

2016 Telehealth Policy Workshop (Co-hosted by the Honorable Senator Brian Schatz)

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JANUARY 2016 NEWSLETTER

The Pacific Basin Telehealth Resource Center and Senator Schatz bring together Telehealth Stakeholders in Hawaii

January 7, 2016 Honolulu, Hawaii

The Pacific Basin Telehealth Resource Center of the University of Hawaii held a Telehealth Policy Workshop with U.S. Senator Brian Schatz (D-Hawai'i) as the honorary co-host as a part of his effort to promote the adoption and expansion of telehealth technology nationwide, including forthcoming legislation regarding reimbursement for telehealth services by Medicare.

Senator Schatz emphasized the need for understanding and working through balancing the complexities of the delivery of health care with regards to convenience and patient privacy and safety. He challenged the group to understand these different aspects of health care and encouraged them to share understanding of these different views, prioritize the issues, and come up with clear next steps at the end of the day.

State policy makers and leaders, including Senator Rosalyn Baker, Senator Josh Green, Representative Della Au Belatti, and Dr. Virginia Pressler, Director, State of Hawaii Department of Health, attended the workshop together with a diverse audience of health care providers, organizations, payers, and advocates. Senator Baker expressed her appreciation for Senator Schatz's commitment and support for telehealth as she discussed her own initiatives to address stakeholder concerns regarding reimbursement, malpractice, and health disparities. Senator Baker introduced the Telehealth Parity Bill that was signed into law in 2014 requiring equivalent payment for services provided through telehealth as for the same services provided in person.

Some of the discussions progressed into details of specific policies, health care reimbursement codes, services, and various payment models demonstrating the complexity Senator Schatz forewarned, and discussed where changes are needed to improve providers' motivation to deliver health services via telehealth.

Dr. Matthew Koenig, Medical Director of Telehealth/Telemedicine for The Queen's Health Systems and a telestroke provider, and Shari Tresky, a Behavioral Health Provider from the Big Island, presented on the challenges with regards to reimbursement and malpractice coverage of telehealth. Dr. Koenig presented compelling data on why there is an urgent need to modify telehealth reimbursement policies in Hawaii.

Dr. Koenig explained that stroke is the third leading cause of death in Hawaii and that there is only one FDA approved medication called tPA for treatment of stroke (tPA is a clot busting medication that must be administered within a few hours from the onset of the stroke). Every minute is critical as one loses about two million neurons per minute after a stroke. About only 6% of stroke patients were treated with TPA in Hawaii in 2015 and of that about 25% were administered through the Telestroke Network that is currently funded through a grant by the State of Hawaii Department of Health. Sustainability of this network is a problem because Medicare and Medicaid do not pay for telehealth services unless the patient is in a designated rural geographic location. The Telestroke Network providers are not paid for a large portion of these life saving services because many stroke victims are Medicare beneficiaries located in areas not considered "rural" by Medicare. Similarly, Shari Tresky, a Behavioral Mental Health Counselor on the Big Island, doesn't get paid for providing telehealth services she delivers by video teleconference to her Medicaid patients from their homes, although this means of providing services significantly increases access to care. Many at the workshop report that if these restrictions were removed they would deliver services by telehealth. Hawaii Med-QUEST Division representatives were at the workshop and were very optimistic about working towards updating Medicaid policies to address some of these issues.

Sylvia Mann, State Genetics Coordinator, State of Hawaii Department of Health, and Dr. Kelley Withy, Director, Hawaii/Pacific Basin Area Health Education Center, presented on the uses of telehealth with regards to Capacity Building and Health Disparities. Ms. Mann discussed the telegenetics training program designed to build workforce capacity and increase the number of genetics providers using telehealth as a part of their practice. Dr. Withy discussed some of the physician shortages in Hawaii. She also presented the last survey on telehealth, conducted 2 years ago, that showed only 2% of physicians surveyed claimed to use telehealth.

Christina Higa and Dr. Deborah Birkmire-Peters also gave special thanks to Dr. Aimee Grace, Health Legislative Assistant, Office of U.S. Senator Brian Schatz for working with them in the organization of the

workshop. Dr. Grace participated by video teleconference for the entire conference from Washington D.C. She briefed the audience on their work to modify Medicare telehealth reimbursement policies to lift many restrictions. This is a major Federal initiative and is very important because many state and private health care payer policies are modeled after Medicare policies. She explained that while Sen. Schatz is not on the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicare, he has been working, in a bipartisan effort, with many Senators and members of Congress to advance telehealth legislation, including being in bill discussions with Senators Wicker, Cochran, Cardin, Thune, and Warner, some of whom are on the Finance Committee.



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