



MEMO

DATE: November 8, 2023
TO: Assembly Committee on Health, Aging and Long-Term Care
FROM: Chris Reader, Executive Vice President
RE: Support of AB 541 to Increase Access to Mental Health Services

Chairman Moses, committee members, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak in support of Assembly Bill (AB) 541 today. Wisconsin is facing a mental health crisis, something that has been acknowledged by the legislature and by the Governor when he announced 2023 as the “Year of Mental Health.” Data from the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) shows that nationally, almost 23% of adults are living with mental health issues, and that increases to 49.5% for children between the ages of 13-18. At the same time, a [2019 Department of Health Services report](#) estimates that 47% of adults with mental illness are unserved and [demand is outpacing supply](#) since the start of the pandemic.

AB 541 will increase the access and availability of mental health services for Wisconsinites at a time when they need it most. This legislation enables out-of-state providers to practice in Wisconsin via telehealth, without first needing to be licensed in Wisconsin. These providers would still be required to be licensed in the state from which they practice, have their license in good standing, and provide the patient with contact information for their credentialing authority in the case of needing to file a complaint. Simply put, this allows qualified providers, who are currently serving clients in their home state, to serve Wisconsinites as well.

This crisis is exacerbated by the fact there is a shortage of mental health providers in Wisconsin. In fact, recent data shows that [we rank 32nd](#) in the number of mental health providers practicing in Wisconsin. We have a shortage and the lack of providers only becomes more stark when we look at more rural areas of the state. Statewide, there is [one provider for every 470 residents](#). However, in northern and western counties that ratio can climb as high as 13,030:1, like it is in Buffalo County. With this legislation, we can open up a greater supply of providers to the people that need it.

Furthermore, every year students come from around the country to attend one of Wisconsin’s UW institutions. For many of the youth today, they are likely seeking help with depression or anxiety, and may have a relationship with a mental health provider in their home state. Under current law, these college students would need to go back to their home state to see their provider or find a new provider in Madison. AB 541 would remove regulatory burdens, allowing them to use telehealth technology to meet with their provider virtually.

The need to remove the burdens that unnecessarily restrict access to care has been recognized nationally. Currently, [26 states](#) have some sort of exception for out-of-state telehealth providers. These

exceptions cover a number of medical and mental health provider groups, but often have a complex set of requirements. Wisconsin can do better, we know that providers from other states are not drastically different to the point that we need to impose duplicative licensure requirements or put up new bureaucratic barriers between providers and Wisconsinites that need help now.

There is no silver bullet for solving the mental health crisis in Wisconsin, but AB 541 will increase access to mental health services for Wisconsinites, and that warrants your support. I respectfully ask that you support AB 541.