STAR Act to Expand Rural Telehealth Capacity

We have an exciting legislative update to share from Washington, D.C. Bipartisan legislation, written with OCHIN input, was introduced to help more vulnerable patients conveniently access high-quality specialty care through telehealth investments in their hometowns. We are proud to support the Specialty Treatment Access and Referrals (STAR) Act, H.R. 5190, which would establish a grant program to fund telehealth expansion in underserved communities across the country.

Currently, patients in rural and remote areas face significant financial burdens to accessing specialty care. They often have to book specialty care months in advance, drive long distances, miss a full day of work or school, or pay for extra child care, just to get to a specialist. Some patients forego seeing specialists altogether. Telehealth allows these patients to get specialty care in their communities in a fraction of the time through services like eConsults with specialists, but many health care providers cannot yet support this technology.

The STAR Act helps solve that problem by creating a grant program to fund telehealth investments in geographically isolated parts of the nation. Health care providers will be able to use this grant funding to purchase the infrastructure, technology, and training they need in order to provide patients with virtual specialty care.

Earlier this year, the Congressional Telehealth Caucus, together with a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators, published a request for information (RFI) asking for guidance in crafting “comprehensive telehealth legislation for the 116th Congress.” OCHIN answered this request by providing detailed comments on possible legislative actions that could encourage eConsults as a way to deliver high-quality specialty care to more patients. U.S. Representative Josh Harder (CA-10) then used those recommendations to build out the STAR Act, seeking to further advance the adoption of eConsult and save patients time and money.

The bipartisan STAR Act is led by Democratic Representative Josh Harder (CA-10) and Republican Representatives Don Young (AK-At Large) and Jeff Fortenberry (NE-01) and was introduced with support from Representatives Xochitl Torres Small (NM-02) and Greg Steube (FL-17) as additional cosponsors.

With strong legislation like the STAR Act, we can fix today’s problems with investments in tomorrow’s technology. Investing in telehealth infrastructure, technology, and training now will help address current provider shortages, reduce the number of patients wasting time and money commuting to specialists, and increase the number of patients accessing specialty care, while also laying the foundation for the telemedicine of the future.

Please reach out to us with any questions on the STAR Act, and be on the lookout for updates about grant opportunities coming soon!