

## **America's Leading Health Plans Unite in Responding to Increased Demand for Mental Health Services Related to COVID-19 and Health Equity**

Washington, DC (June 2, 2021) - While rising vaccination rates across the country have fostered optimism that we are inching closer to winning the fight against COVID-19, the pandemic's effect on our nation's collective mental health and well-being may shape demand for behavioral health services for years to come.

As leaders of behavioral health and wellness companies, we are committed to ensuring equitable access to behavioral health and wellness care that is inclusive and authentic to every individual's race, sexual orientation and gender identity, geography, and socio-economic status.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 40 percent of adults in the U.S. experienced symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorders at some point between August 2020 and the end of January 2021.<sup>i</sup> The pandemic also has caused a rise in substance use with one report citing a 13 percent increase, as well as an 11 percent rise in suicidal ideation.<sup>ii</sup> Added to this is the interpersonal grief that nearly 560,000 American families are feeling from the loss of a loved one due to COVID-19.

Amidst this challenging environment, a bright spot has emerged as millions of consumers and clinicians have embraced the safety and convenience of virtual care – telehealth. Telebehavioral health is a mode of healthcare delivery that can help create treatment options for those with access to technology who have limited or no access to in-person behavioral health services.

What we are witnessing through telehealth has been nothing short of inspiring. Over the past 12 months we have seen a twenty-three-fold increase in telemedicine visits across the country compared to pre-pandemic.<sup>iii</sup> While the number of virtual care visits for physical health issues remains closer to pre-pandemic levels, telebehavioral health visits for mental health have soared above 50 percent for many providers.

Significant trends are developing that can better support those who need mental health and substance use services. Most notably, the ability to deliver both traditional counseling services for conditions like anxiety and depression, but also virtual treatment options to treat conditions like eating disorders and substance use disorders. While telehealth is not a panacea for all of behavioral healthcare, it is a much-welcomed option of care.

For too long, talking about mental health and the need for care has been considered taboo or a sign of weakness - this stigma has prevented many individuals from seeking the help they need. The increase in public dialogue around mental health and substance use disorders over the past 14

months has been a positive outcome from the challenges related to COVID-19. People are realizing that they are not alone in their feelings of despair. This has led to a willingness on the part of individuals to acknowledge they are experiencing problems, take the needed steps to get care, and reduce the stigma.

As leaders in the behavioral health and wellness industry, we have been laser focused on increasing access to care prior to, but especially during the pandemic. We have seen a significant increase in individuals reporting anxiety, grief, and a range of other mental health conditions. We are dedicated to finding innovative ways to expand our behavioral health system including telehealth, peer services, enhanced provider training, and free hotlines for crisis services.

The message from America's leading health benefits companies is clear. For a nation confronting a wide range of mental health needs, help is available, you are not alone, and we are stronger together. As we continue to navigate the effects of the pandemic on our mental health, we encourage you to talk to your healthcare provider, a trusted friend/family/colleague, or support group. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 or text HOME to 741741.

Signed:

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[ABHW](#) is the leading health plan association working to improve access and quality of care for mental health and substance use disorders. ABHW's members include national and regional health plans who care for more than 200 million people. Together we work to reduce stigma and advance federal policy on mental health and addiction care. Member companies - Aetna Behavioral Health, AmeriHealth Caritas, Anthem/Beacon, Centene Corporation, Cigna, Kaiser Permanente, Magellan Health, New Directions Behavioral Health, and Optum.

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<sup>i</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mental Health, Symptoms of Anxiety or Depressive Disorder and Use of Mental Health Care Among Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, August 2020 – February 2021, [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7013e2.htm?s\\_cid=mm7013e2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7013e2.htm?s_cid=mm7013e2_w), published 3/26/2021, accessed 3/31/21

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ii Panchal, Nirmita et al, KFF, [The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use](#),  
Published 2/10/21

iii Rosenfeld, Samara, Managed Health Care Executive, [Exploring Telehealth Trends During Covid-19](#),  
2/4/2021