Representative Ann-Margaret Ferrante, Vice-Chair
House Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 42
Boston, MA 02133

Senator Cindy Friedman, Vice-Chair
Senate Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 208
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Daniel Hunt, Chair
House Committee on Federal Stimulus & Census Oversight
State House, Room 166
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Aaron Michlewitz, Chair
House Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

Senator Michael Rodrigues, Chair
Senate Committee on Ways & Means
State House, Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

The *t*MED Coalition and its members wish to recognize and express gratitude for the adoption of the state's telehealth law, Ch. 260 of the Acts of 2020. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth has been critical in maintaining and expanding access to care for patients across the commonwealth. Initial statewide data indicates that the utilization of telehealth for certain patient populations increased by 5,100% in March 2020 when compared to March 2019.[1] Providers anticipate that telehealth will continue to be a significant modality within our state's healthcare landscape.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also made us acutely aware of the digital divide in our state. Many patients who would otherwise take advantage of telehealth services have been precluded because they lack access to broadband, devices, and/or digital fluency. **As such, the *t*MED Coalition respectfully requests the legislature devote $1,000,000 of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to establish a statewide Digital Bridge Pilot Program and a Digital Health Navigator Tech Literacy Program.** These initiatives are part of a larger digital equity bill filed by the coalition this session—*An Act relative to telehealth and digital equity for patients* (H.1101/S.678). These programs, which would be administered by the Health Policy Commission (HPC), would help mitigate many barriers in accessing telehealth services for diverse patient populations across the commonwealth.

The Digital Bridge Pilot would provide funding for healthcare and human service providers and their patients and clients to support the purchase of telecommunications, information services and connected devices necessary to provide telehealth services. We respectfully ask $500,000 to establish this program.

The Digital Health Navigator Tech Literacy Program is intended to work in conjunction with the Digital Bridge Pilot to provide culturally and linguistically competent hands-on support to educate

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[1] https://heller.brandeis.edu/mass-health-policy-forum/categories/public-health/pdfs/telehealth-in-a-post-pandemic-world/telehealth-in-a-post-pandemic-world-issue-brief-12-3-2020.pdf

patients on how to access broadband and wireless services and subsequently utilize devices and online platforms to receive telehealth care. We respectfully ask $500,000 to establish this program.

Both initiatives are designed to shrink our digital divide. They would prioritize participation in communities that are more likely to suffer barriers in accessing telehealth care and for those who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. These include low-income families, the elderly, patients of color[2], and those who live in rural regions of our state. Additionally, we would ask the HPC to report on the impact of both programs on expanding access to telehealth care.

Addressing the divide is urgent—estimates indicate that more than 1 million residents in Massachusetts (15% of our population) do not have access to fixed broadband. Moreover, appetite for expansion exists.[3] According to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) data, to date, 68,545 households in Massachusetts have enrolled in an emergency federal benefit program which offers discounted broadband service and associated equipment rentals. Such emergency benefits at the federal level, however, will not be sufficient in fully addressing the scope of the digital divide across the commonwealth.

Telehealth has proven to be a critical tool to maintain and expand access to care. In an effort to ensure that all of our patients can take advantage of this resource—especially as the future regarding the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncertain—we must invest in these key strategies to bridge the digital divide. Without further investments, members of our most vulnerable communities—for no fault of their own—will continue to struggle to access safe, timely healthcare.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this matter. We appreciate the legislature's thoughtful deliberation regarding the use of ARPA funding and for your consideration of these funds as an important intervention for health equity.

If you have any questions, please contact Adam Delmolino, MHA's Director of Virtual Care & Clinical Affairs, at adelmolino@mhalink.org, or Allie Cataldo, MHA's Manager of State Government Affairs, at acataldo@mhalink.org.

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[2] A May 2020 Kaiser Family Foundation issue brief noted that, nationally, just 42% of African-American Medicare beneficiaries own a computer (compared to 71% of those who are white).
[3] https://data.aclum.org/covid19-internet-map/