

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 4, 2020

The Honorable Thomas McCaffery
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs
Defense Health Agency
Department of Defense
7700 Arlington Blvd
Suite 5101
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Assistant Secretary McCaffery:

We write to bring your attention to concerns we have heard from patients and health care providers regarding TRICARE coverage of telehealth services. As the outbreak of the novel coronavirus or “COVID-19” continues to pose a threat to our communities and our service members, the use of telehealth services during social distancing is increasingly critical. I urge the Defense Health Agency (DHA) to allow for a broad array of health care services under TRICARE, including mental health services in particular, to be offered through telehealth for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to limit face-to-face interactions and the spread of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that health care providers increase the use of telephone, video, conference or other telemedicine services rather than in-person visits.ⁱ To that end, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has significantly expanded Medicare coverage of services now offered through telehealth, including mental health visits.ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, we have heard concerns that TRICARE has not made the same level of commitment to telehealth flexibilities for mental health services, as compared to the Medicare program and private insurers. This could force military members and their families battling mental illness to risk their own physical health and potential COVID-19 infection in order to access the mental health treatment they need.

To address these concerns, it is critical that DHA take action to allow for similar flexibility as currently exists in Medicare for services provided through telehealth to TRICARE beneficiaries, consistent with CDC recommendations. Service members undertake an incredible sacrifice to protect our country, and it is all too often that the strains of a military deployment take a toll on the mental health of themselves and their families.

It is critical that they continue to receive mental health services at all levels of care without risking exposure to COVID-19. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



JEANNE SHAHEEN
United States Senator



MARTHA McSALLY
United States Senator

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Coronavirus Disease 2019: Key Considerations for Healthcare Facilities,” February 29, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-hcf.html>

ⁱⁱ Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “Medicare & Coronavirus,” March 2020. Available at: <https://www.medicare.gov/medicare-coronavirus#500>