

Headquarters
7015 College Blvd. Suite 150
Overland Park, Kan. 66211
T: 816-756-3140



Government Affairs Office
50 F Street N.W., Suite 520
Washington, D.C. 20001
T: 202-639-0550

March 25, 2021

Contact: Mason Zeagler
202-639-0550
mzeagler@NRHArural.org

Reps. Dan Kildee (D-Mich.) and Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio) introduce Rural Behavioral Health Access Act

Crucial legislation would ensure critical access hospitals can continue behavioral therapy through telehealth after pandemic

March 25, 2021 – Washington, D.C. – Today Reps. Dan Kildee (D-Mich.) and Brad Wenstrup (R-Ohio) introduced their bipartisan bill, the Rural Behavioral Health Access Act. This legislation would ensure critical access hospitals (CAH) retain crucial flexibility to provide behavioral health services through telehealth after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a rural hospital designation, critical access hospitals were established by Congress to improve access to essential health care services in rural communities, which often lack access to healthcare providers. As more Medicare patients seek care from home and behavioral health demands in rural areas increase, it is critical that CAHs can utilize and bill for telehealth services.

Congress acted rapidly to expand access to telehealth during the pandemic, but behavioral health challenges in rural areas will continue long after COVID-19 recedes. According to SAMHSA's 2019 national survey on drug use and health, one in five rural Americans reported having a mental illness, and [December 2020 polling](#) by the American Farm Bureau Federation found that more than half of rural Americans say they are personally experiencing more mental health challenges than they were a year ago. Empowering CAHs to continue providing behavioral therapy services is an important, logical step to address the growing national behavior health crisis.

Key provisions of the Rural Behavioral Health Access Act Include:

- Allowing Medicare to provide payment for outpatient CAH services consisting of behavioral therapy when the individual is not located at the hospital.
- Allowing the initiation of a new patient relationship via telehealth, but only when a plan of care has been established that includes in-person care.
- Allowing the provision of behavioral therapy services through an audio-only interaction, but only if audio-visual capability is not available.

For more information, view [a one-page summary of the bill](#) or [the full legislative text](#).

www.RuralHealthWeb.org

Here is what NRHA and others are saying about the bill:

“NRHA applauds Representatives Kildee and Wenstrup for their work to introduce the Rural Behavioral Health Access Act. This important legislation would allow critical access hospitals to continue providing behavioral health services via telehealth beyond the duration of the public health emergency. Mental health needs have spiked in rural communities since the beginning of the pandemic. Allowing continued access via telehealth in these communities will save lives.” – *Alan Morgan, NRHA CEO*

“The Alliance for Connected Care is pleased to join the National Rural Health Association in applauding this important legislation, which shines a light on the need for critical access hospitals to be able to flexibly provide telehealth services to their patients. The Rural Behavioral Health Access Act should be included alongside other important telehealth changes Congress must pass before the end of the public health emergency.” – *Krista Drobac, Alliance for Connected Care executive director*

"New telehealth flexibilities afforded to county behavioral health and I/DD services have been essential during the past year. These flexibilities have permitted us to serve a larger number of county citizens in a much more effective manner. Now that we also are in the midst of a U.S. behavioral health pandemic, we will need these flexibilities even more going forward." – *Ron Manderscheid, PhD, National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors president/CEO*

“The Rural Behavioral Health Access Act is timely and important, and we share the goal of ensuring that behavioral health patients in underserved areas do not lose access to virtual care services. This is a population that has especially relied on advances in virtual care during the pandemic, and Congress must act to allow these services to continue. In addition, we believe it is critically important that Congress enact broader changes to the current virtual care legal framework.” – *Peter M. Leibold, Ascension executive vice president and chief advocacy officer*

“Psychiatric Medical Care was founded around the need for highly collaborative partnerships to support quality of life for older adults in rural communities. We applaud Representatives Kildee and Wenstrup for introducing this legislation, which will help to ensure Medicare beneficiaries are able to access the same behavioral therapy services either in a local critical access hospital or through virtual care.” – *J.R. Greene, FACHE, Psychiatric Medical Care CEO*

About NRHA

NRHA is a nonprofit organization working to improve the health and wellbeing of rural Americans and provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research. NRHA’s membership is made up of more than 21,000 diverse individuals and organizations, all of whom share the common bond of an interest in rural health.