

March 31, 2008

The Honorable Kent Conrad
SH-530 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
SH-133 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Conrad and Sen. Stabenow:

On behalf of the National Council on Community Behavioral Healthcare – representing 1,400 Community Mental Health Centers and other community mental health and substance abuse agencies serving over 6 million low-income Americans with mental illnesses and addiction disorders -- I am writing to express our strong support for the Conrad/Stabenow Medicare Telehealth Improvement Act.

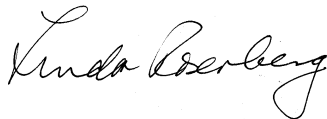
The National Council is particularly pleased that you included provisions designating CMHCs as originating sites, thereby authorizing to seek reimbursement directly from Medicare for tele-mental health services in rural areas.

Such proposals have long enjoyed strong bipartisan support. As an illustration, President George W. Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health stated: "Telehealth – using electronic information and telecommunications technologies to provide long-distance clinical care and consultation, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration – is a greatly underused resource for mental health services." The Commission went on to note that tele-mental health can increase access to care for patients in remote geographic areas, and is especially important for individuals with multiple chronic conditions, people with severe mental illnesses, underserved populations, children and the frail elderly [*Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America*, pg. 80, July 2003].

Like other safety net providers in rural America, CMHCs struggle to recruit skilled medical staff in health professional shortage areas. The only practical means of expanding access to mental health services in these regions is through the application of new technologies – including tele-mental health care.

The National Council is committed to working with both of your offices to secure passage of the Medicare Telehealth Improvement Act

Sincerely,



Linda Rosenberg, MSW
President & CEO

