



RACHAEL A. CABRAL-GUEVARA

STATE SENATOR • 19TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families

Senator Rachael Cabral-Guevara

November 28, 2023

Hello, members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families. Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony on Senate Bill 515, an important bill that will expand access to telehealth services in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin faces a mental health crisis. We are also experiencing a health care provider shortage, causing many folks to go without access to mental health services. In 2019, it was reported that [52 of Wisconsin's 72](#) counties qualified as health professional shortage areas, all before the pandemic. As a component of Emergency Order #16 during the pandemic, out-of-state providers were able to provide mental health telehealth services. Although Emergency Order #16 has ended, Wisconsin deserves better access to telehealth treatment beyond public health emergencies.

From a provider's standpoint, telehealth services have been an important tool to boost patient follow-up. This bill would allow struggling Wisconsinites continued access to quicker and more efficient telehealth services. As they had during the pandemic, these out-of-state providers would be able to provide telehealth services to Wisconsinites, so long as the provider:

- Is able to practice within the state they physically reside.
- Only provides services within their scope of practice.
- Informs the patient which state(s) they are licensed to practice in and what regulatory board has oversight of their practice.

There are two amendments I am hopeful you will support, both of which passed the Assembly: one to narrow the scope of professionals to mental health providers and the other to simply require registration with the Department of Safety and Professional Services. As amended, I am hopeful you will support this important piece of legislation.

Senator James and members of the committee,

Thank you for having me today to testify in favor of SB515, which would expand access to therapists in Wisconsin by allowing professionals who are deemed qualified to treat patients by other states to also treat patients in Wisconsin via telehealth.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness,¹ 75% of the people who will be diagnosed with a mental illness in their life begin to show signs by age 24. Last year, I became one of those people.

My name is Benjamin Garbedian. I'm a 22 year old college student from Waukesha, and last fall, I began having panic attacks. I've always kept a fairly busy schedule, and between school, work, social life, family life, and any other things that arise in a given day, stress caught up to me.

In an effort to try and stop my panic attacks, I began seeking out a therapist, and discovered how much of a shortage of mental health professionals there really is in Wisconsin. The vast majority of places and people I reached out to were booking out months on average, weeks if I was lucky. While I was able to eventually find help, many others in this state have not been as fortunate.

SB515 is simple. It would require the Department of Safety and Professional Services to recognize licenses for therapists that have been issued by other states to be valid to treat Wisconsinites. In the era of Zoom and other forms of telehealth, this is just common sense. There is no clinical difference between treating Illinoisians and treating Wisconsinites - there shouldn't be a legal difference either.

This reform is not only simple, it's actually been done here before. During the COVID pandemic, when we were facing a shortage of all healthcare professionals, the governor signed Executive Order 16, which allowed therapists from other states to be temporarily recognized as qualified here. That means that for the months that the emergency order was in place, there were therapists from states as close as Minnesota and as far away as Alaska who were able to treat patients via Zoom, who then were suddenly banned from seeing them again when the COVID orders ended. The National Institutes of Health reports that while the rates of Americans seeing primary care physicians via telehealth has fallen since COVID, rates of people seeking telehealth therapy have stayed high,² indicating a demand for reforms like this one. Let's cut red tape and help give people like me the care we need. I urge you to vote in favor of SB515.

¹<https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9412131/>



MEMO

DATE: November 28, 2023
TO: Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families
FROM: Alex Ignatowski, Director of State Budget and Government Reform
RE: Support of SB 515 to Increase Access to Mental Health Services

Chairman James, committee members, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak in support of Senate Bill (SB) 515 today. Wisconsin is facing a mental health crisis, something that has been acknowledged by both the Legislature and by the Governor when he announced 2023 as the “Year of Mental Health.” Data from the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) shows that nationally, almost 23% of adults are living with mental health issues, and that increases to 49.5% for children between the ages of 13-18. At the same time, a [2019 Department of Health Services report](#) estimates that 47% of adults with mental illness are unserved and it is clear that [demand is outpacing supply](#) since the start of the pandemic.

SB 515 will increase the access and availability of mental health services for Wisconsinites at a time when they need it most. This legislation enables licensed out-of-state providers to practice in Wisconsin via telehealth, without first needing to be licensed in Wisconsin. These providers would still be required to be licensed in the state from which they practice, have their license in good standing, and provide the patient with contact information for their credentialing authority. An amendment to this bill also requires providers to notify the state within 30 days of them practicing in Wisconsin. Simply put, this allows qualified providers, who are currently serving clients in their home state, to serve Wisconsinites as well.

This crisis has been exacerbated by the shortage of mental health providers in Wisconsin. In fact, recent data shows that [we rank 32nd](#) in the number of mental health providers practicing in Wisconsin. The shortage only becomes more stark when we look at more rural areas of the state. Statewide, there is [one provider for every 470 residents](#). However, in northern and western counties that ratio can climb as high as 13,030:1, like it is in Buffalo County. With this legislation, we can open up a greater supply of providers to the people that need it.

Furthermore, every year students come from around the country to attend one of Wisconsin’s UW institutions. Many college students are seeking help with depression or anxiety, and may have a relationship with a mental health provider in their home state. Under current law, these college students would need to go back to their home state to see their provider or find a new provider in Wisconsin. SB 515 would remove regulatory burdens, allowing them to use telehealth technology to meet with their provider virtually.

Other states are starting to see that we need to remove these unnecessary burdens, too. Currently, [26 states](#) have some sort of exception for out-of-state telehealth providers. These exceptions cover a number of medical and mental health provider groups, but often have a complex set of requirements. Wisconsin can do better, we know that providers from other states are not drastically different to the point that we need to impose duplicative licensure requirements or put up new bureaucratic barriers between providers and Wisconsinites that need help now.

There is no silver bullet for solving the mental health crisis in Wisconsin, but SB 515 will increase access to mental health services for Wisconsinites, and that warrants your support. I respectfully ask that you support SB 515.