans with mental health conditions and substance use disorders faced barriers accessing the care they need. COVID-19 has only exacerbated those challenges as more people seek mental health treatment and more behavioral health organizations close their programs due to financial constraints.<sup>2</sup>

Expanding access to mental health services via telehealth is an important solution that would support patients and their behavioral health providers while remaining still complying with social distancing guidelines.

Senators Smith and Murkowski's bipartisan *Tele-Mental Health Improvement Act* would improve access to tele-mental health during the length of the COVID-19 public health emergency by:

- Require ERISA plans to cover mental health and substance use disorder services provided through telehealth at the same reimbursement rate as for the same services provided in-person;
- Prohibit health plans from imposing additional barriers to access telehealth;
- Direct health plans to inform enrollees how they can access mental health and substance use disorder services via telehealth; and
- Require the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to issue a report on the impact of telehealth parity measures on the use of telehealth and in-person services.

This legislation is endorsed by: National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), NAMI Minnesota, National Council on Behavioral Health, American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM), American Psychiatric Association (APA), Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action, Residential Eating Disorders Consortium, WithAll, The Emily Program, and Alaska Eating Disorders Alliance.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirzinger, A., Kearney, A., Hamel, L., & Brodie, M. (April 2020). Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll—Early April 2020: The Impact of Coronavirus on Life in America. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-early-april-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> National Council for Behavioral Health. (April 2020). COVID-19 Economic Impact on Behavioral Health Organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/press-releases/behavioral-health-crisis-in-america-getting-worse-as-covid-19-forces-community-behavioral-health-care-organizations-to-cut-back/>