



## AMERICAN ACADEMY of DERMATOLOGY | ASSOCIATION

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November 6, 2019

The Honorable Danny Davis  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2159 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Terri Sewell  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2201 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brad Wenstrup  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2419 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jodey Arrington  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1029 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Rural and Underserved Communities Health Task Force Co-Chairs:

On behalf of the 13,800 U.S.-based members of the American Academy of Dermatology Association (Academy), I am writing in response to the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee's formation of the bipartisan "Rural and Underserved Communities Health Task Force." The Academy is committed to excellence in the medical and surgical treatment of skin disease; advocating high standards in clinical practice, education, and research in dermatology and dermatopathology; and supporting and enhancing patient care to reduce the burden of disease. We applaud the Committee members' work to advance bipartisan solutions to improve access to care and quality of health care outcomes in these communities and stand ready to serve as resource for you and your staff.

Telemedicine continues to be one of the innovative vehicles that can help improve access to care for patients throughout the health care system. The Academy is a leader in telemedicine and has first-hand knowledge of the benefits that telemedicine can offer patients in gaining access to specialty care. Many patients face difficulties when attempting to access specialty providers throughout our healthcare system. Access issues are not limited to one patient group – they cross socioeconomic, racial, geographic, and age boundaries. Patients living in rural and underserved areas, as well as those in crowded urban centers, may face significant health challenges including, but not limited to, physician shortages and higher rates of chronic conditions; to address these challenges, the Academy supports innovative telehealth policies and programs that will help increase access to this population.

### **AccessDerm**

For nearly a decade, the Academy has had a specific mission to improve the dermatologic care available to underserved populations in the United States by facilitating access to board-certified dermatologists in their respective states via an Academy sponsored telemedicine platform, AccessDerm. The AccessDerm program gives primary care providers, who work in participating free and rural clinics, and Indian Health Service clinics on Native American reservations access to dermatologists' expertise.

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In an effort to continue to improve upon the available technology, the Academy relaunched its AccessDerm program in early 2018. The Academy's AccessDerm program provides physicians treating underserved communities access to the dermatologic expertise of Academy member dermatologists and residents in training at no charge. The program facilitates safe and secure provider-to-provider consults with an easy to use teledermatology platform and application. The Academy and its AccessDerm program support the appropriate use of teledermatology as a means of improving access to the expertise of board-certified dermatologists to provide high-quality, high-value care. In addition to expanding access to dermatologic care, the program helps reduce wait times and unnecessary referrals for in-person visits and triages patients who need to see a dermatologist for an in-person visit right away.

AccessDerm currently has 45 dermatologist volunteers and 354 primary care physicians across 9 states with 6 additional states pending. Since the program relaunched in 2018, there have been more than 400 consults with 24 melanomas detected. As the program expands, the Academy is working collaboratively with national organizations such as the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) to pilot and expand the AccessDerm program. The Academy recognizes the important role that the Community Health Center Fund (CHCF) has played in improving access to care for patients through community health centers (CHCs) in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the country; and to that end, the Academy encourages Congress to increase funding of the CHCF in Fiscal Year 2020. AccessDerm continues to service several NACHC member locations this year with hopes of expanding the program to additional centers in 2020 and beyond. Additionally, the program will look to expand to more sites such as Equal Access to Care Mobile Units, Native American Health Services, school systems, prison systems, and detention centers. These services have the opportunity to expand and further build on the mission to increase access to specialty care for patients who might otherwise wait much longer to access the care and treatment they critically need.

Further, the Academy encourages Congress to reward specialists who volunteer for telehealth programs, like AccessDerm, by offering support for student loan repayment, either through proportional loan repayment based on number of hours volunteered or through tax deduction incentives. Recompenses such as these have the potential to increase specialists interested in telehealth volunteer programs while reducing volunteer burnout.

### **Project ECHO**

The Academy also supports Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes), an online learning collaborative model of medical education and care management. Through ECHO, primary care providers working in rural and underserved communities gain knowledge and support from specialty colleagues. Derm ECHO uses videoconferencing to link primary care providers with dermatologists to jointly manage complex skin diseases while promoting continued medical learning. Members of the Academy who participate in Project ECHO have seen its positive impact firsthand. Dermatologists diagnose and treat more than 3,000 diseases, including many chronic inflammatory, multi-system, disabling, and life-threatening conditions, and Project ECHO has helped increase primary care physicians' knowledge of dermatologic and other specialty conditions while also increasing patients' access to a larger network of specialists.

In a February 2019 report to Congress, "Current State of Technology-Enabled Collaborative Learning and Capacity Building Models," the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) concluded that though evidence of the impact on patient and provider outcomes from online learning collaboratives,

such as ECHO, remains modest, the evidence consistently shows positive effects in areas that have been measured. To further these efforts, the Academy recommends Congress increase federal grant funding available to technology-enabled learning collaboratives and continue studying the effects of such models.

## **Technology Support**

The Academy also commends Congress for investing \$600 million in rural broadband expansion as part of the Fiscal Year 2018 Omnibus Spending Package and encourages more investment in this necessary telehealth utility. Reliable and secure internet access is vital to the expansion and sustainability of telemedicine in rural communities. Dermatologists cannot provide high quality care with pictures on sub-par technology. Access to broadband is imperative not only for the sustainability and expansion of telemedicine, but it is also the underlying support system necessary for the continued development of innovative technologies in health care. Furthermore, the Academy also recommends additional funding for the Indian Health Service (IHS) to allow each IHS site to acquire new mobile devices with high definition cameras to allow for the expansion of teledermatology and other store-and-forward services within the IHS.

The use of telemedicine has the potential to increase access to dermatologists. Physicians can provide high quality, specialized services for patients using telemedicine applications. For example, these applications provide for remote monitoring, triage, and treatment of many skin-related issues including rashes, wounds, and suspicious moles. The Academy asks Congress to evaluate the use of telemedicine applications to help improve patient outcomes while also ensuring that the modalities are secure and interoperable.

The Academy regularly evaluates the efficacy of the telehealth programs dermatologists participate in and the telehealth services they provide to ensure patients' quality of care or choice of provider are not compromised. As the Task Force continues to explore challenges of delivering care in rural and underserved areas, and as it works to identify bipartisan policies to improve outcomes and access to care, the Academy encourages you to continuously evaluate telehealth programs and services to ensure our shared goal of increasing patients' access to high quality care is being achieved.

Again, the Academy appreciates the opportunity to share its perspective and experience on increasing access to care for those in rural and underserved areas. The Academy remains ready to serve as a resource and looks forward to working with you to ensure that our patients can benefit from advances in telemedicine and technology, while preserving the highest standards of patient safety and efficacy. Please feel free to contact Blake McDonald, the Academy's Manager of Congressional Policy, at [bmcDonald@aad.org](mailto:bmcDonald@aad.org) or (202) 712-2608 if you have any questions or if we can provide additional information.

Sincerely,



George J. Hruza, MD, MBA, FAAD  
President, American Academy of Dermatology Association