

Testimony: Jeanette Ashlock, Newport News, Virginia

Chairs Guthrie and McMorris-Rodgers, Ranking Members Eshoo and Pallone, and members of the Committee: My name is Jeanette Ashlock, and telehealth has become an essential part of how I stay as healthy as possible. Thank you for having this important conversation.

I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, or MS, in 2001 at the age of 30. I experienced my first MS symptoms right after my honeymoon, when I returned to my job at a folding carton manufacturing company. My muscles and body started locking up. I was losing my ability to control my movement, and losing function. Work started to feel dangerous to me, since my office was located in the warehouse where the forklifts traveled daily, so I went to urgent care. After that, I saw a neurosurgeon and then a neurologist who delivered my MS diagnosis.

My first eight years living with MS were extremely difficult. I dealt with significant pain, tremors, lost vision, and was hospitalized every few months. Within just three years of my diagnosis, my symptoms were severe enough to require me to use a cane, and then a wheelchair. My neurologist worked with me to make sure I kept moving my body to maintain my function—he kept saying “if you don’t use it, you’re going to lose it.” After that first eight years, and trying and switching medications several times, my MS stabilized and symptoms improved. I have not had a relapse since then, and am now able to walk on my own. I do continue to have symptoms like severe fatigue. I had to stop working because of my symptoms, and I’ve been on Medicare since two years after my diagnosis.

I am among the many people living with MS who can manage their disease, and maintain their quality of life, because of the care I receive from a network of healthcare providers. Since Medicare removed many of the restrictions around telehealth, my ability to use telehealth for some of my care needs has become absolutely essential to me. I have used it for appointments with my primary care provider and some of my specialists, including my OBGYN. I have been able to talk to my providers for follow-up visits, for example after having lab work done, and to talk through new health issues as they come up. Many times, I’ve called and been told that I can’t get an in-person visit for months, but I can get a quick telehealth visit right away. I’ve been able to stay on-schedule with my visits, and bring up issues right away, so I can prevent them from becoming more serious down the road.

Like many people with MS, I deal with some cognitive issues, including some memory problems—and it gets worse when I experience stress. But when I am doing a telehealth visit from my home, I am able to sit at my own kitchen table in front of my computer and have my pen and paper with my questions written down nearby, and I am so much more prepared. I am able to describe every symptom, and remember every single question I meant to ask, and take really good notes, instead of having to memorize what my providers are sharing with me. I am also better able to manage my fatigue when I can do visits from home, rather than driving to and from in-person appointments.

Telehealth has also helped ease the stress of going to the doctor and my telehealth visits do not feel rushed. So often, as soon as you touch that doorknob on a doctor's office, everything you had in your mind to talk about just melts away, because it can be so stressful. And then on the way out the door from the visit, everything you discussed melts away. With my telehealth visits from my house, I am much more relaxed, and able to have much better appointments. It has been so much better for my health all around.

Finally, one of the biggest reasons I am so grateful for telehealth is because during the pandemic, I was able to access a mental health provider via telehealth for the first time. Like a lot of people with MS, I sometimes face mental health symptoms. I was able to find a therapist, who was a little farther away from my house but able to see me right away via telehealth, without the long wait that you usually face when seeking a therapy appointment. I have been able to meet with her regularly through our telehealth appointments and it has made such a difference in my life.

I am not the only person in the MS community who benefits from telehealth, and I want to represent some of their needs today, as well.

- Unfortunately, many people living with MS—especially those in rural areas—reside in areas with limited or no neurologists. These are often referred to as “neurology deserts.”
- For people with MS who live in those neurology deserts—or for those with mobility challenges, or those with no accessible transportation—telemedicine can offer meaningful access to care for those who may struggle to get it otherwise.

It is so important that patients continue to have a choice of whether to use telehealth when it's appropriate. I urge this Committee to advance legislative solutions to make sure that our telehealth access does not disappear. Thank you.