



May 13, 2021

The Honorable Lorena Gonzalez
Chair, Assembly Appropriations Committee
State Capitol, Room 2114
Sacramento, California 95814

Re: **REQUEST TO MOVE HIGH PRIORITY BILL OFF SUSPENSE: AB 32 (Aguiar Curry): Telehealth**

Dear Assemblymember Gonzalez:

As you know, [Health Center Partners of Southern California](#) represents 17 member organizations, including 12 Federally Qualified Health Centers, 4 Indian Health Centers, and Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest, which operate over 160 practice sites across five counties, and serve 917,000 patients with 3.9 million patient visits annually. **I respectfully request your assistance in releasing AB 32, a high priority health care bill from the Assembly Appropriation Committee's Suspense File.**

Since the beginning of COVID-19, telehealth including audio-only visits, has transformed how care is delivered. Telehealth decreases barriers, increases access to care for Community Health Center (CHC) patients, and reduces no-show rates significantly. **More importantly, telephonic (audio only) care has become a reliable modality of care, especially for your constituents.**

I have expressed my deep concerns to the Governor regarding the Department of Health Care Services' (DHCS) post-pandemic telehealth policy recommendations ("telehealth proposal") and the corresponding trailer bill language published by the Department of Finance on February 2, 2021 **that explicitly exempts Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and Rural Health Clinics (RHCs) from the proposed audio only policy.** This creates new, and concerning, bifurcation within the Medi-Cal delivery system. **AB 32 will allow all Medi-Cal providers, including FQHCs and RHCs, to receive payment for telehealth and telephonic (audio only) care, which will address health equity for CHC patients.**

Current telehealth flexibilities, including reimbursement for telephonic care, will end upon the termination of the declared COVID-19 Public Health Emergency. Without an immediate action to allow PPS reimbursement rates for audio-only visits, there will be a devastating multi-year gap. **AB 32 would ensure telehealth and telephonic care continue to be available to all Medi-Cal patients regardless of who they are, what languages they speak, where they live or where they seek care.**

Prior to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE), CHCs could not be reimbursed for audio-only visits. This pandemic, and the state's critical policy pivot in March 2020, had an immediate impact on pandemic care and completely transformed care delivery, while producing significant improvements in patient and provider satisfaction. With nearly 82,000 San Diego households **lacking Internet** access, low-income and rural households were even more disadvantaged during the pandemic. These are CHC patients. Without access to broadband or high-speed internet, video calls required for telehealth visits are all but impossible.



Telehealth visits will never replace in-person care. Rather, telehealth is used to supplement or compliment the patient’s overall health care plan and will be used only when medically necessary. Contrary to the administration’s concern that telehealth and telephone visits would increase utilization and total cost of care, telehealth has merely substituted in-person visits when clinically appropriate and **has not resulted in higher utilization or cost of care.** In fact, the Department of Health Care Services continued to see lower numbers of outpatient visits during COVID-19 as compared to prior to COVID-19,¹ and telehealth visits at FQHCs have decreased as shelter-in-place orders are lifted². Currently, our members’ telehealth patient visits are only 36 percent of their total patient visits. This is down from a high of 60 percent during the beginning of the pandemic.

California can do better. Our patients deserve better. With the promising fiscal projections for this year, we can do just that.

I respectfully request your assistance in releasing AB 32 (Aguiar-Curry) off the Assembly Appropriation Committee Suspense File.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Henry N. Tuttle".

Henry N. Tuttle
President and Chief Executive Officer

cc: Members of Assembly Appropriations Committee
Assemblymember Aguiar Curry
Health Center Partners Board of Directors

[Health Center Partners of Southern California](#), a family of companies, includes a 17-membership organization of federally qualified health centers, Indian Health Services Organizations, both urban and sovereign, and Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest, collectively serving 917,000 patients each year, for 3.9 million patient visits each year, at 160 practice sites across San Diego, Riverside and Imperial counties, and is the seventh largest provider group in the region. [Read our latest Impact Report.](#)

¹ California Department of Health Care Services, Managed Care Advisory Group. March 11, 2021.
<https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/Pages/ManagedCareAdvisoryGroup.aspx>.

² U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration, California Health Center COVID-19 Survey Summary Report.
<https://bphc.hrsa.gov/emergency-response/coronavirus-health-center-data/ca>.