



June 25, 2020

Ms. Stephanie Azar
Commissioner
Alabama Medicaid Agency
501 Dexter Avenue, PO Box 5624
Montgomery, AL 36103

Electronically sent to: stephanie.azar@medicaid.alabama.gov

Cc: kay.ivey@governor.alabama.gov

Dear Commissioner Azar,

On behalf of the 410 people in Alabama living with cystic fibrosis (CF), we write to thank you for expanding access to telehealth services during the COVID-19 crisis and ask you to extend many of these flexibilities while COVID-19 remains a threat for people with CF. Continuing these flexibilities past the current expiration date of June 30, 2020 will help ensure those at high-risk of complications related to COVID-19—including people with cystic fibrosis—have continued access to care without putting themselves at greater risk of infection.

About cystic fibrosis and COVID-19

Cystic fibrosis is a life-threatening genetic disease that affects more than 30,000 children and adults in the United States. CF is a complex, multi-system disease that causes the body to produce thick, sticky mucus that clogs the lungs and digestive system, which can lead to life-threatening infections. Cystic fibrosis is both serious and progressive; lung damage caused by infection is irreversible and can have a lasting impact on length and quality of life. While great strides have been made in the treatment of the disease, CF continues to be a severe condition for which COVID-19 can pose serious health risks.

Access to telehealth services is especially important for those with CF and other underlying health conditions who, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), are at increased risk of developing serious illness if they become infected with the coronavirus. Recognizing the need for strict adherence to social distancing guidelines and taking into account special considerations for their patient population, CF care teams have responded rapidly to changes in care delivery and are embracing telehealth in their clinics. Today, nearly all of the 130 CF care centers in the U.S., including two centers in Alabama, are providing some form of telehealth services to their patients.

COVID-19 continues to present serious risk to Alabama residents, including those with CF. As of June 25, 2020, more than 120,000 people in the United States have died as a result of COVID-19, including 870 in Alabama.¹ Furthermore, over the last seven days, more than 4,500 cases in Alabama have been

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/>

reported to the CDC—the 12th highest in the nation. As the number of cases increases and the risks continue, the CDC has recommended Americans continue to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and protect those who are most vulnerable to infection.²

Extend telehealth flexibilities

The CF Foundation commends Alabama and the state’s Medicaid agency for recognizing the critical role of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing temporary flexibilities to increase access to remote care. In particular, we appreciate your policies that expand eligible modalities to include audio-only delivery and broaden provider eligibility for telehealth reimbursement. These changes have helped mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic by removing barriers to telehealth services and reducing unnecessary exposure to the virus for both patients and providers. As such, we ask that Alabama Medicaid extend the following telehealth flexibilities set to expire on June 30, 2020 for as long as COVID-19 remains a threat to people with CF:

Telehealth modalities

We also ask that Alabama extend reimbursement for all services delivered by audio-only devices. Permitting audio-only communication has helped ensure that patients without access to the internet, a computer, or smartphone are still able to receive care while it is not safe to be seen in-person. This flexibility is especially critical for providers that serve rural or low-income populations, as many of these patients lack internet access. For instance, a CF clinician from Tucson, Arizona said that most of her patients do not have access to the internet and many are relying on audio-only telehealth visits with their care team during the pandemic. We recognize that Alabama Medicaid temporarily expanded this offering to include reimbursement for prenatal services conducted via audio-only devices, but urge you to allow *all* telehealth visits to be conducted via audio-only devices.

Eligible provider types

Continuing to provide telehealth reimbursement for additional types of providers is critical as well. Cystic fibrosis is a complex disease that requires multidisciplinary, patient-centered care; each care team has a pulmonologist, nurse, respiratory therapist, dietician, and social worker, and often includes additional staff such as a mental health coordinator or pharmacist. In order for patients with CF to continue to receive the highest quality of care from their homes, they must be able to access their entire care team. Therefore, it is critical that each discipline remain eligible for reimbursement for telehealth services beyond the current public health emergency. We encourage Alabama to continue to allow the list of eligible telehealth providers to include at least those added during your initial response to COVID-19 back in March.

Cover remote monitoring devices and services

To experience the full benefits of Alabama’s telehealth expansions, people with CF also need access to remote monitoring devices, including home spirometers, pulse oximeters, and scales. As a complex, chronic disease, cystic fibrosis requires regular physiologic monitoring. CF clinicians monitor patient wellbeing through key health indicators, most notably lung function and weight. Studies show that home spirometry use, for example, can help detect pulmonary exacerbations in adults and may improve

² <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/s0528-coronavirus-death-toll.html>

medication adherence in adolescents.^{3,4} Additionally, people with cystic fibrosis can experience complications that lead to malnutrition and other digestive issues that hinder their ability to maintain a healthy weight. Infant and adult scales are critical for people with CF to monitor their weight and body mass index (BMI) in consultation with their care team. Coverage of these devices, in addition to provider time spent on remote patient monitoring, is vital for CF patients to maintain their health while remaining at home.

We urge you to extend the flexibilities detailed in this letter beyond June 30, 2020 and to provide coverage of remote monitoring devices and related services. The coronavirus is still very much a threat for people with cystic fibrosis and ongoing access to telehealth care is imperative for avoiding unnecessary exposure to the virus.

We stand ready to serve as a resource to Alabama as you consider coverage and reimbursement changes during and beyond the current public health emergency. Please contact Adam Kellermann at akellermann@cff.org or 240-200-3713 if you would like to discuss this issue further.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely



Mary B. Dwight
Chief Policy & Advocacy Officer
Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy

Cc: Kay Ivey, Governor, State of Alabama

³ Shakkottai A, Kaciroti N, Kasmikha L, Nasr SZ. Impact of home spirometry on medication adherence among adolescents with cystic fibrosis. *Pediatric Pulmonology*. 2018;53:431–436. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppul.23950>

⁴ Lechtzin, Noah et al. "Home Monitoring of Patients with Cystic Fibrosis to Identify and Treat Acute Pulmonary Exacerbations. eICE Study Results." *American journal of respiratory and critical care medicine* vol. 196,9 (2017): 1144-1151. doi:10.1164/rccm.201610-2172OC