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November 6, 2017

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The Honorable Glenn Thompson  
U.S. House of Representatives  
124 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Julia Brownley  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1019 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington DC 20515

Dear Representatives Thompson and Brownley:

On behalf of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the national medical society representing more than 37,000 physicians specializing in psychiatry, I am writing in support of H.R. 2123, the Veterans E-Health and Telemedicine Support (VETS) Act of 2017. This bipartisan legislation addresses many obstacles that our veterans face in accessing mental health and substance use disorder services within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system.

The VETS Act increases access to quality coordinated care for veterans, with special emphasis on those in rural and remote locations, through at-home utilization of telemedicine services. Critically, the VETS Act authorizes VA-employed physicians and other VA-employed health care professionals to provide services within the scope of their practice via telemedicine to all veterans, without regard to the location of the patient or health care professional.

Research supporting the effectiveness of telemedicine has grown over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Collectively, this research indicates that specialized services, such as psychiatry, provided via televideo means is as effective as the same services provided in-person. The elements comprising the standard of care of psychiatry (such as integrated care, patient-doctor engagement, and biopsychosocial treatment considerations) are equally present in telepsychiatry. Further, the overwhelming weight of evidence demonstrates that the availability of telemedicine to connect patients to psychiatrists can result in improved patient outcomes, including shorter hospitalizations and improved medication adherence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hilty DM, Yellowlees PM, Parish MB, et al. Telepsychiatry: Effective, evidence-based and at a tipping point in healthcare delivery. *Psych Clin N Amer* 2015;38(3):559-592.

<sup>2</sup> Hubley, S., Lynch, S.B., Schneck, C., Thomas, M., & Shore, J. (2016). Review of key telepsychiatry outcomes. *World Journal of Psychiatry*, 6(2), 269-282.

With a quarter of all veterans residing in rural communities, the general obstacles to health care faced by residents in rural areas are especially relevant to veterans. Veterans requiring specialized or preventive care who reside in rural areas are 33% less likely to visit VA-designated specialty clinics than veterans from urban areas.<sup>3</sup> This legislation will provide accessible care for the 5.2 million veterans living in rural areas by eliminating the requirement that a veteran must report to a VA facility to receive telepsychiatry services.

The APA is committed to improving access and quality for our veterans with mental health and substance use issues. We strongly support your legislation as it advances patient access to mental health and substance use services and allows all veterans to obtain care with a psychiatric physician through new innovations in the VA system. We applaud the work Congress has made to ensure the nation's most vulnerable receive quality health care and expanded access to the availability of telemedicine. We are pleased that these issues have received greater attention through your efforts, and we urge Congress to act on your important legislation on a bipartisan basis as soon as possible. We stand ready to partner with you in this effort. If you have any questions, please contact Ashley Mild, APA's Interim Chief of Government Relations, at [amild@psych.org](mailto:amild@psych.org).

Sincerely,



Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A.  
CEO and Medical Director

Cc: Representative Phil Roe, Chairman of House Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Representative Tim Walz, Ranking Member of House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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<sup>3</sup> Brooks E, Novins DK, Thomas D, Jiang L, Nagamoto HT, Dailey N, Bair B, Shore JH. Personal Characteristics Affecting Veterans' Use of Services for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Psychiatr Serv.* 2012 Jun 15. doi: 10.1176/appi.ps.201100444. [Epub ahead of print] PubMed PMID: 22707088.