



Physicians Caring for Texans

**House Insurance Committee**  
**House Bill 980 by Rep. Art Fierro**  
**Oral Testimony by Thomas J. Kim, MD, MPH**  
*April 13, 2021*

Chair Oliverson and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of myself and the Texas Medical Association in support of House Bill 980. My name is Dr. Thomas Kim and I am an internist and psychiatrist here in Austin.

For the last 18 years, I have had the fortune of working in the field of telehealth in a variety of ways including my current role as Chief Behavioral Health Officer for Prism Health North Texas. The diversity and duration of my professional experience affords me a unique perspective with regard to telehealth's history and what the future may hold.

HB 980 represents the next logical step in crafting meaningful legislative guidance around technology enabled care for all Texans. In my view, Texas is a great example of measured guidance on how to benefit from the potential opportunities and solutions of telehealth. We have a history of incredible innovation and decades of promising work largely from academic centers reconsidering how we might resolve ongoing access to care challenges. As the field and technology matured, new questions emerged around how community-based physicians might also improve care delivery with telehealth. This highlighted a growing recognition that while telehealth was more accessible it was also still understood as something distinct from conventional healthcare. And because this misunderstanding risked duplicative rules, conflicting expectations, and other complications, the 2017 legislative session resulted in the agreement that telehealth care is health care.

The 2019 session pushed the boulder further up the hill with what I refer to as "service parity". Far from requiring that payers cover specific telehealth services, it instead clarified that should a payer agree to a covered service with a contracted provider...it should not matter how that service was delivered so long as conventional regulatory expectations were met. Telehealth is now understood as a means to a service.

Then 2020 happened. It sounds odd to frame it like this and full credit goes to a patient of mine who coined the phrase when considering his progress over the last year...but the gift of this pandemic concentrated years of progress into months as everyone struggled to simply survive. In healthcare, there were relaxations to existing rules in order to ensure that care could be delivered safely, effectively, and in a timely fashion. There continues to emerge a growing body of data that the promise of telehealth care was spot on in multiple ways as more and more patients and physicians engaged in telehealth encounters.

HB 980 seeks to build on this momentum and calls for "payment parity". For any covered service by a contracted provider, such a service should be reimbursed at the same rate regardless

of means. The importance of payment parity is to ensure that we have a sustainable engine to support continued innovation and improved health care delivery through telehealth.

That said, there is a single nuanced point I wish to make. The incredible progress over this last year has led to telehealth further evolving into more than just one thing. For years I have advocated for telehealth broadly but emphasized that what I do is different than what a growing number of exclusively telehealth service providers do. In the simplest terms, my vision of telehealth is offering up the right doctor (YOUR doctor) with the right information at the right time. Pure telehealth service providers typically offer A doctor with some information at the right time. Both forms of telehealth obviously improve on no doctor with no information at no time but highlights how we can fully realize the promise of telehealth. HB 980 recognizes the much larger beneficial impact that YOUR doctor has in improving the health and wellness of all Texans through telehealth. True payment parity empowers YOUR doctor to utilize whatever means he or she believes will lead to a better outcome. And all things being equal, it has been my experience that patients would prefer to see their doctor rather than a doctor most every time.

I could go on to advocate for both payment parity and telehealth in general, but I will close my remarks with thanks to you and this legislative body for helping to create an environment over the years that has allowed me to realize my goal of caring for patients the best that I can in such a wonderfully rewarding way.

Thanks also for your time and attention and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.