APTA Template Letter for Members: Maintaining Telehealth Policies

Use this template to advocate to private payers, Medicare Advantage, and Medicaid (both fee for service and MCOs) for continued coverage of telehealth furnished by PTs and PTAs post Stage 1 of the COVID-19 crisis. Insert your individual information where indicated. As a reminder, your comments represent only you and your situation; they should not imply representation of APTA.

**REMINDER**: Delete all text above, including these instructions, before sharing with patient/consumer.

[DATE]

[NAME/TITLE OF PAYER ADDRESSEE]

[ADDRESS OF PAYER]

**RE: Maintaining Access to Telehealth Post COVID-19**

Dear [TITLE/LAST NAME]:

**As a** [SELECT: **physical therapist/physical therapist assistant/physical therapy provider**], **I respectfully request that [Payer Name/Payer Program] permanently adopt payment policies implemented during the COVID-19 public health emergency to ensure that patients continue to have real-time access to physical therapists without barriers when a patient is unable or chooses not to receive onsite care, and as a means by which face-to-face sessions can be reinforced and augmented based on patient and/or caregiver needs.**

The coronavirus pandemic resulted in a need for patients, health systems, payers, and providers to pivot and rapidly adopt or expand models and modes of care delivery that minimized disruptions in care and the risks associated with those disruptions. The expansion of telehealth payment and practice policies during this Public Health Emergency demonstrated that many needs can be effectively met via the use of technology and that patients can have improved access to care by leveraging these resources. Providers who had to rapidly deploy telehealth services in less than ideal situations were still able to support patients and positively impact outcomes. The sudden termination of these options and resources would not make sense, nor would it demonstrate a commitment to supporting patients when and where their needs exist.

At the same time APTA recognizes that policies established during a public health emergency may need to be modified for long-term sustainability. We look forward to the opportunity to work with you to ensure the development of policies that will support your members and ensure the ongoing utilization of technology and telehealth while minimizing the risk for over- or inappropriate utilization. APTA has long supported the use of telehealth by physical therapists and physical therapist assistants and has many resources developed to support providers. There are also many models and studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of telehealth when used in a clinically appropriate manner.

Physical therapist interventions delivered through an electronic or digital medium have the potential to prevent falls, functional decline, costly emergency room visits, and hospital admissions and readmissions. Further, the very nature of physical therapy services makes them well-suited to telehealth. Telehealth helps to overcome access barriers caused by distance, lack of availability of specialists and/or subspecialists, and impaired mobility; and can prevent unnecessary exposure during a pandemic or epidemic. Education and home exercise programs, including those focused on falls prevention, also function particularly well with telehealth. For patients who have difficulty leaving their homes without assistance, lack transportation, or need to travel long distances, the ability to supplement or replace some in-clinic sessions with those furnished via telehealth greatly reduces the burden on the patient and family when accessing care. Patient and caregiver self-efficacy are inherent goals of care provided by physical therapists. A patient’s and/or caregiver’s ability to interact with a physical therapist in their own environment when they are facing a challenge, rather than waiting for the next appointment, can be invaluable in supporting the adoption of effective strategies to improve function, enhance safety, and promote engagement.

Physical therapists can use telehealth as a supplement to in-person therapy to treat a variety of conditions. Examples of physical therapists using telehealth technologies include the following:

* Physical therapists use telehealth to provide quick screening, assessment, and referrals that improve care coordination.
* Physical therapists provide interventions using telehealth by observing how patients move and perform exercises and activities. Physical therapists then provide verbal and visual instructions and cues to modify how patients perform various activities. They also may change the environment to encourage optimal outcomes.
* Physical therapists provide consultative services by working with other physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and other health care providers to share expertise in specific movement-related activities to optimize the patient’s participation.
* Physical therapists use telehealth for quick check-ins with established patients, for which a full in-person visit may not be necessary.

APTA has compiled [research studies on telehealth](https://www.apta.org/advocacy/issues/telehealth/increasing-access-research-on-telerehabilitation-services) and [testimonials from APTA members](https://www.apta.org/advocacy/issues/telehealth/telehealth-testimonials) on how they have balanced in-person and telehealth visits.

Physical therapists often describe telehealth as a “game changer” that provides access to their services in remote, particularly rural, areas and during inclement weather. Telehealth improves access to physical therapy for patients who have mobility issues. Telehealth is also a great way to get specialists and sub-specialists into communities that would otherwise lack access. Telehealth has been shown to improve access to care for rural populations, as well as outcomes for a variety of health problems, including PTSD, chronic pain, stroke recovery, and joint replacement.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has shown numerous successful outcomes for telehealth, improving access to medical specialists for veterans who visit community outpatient clinics far removed from the nearest VA Medical Center. The VA found telehealth yielded significant per-patient cost savings over traditional methods of care delivery (<https://www.research.va.gov/topics/healthcare_delivery.cfm>). Improved outcomes can lead to long-term cost savings. Proper application of tele rehabilitation can have a dramatic impact on improving care, by reducing negative consequences and costs of care, and ensuring access to specialized care in geographic areas that face difficulties in maintaining and staffing full-service hospitals.

**Recommendation**

While rehabilitative services furnished via telehealth would not replace traditional clinical care, telehealth has proven to be a valuable resource for physical therapists and physical therapist assistants in expanding their reach to meet the needs of patients when and where those needs arise.

The permanent adoption of telehealth policies will provide greater flexibility to providers and patients and increase access to care, especially to those living in rural or medically underserved areas or individuals living with impaired mobility. Maintaining coverage to include the delivery of telehealth by physical therapists will lead to reduced health care expenditures, increased patient access to care, and improved management of chronic disease and quality of life, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Patient geography no longer would be a barrier to receiving timely, appropriate medical care.

If you have any questions or would like to contact me, I can be reached at [PHONE] or [EMAIL].

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]

[YOUR TITLE]