



# UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

## Legislative Testimony

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Testimony Presented Before the  
House Committee on Health & Human Services  
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By

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### SB 2891 SD1 – RELATING TO TELEHEALTH

Chair Mizuno, Vice Chair Kobayashi and members of the committee:

SB 2891 SD1 appropriates funds to the Department of Health (DOH) to conduct a pilot project on telehealth to expand accessibility to health care in our rural communities and the neighbor islands. The University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) strongly supports SB 2891 SD1.

The proposed telehealth pilot is welcome and sorely needed in rural and remote communities, as well as in communities with little access to medical, mental health and oral health services. According to the 2016 Hawai'i Primary Care Needs Assessment Data Book, most rural communities in Oahu, as well as on the neighbor islands, have higher percentages of populations receiving public assistance (health care covered by Quest or Medicaid FFS) compared to the State average. Per capita household income is lower which may contribute to the numerous transportation barriers seen in rural communities. Rural communities and underserved communities throughout Hawai'i have higher rates of obesity, heavy drinking, diabetes and blood pressure compared to more affluent or urban communities. Death from heart disease, cancer and stroke also tend to be higher in all neighbor islands, as well as rural O'ahu communities. Hospital admissions for substance-related disorders and mood disorders are also higher than Honolulu-county or statewide rates.

Many of the highest-risk patients reside in Medically Underserved Areas (MUA), are part of Medically Underserved Populations (MUP), or reside in federally-designated health professional shortage areas. Telehealth would benefit many in these communities. Elderly, as well as medically- and socially-complex patients often face transportation barriers and difficulty navigating our collective system of health care. These determinants of health, as well as social- or cultural-isolation can often impede seeking care or follow-up after a doctor's appointment or hospitalization. Being able to provide telehealth services at community health centers or in the home has tremendous

potential for improving the health of patients, their families, as well as providing cost-savings to the entire health system by avoiding emergency department or hospitalization costs.

Telehealth has the potential to improve follow-up post-hospitalization (and prevent additional emergency department or hospital visits), provide closer monitoring of patients who would benefit from multi-disciplinary, team-based care, especially if periodically coupled with home visits by trained nurses, community health workers or physicians. In the Veteran's Administration population, telehealth to rural areas has shown a 58% reduction in hospital bed-days care and a 32% reduction in hospital admissions (Slabodkin, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. A successful series of telehealth pilots – on the neighbor islands and in a rural/underserved community on O'ahu – while simultaneously building a telehealth provider network across the State, would likely realize similar financial gains and long-term improvement in some health outcomes.

Hawai'i's Medicaid and Quest plans pay for telehealth visits as a covered benefit under Act 226 (SLH, 2016) - including reimbursement for behavioral health, primary care, specialty care that is provided by physicians, advanced practice registered nurses, psychologists, mental health providers, dentists and other oral health providers. In Hawai'i, telepsychiatry helps to address the mental health needs of children on most neighbor islands, as well as students in home- and school-based settings on the islands of Maui, Moloka'i and Lāna'i and O'ahu. Conditions treated in the schools, home and in the Department of Health's mental health clinics include developmental disabilities and severe mental illness.

Several clinical departments at JABSOM provide telehealth services to remote areas of Hawai'i and the US Pacific. We already have partnered with the Hawai'i State Department of Health in the development of the Hawai'i State Telehealth Plan. JABSOM, as part of the fabric of Hawai'i, looks forward to working with many partners in support of *Maika'i Loa*: Attain Lasting Optimal Health for All (ALOHA).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this bill.

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<sup>1</sup> Slabodkin, G. (2016). VA expanding telehealth to meet growing needs of veterans. Health Data Management. Retrieved from <https://www.healthdatamanagement.com/news/va-expanding-telehealth-to-meet-growing-needs-of-veterans>.