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Buprenorphine Treatment Via Telemedicine Expands Access to Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder

The use of buprenorphine in medication-assisted treatment of opioid use disorder has proven to be a transformative tool in the ongoing opioid epidemic. Buprenorphine is a partial opioid agonist that works by binding to opioid receptors in the brain, thereby reducing cravings and helping to fend off withdrawal symptoms. When prescribed as part of maintenance therapy, it has decreased drug use, recidivism, high-risk behaviors and health care costs, and lowered the risk of death.

Before a patient can be admitted to an opioid treatment program and treated with buprenorphine, federal law requires the patient to first undergo a complete, in-person physical evaluation. The COVID-19 emergency has substantially curtailed many in-person interactions, including medical examinations.

To address this issue and allow states to expand the use of telemedicine to treat opioid use disorder, the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration issued an [announcement](#) exempting opioid treatment programs from the in-person physical examination requirement for patients who will be treated with buprenorphine. The exemption requires a determination by a program physician, primary care physician or authorized healthcare professional under the supervision of a program physician that an adequate evaluation of the patient can be accomplished via telemedicine.

Consistent with the federal guidance, and pursuant to Governor Wolf's Proclamation of Emergency Disaster Declaration issued March 6, 2020, the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP) [suspended](#) the requirement that licensed Narcotic Treatment Programs (NTPs) make a face-to-face determination before admission to treatment for clients who receive buprenorphine treatment. DDAP also [suspended](#) the requirement that NTPs have narcotic treatment physician services onsite. These regulatory suspensions by DDAP will remain in effect for the duration of the COVID-19 disaster emergency in Pennsylvania.

Before a patient can be prescribed any controlled substance in Pennsylvania, a person licensed to practice medicine and surgery in the commonwealth, or otherwise licensed or regulated by the State Board of Medicine, must take an initial medical history and conduct an initial physical examination, unless emergency circumstances justify otherwise. This requirement curtails access to buprenorphine provided via telemedicine and, in many instances, creates a potentially insurmountable barrier for individuals who would benefit greatly from buprenorphine treatment.

Therefore, as a result, the Department of State requested and received approval from the Governor's Office to suspend the initial medical history and physical examination requirement at 49 Pa. Code § 16.92(b)(1) for the duration of the COVID-19 disaster declaration.

This waiver is specifically limited to the treatment of opioid use disorder with the FDA-approved, office-based treatment medication buprenorphine. A person licensed to practice medicine and surgery must comply with the standards of acceptable and prevailing medical practice. Methadone treatment models that are restricted to DEA-approved opioid treatment programs are not covered by this waiver.