Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Announces Bold New Action To Expand Members' Access to Mental Health Services

Steps include a 50% increase in reimbursement rates for child psychiatrists and permanently paying for telehealth visits at in-person rates

BOSTON, July 23, 2020 /PRNewswire/ -- Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts ("Blue Cross") is announcing a set of bold new initiatives to ensure our members have timely access to high-quality, affordable mental health care. Access to mental health services is a serious issue across the country and has become even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initiatives announced today include*:

- Supporting newer, more convenient mental health care options by reimbursing telehealth sessions performed by mental health specialists at the same rate as in-person visits beyond the current COVID-19 public health emergency. This includes both video and telephonic telehealth services.
- Expanding member access to telehealth coverage for psychiatric care on our national telehealth platform
- Expanding the number of child psychiatrists available to our members by increasing reimbursement rates by 50% for child psychiatrists who participate in our new incentive program
- Offering new financial incentives for primary care physicians to integrate mental health care into their practices with the goal of improving our members' physical and mental health outcomes
- Expanding access to an innovative online program to help our members better manage anxiety and stress
- Adding 2,000 new clinicians to the Blue Cross mental health network to provide our members with more options for their care

"We know that far too many of our members – both children and adults -- are not getting the mental health care they deserve," said Andrew Dreyfus, Blue Cross' president and CEO. "Taken together, we believe these initiatives will help address a critical need at a time when access to high quality mental health services has never been more important."

Giving members easier, more convenient options for mental health services

Blue Cross recognizes the value of telehealth in increasing access to mental health care.

The company said today it will continue to pay mental health clinicians for telehealth visits at the same rate as in-person visits, even after the COVID-19 state of emergency ends. This includes visits via both video and phone, since telephonic visits may be particularly useful for members who do not have internet access or privacy. A recent report from the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation concluded that permanently making this type of payment commitment is an important step in encouraging mental health clinicians to offer telehealth to their patients. Blue Cross has processed more than 2.5 million new telehealth claims since changing its policy to both expand coverage for telephone and virtual visits and reimburse them at the same rate as in-person visits during the COVID-19 state of emergency – nearly half of those claims were for mental health visits.

"We applaud the steps that Blue Cross Blue Shield is taking to continue access for telebehavioral health through innovative payment and delivery models," said state Health and Human Services Secretary and Governor Baker's COVID-19 Command Center Director, Marylou Sudders. "These services are critically important now more than ever, and these changes will help more individuals access or maintain important mental health care in the future, beyond the COVID-19 crisis."

The company also announced today that it will now offer psychiatry visits via its telehealth platform WellConnection.

"Offering psychiatry via our telehealth platform solves a novel problem," said Dr. Ken Duckworth, Blue Cross senior medical director for behavioral health. "Most psychiatrists don't have multi-state licenses. That means if your child goes off to college in another state, chances are, his or her psychiatrist can't continue to provide services via telehealth. *WellConnection* has licensed psychiatrists in every state, to ensure our members can get the care they need, regardless of where they are."

Addressing the shortage of child psychiatrists who accept insurance

One of the most significant steps announced today is a new incentive plan that reimburses child psychiatrists at a rate 50% higher than the standard fee schedule, in exchange for agreeing to maintain availability in their practices for Blue Cross members.

"The Massachusetts Psychiatric Society supports steps like these taken by Blue Cross which are designed to broaden access to critically needed child psychiatric care by improving mental health provider reimbursement rates," said Dr. Sally Reyering, president of the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society.

"While the shortage of psychiatrists is an issue statewide, it's particularly acute in the central and western parts of the Commonwealth," said Dr. Mary Ahn, director of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Residency Training program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester "I'm hopeful this Blue Cross incentive program will encourage more of our new child psychiatrists to stay in this part of the state and to accept insurance, so that we can increase access to these desperately-needed services."

Helping members improve both their physical and mental health

Blue Cross is also announcing new incentives for primary care physicians to integrate mental health care into their practices. Practices that implement a psychiatric *collaborative care management* model, which has been proven to improve both physical and mental health outcomes, can bill Blue Cross for these services and receive reimbursement, plus additional payments for participating.

"We've seen firsthand how integrating mental health care in the primary care setting can increase access and reduce stigma," said Susan Dirks, APRN-BC, clinical psychiatric nurse specialist at Congenial Healthcare, a Peabody-based primary care practice currently using the collaborative care model. "Patients can be treated within their PCP's practice, rather than having to try and find a mental health clinician on their own, which we know can be a difficult process given the nationwide shortage."

This initiative comes on the heels of Blue Cross' recent announcement of its new value-based payment program for independent primary care practices, designed to improve quality, lower costs, and provide immediate financial support to practices that sign on to participate.

Supporting members in managing stress and anxiety

Blue Cross is also expanding access to an innovative online program that helps address mild to moderate anxiety, depression, insomnia, or substance use and improve overall emotional health. Learn to Live is a coach-supported, digital program based on the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy. Previously, the program was available to members whose employers purchased the benefit. Now, Blue Cross is making it available at no cost to all of its fully insured customers. Self-insured customers have the option to purchase *Learn to Live*.

The number of Blue Cross members using *Learn to Live* has tripled since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

"Most of us are experiencing higher levels of psychological distress during this uncertain and stressful time," said Dr. Duckworth. "But I'm encouraged that we're seeing strong clinical improvement in members who are using *Learn to Live* – an average 39% improvement for members using the program for stress, anxiety, and worry, and 30% improvement for members using it to address depression."

Blue Cross also announced today that its HMO Blue mental health provider network grew by more than 2,000 clinicians in the past 3 years, bringing the total number of clinicians in the network to nearly 15,000.

The company is already known for its innovative approach to mental health and substance use disorder, including an in-house staff of actively practicing clinicians and specially trained mental health case managers who work hand-in-hand with medical case managers to ensure all of our members' needs are met. Blue Cross has consistently removed barriers and administrative burdens such as referrals and prior authorizations for all outpatient mental health care.

Blue Cross members who need assistance finding a mental health clinician can call the number on the back of their member ID card. Blue Cross representatives can help locate appropriate clinicians who are accepting new patients and have schedule availability and even assist with setting up the first visit.

Members who have questions about their specific benefits should call Member Service at the number on their ID cards, as benefits may vary by product.

About Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (www.bluecrossma.com) is a community-focused, tax-paying, not-for-profit health plan headquartered in Boston. We are committed to the relentless pursuit of quality, affordable health care with an unparalleled consumer experience. Consistent with our promise to always put our members

first, we are rated among the nation's best health plans for member satisfaction and quality. Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

*Benefits may vary by product.

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