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**Senate Passes Patients First Act**

*Bill expands access to telehealth, protects patients from surprise billing, and enhances quality care*

BOSTON (6/26/2020) –The Massachusetts Senate unanimously passed the Patients First Act, the third piece of signature healthcare legislation advanced by the body to increase access to health care, protect patients, and enhance quality care. The legislation builds on vital lessons learned during the COVID-19 public health crisis, as unprecedented demands on the healthcare system have prompted innovation and the expedited adoption of policy changes.

“During this pandemic we have seen the use and popularity of telehealth services expand rapidly, and for good reason,” commented **Senator Anne Gobi (D-Spencer)** on the bill’s passage. “Our actions here reflect the changing needs of our communities, and I am glad that we have prioritized the need to ensure these services remain affordable and accessible while keeping patients protected from out-of-network costs.”

The Patients First Act ensures that telehealth services are available across the Commonwealth – services that have experienced a dramatic expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling patients across the state to continue receiving vital medical care through phone or videoconference without risking exposure to the coronavirus. Experience from the last few months has shown that telehealth has the ability to improve efficiency and expand access to care. These services, however, were not widely utilized before COVID-19.

The bill does the following to put patients first:

- **Requires insurance carriers, including MassHealth, to cover telehealth services** in any case where the same in-person service would be covered. It also ensures that telehealth services include care through audio-only telephone calls, and requires reimbursement rates to match in-person services over the next two years.
- **Eliminates “surprise billing,”** the unfair practice of charging patients who are unaware they received health care services outside of their insurance network for costs that insurance carriers refuse to pay. The situation is common especially prior to a planned procedure, and it can be impossible to avoid uncovered services, particularly in emergency situations.

- **Expands the scope of practice for several health care professionals**, increasing patient access to critical care. The bill would allow registered nurse practitioners, nurse anesthetists and psychiatric nurse mental health specialists to practice independently as long as they meet certain education and training standards.
- **Recognizes pharmacists as health care providers**, enabling them to integrate more fully into coordinated care teams.
- **Creates a new professional license for “dental therapists,”** who will be authorized to provide dental hygiene and other oral health services, which will help expand access to dental care in underserved communities.
- **Tasks state health care oversight agencies to analyze and report on the effects COVID-19 has had on the Commonwealth’s health care delivery system** as it relates to accessibility, quality and fiscal sustainability. The analysis will include an inventory of all health care services and resources serving Massachusetts residents from birth to death, as well as an analysis of existing health care disparities due to economic, geographic, racial or other factors.

The passage of the Patients First Act marks the third major piece of healthcare legislation passed in the Senate this session, in addition to the Pharmaceutical Access, Costs and Transparency (PACT) Act and the Mental Health Addressing Barriers to Care (ABC) Act.

The Patients First Act now moves to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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