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## **MAHP Member Plans Announce Efforts to Address Social and Racial Disparities in Health Care**

**Boston, MA** – The Massachusetts Association of Health Plans and its Board of Directors have announced two important initiatives to help combat social and racial disparities that persist in the delivery of health care services and within the healthcare workforce.

The first initiative authorizes MAHP to sponsor a broad-based research study to identify how access to telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic has differed based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors, and how the health care sector can work together to eliminate identified barriers to equitable access. The second initiative supports employment opportunities for low-income communities and communities of color in health care through a Workforce Development Compact. Both initiatives were based on recommendations from a MAHP subcommittee that was formed to examine how MAHP member health plans could address health care related disparities and broader social inequities.

“Both of these initiatives are important as we work to ensure fairness and equity for underserved populations and communities of color. While disparities in health care are not new, they have been profoundly exposed during this pandemic, where people of color and those living in low income communities have had worse outcomes than other populations. Our telehealth study seeks to analyze gaps in access to services for these populations and to offer recommendations to ensure equal access to telehealth services” said Lora Pellegrini, President and CEO of MAHP. “Our Workforce Development Compact will seek to provide employment opportunities and advancement to diverse and underserved populations in order to ensure our workforces reflect the members we serve.”

The 18-month telehealth study, led by researchers from the Department of Population Medicine at the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Institute aims to be the most timely and comprehensive evaluation to-date of potential socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic inequities in telehealth usage in Massachusetts, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will combine analyses of health care claims data from Medicaid, Commercial and Medicare members with qualitative interviews with members, providers, and health officials in communities with disproportionately low rates of telemedicine use. This study will build upon recent work led by the Massachusetts

Attorney General's Office by looking expansively at access and use rates, and identifying actionable implementation steps across the health care sector.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the structural inequities that exist in the Commonwealth and health care system. Together with our partners, we can strengthen our systems, increase health care access and usage, and ensure equitable and culturally appropriate health care," said Marylou Sudders, Secretary of Health and Human Services. "I commend MAHP and its members for taking action to understand and address the structural issues impacting health care delivery."

"While we already know that social and racial disparities significantly impact the health and wellbeing of residents of the Commonwealth, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought this issue into starker relief" said House Speaker Robert DeLeo. "I am pleased that MAHP is taking health inequities seriously with these two initiatives and will focus their energies on two areas acutely relevant during this time - telehealth and workforce. The House looks forward to collaborating with the health plans on these matters."

"Understanding differences in health care outcomes is fundamental to improving the healthcare system" said Senate President Karen E. Spilka. "In order to root out racial inequities in health care, which have been laid bare once again by the COVID-19 pandemic, lawmakers need good data and focused solutions. Importantly, these initiatives from MAHP look to provide both: much-needed data on racial disparities and telehealth, where there is a mounting case for reform, as well as a program to support a more diverse health industry workforce, which has been shown to improve healthcare overall. The Massachusetts Senate looks forward to partnering with MAHP in the fight to advance healthcare equity and transparency here in the Commonwealth."

"I applaud MAHP for taking these important steps to study and address health inequities. My office has identified telehealth access in underserved communities and health care workforce development as priority action areas to promote racial justice and equity in health. MAHP's pair of initiatives show leadership and commitment to making progress in these areas. My office stands ready to partner with our health plans and other stakeholders in taking action to ensure equitable access to health care for all Massachusetts residents," said Attorney General Maura Healey.

The Massachusetts Health Policy Commission will serve as an advisor on the study. "We are enthusiastic to partner with MAHP on this project. Telehealth has played a pivotal role in helping the Commonwealth's residents access health care during the pandemic, and it will continue to play an important role in the future for patients, particularly those with chronic conditions. It is imperative that we understand what barriers to utilization of telehealth services exist, especially for people of color, individuals with low income, and those with disabilities, so that we can work to eliminate disparities and ensure health equity across the board," said David Seltz, Executive Director of the Health Policy Commission.

Alon Peltz, MD, MBA, MHS, Instructor of Population Medicine at the Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Institute and Harvard Medical School will lead the study. Dr. Peltz's team will be supported by an advisory board which will include broad representation from many of the local area health care systems.

A preliminary report, tentatively scheduled to be released next July, will measure telehealth usage rates before and since the COVID-19 pandemic, examine differences by insurance, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity. The preliminary report will also review activities that health plans have taken to enable access to telehealth services, and outline ways to improve the robustness of demographic data in the health plan setting. The final report, tentatively scheduled to be released in July 2022, will measure interval changes in telehealth usage rates and equity, identify communities with low rates of digital access and telehealth usage rates, and outline actionable steps to promote and sustain health equity.

"We are excited to partner with MAHP on this important evaluation. In addition to the devastating health effects, the COVID-19 pandemic has created unique access to care obstacles, with rapid adoption of telehealth. However, historically, there have been important inequities in telehealth access in low-income communities, communities of color, and rural communities. We hope that our study will provide timely, local data on the current landscape, and help identify solutions that can apply across the entire health care sector in the Commonwealth to promote and sustain equitable access," said Dr. Peltz, the lead of the study team.

The second initiative focuses on diversifying the workforce within MAHP member plan organizations and in health professions. While health plans have worked to promote a more diverse workforce that reflects the demographics of the members they serve, the MAHP Board understands that more needs to be done to diversify the healthcare workforce and increase opportunities for advancement for individuals in low income areas and communities of color.

As a first step of this initiative, MAHP has developed a [Compact for Diversity and Inclusion in Health Care Workforce Development](#) that outlines health plans' commitment to 1) promote a culture of diversity and inclusion, 2) support workforce diversity in health professions through the creation of a pipeline to employment and 3) develop and increase opportunities for diverse candidates through targeted entry level healthcare jobs. The majority of MAHP member plans have signed on to the compact committing to create change in all three areas of focus. MAHP member health plans will report at regular intervals throughout the next year on progress to advance this initiative.

"While we have made strides to increase workforce diversity across MAHP member plans, we recognize that more needs to be done to increase representation in leadership ranks and to develop the pipeline of racially-diverse talent. We also need to do much more to address health disparities and ensure equitable access to all, particularly to ensure communities of color are equally benefiting from the market-wide adoption of telehealth. We are proud to sign onto this important initiative", said Thomas Crosswell, Chairman of MAHP's Board and President and CEO of Tufts Health Plan.

## **STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT**

### **Steve Tringale, President, AllWays Health Partners**

“AllWays Health Partners joins MAHP and other health plans in this industry pledge to foster a diverse workforce, an inclusive workplace environment, and equitable health care solutions for our customers. As part of Mass General Brigham’s integrated health care system, we are also working with our partners across the enterprise to advance these goals. By signing this compact, the industry takes another step forward in creating meaningful change.”

### **Heather Thiltgen, President of BMC HealthNet Plan**

“The mission of Boston Medical Center Health System, of which BMC HealthNet Plan is a part, is to provide exceptional care, without exception. To that end, we are dedicated to providing accessible healthcare to everyone; all are welcome and treated equally. Consequently, we proudly endorse the telehealth access and Workforce Development Compact initiatives championed by MAHP and its member plans. Our collaboration with MAHP in this critical work is a priority for us, because it will advance our collective goals of eradicating healthcare disparities and promoting true diversity and inclusion in the workplace.”

### **Christopher D. Palmieri, President & CEO, Commonwealth Care Alliance® (CCA)**

“Inequities in healthcare and in the workforce clash with CCA’s mission, vision and values. Telehealth holds tremendous promise for individuals in Massachusetts who face significant economic, social, behavioral health and medical needs; however, to realize telehealth’s promise requires that we pay attention to the inequities it may perpetuate or even create as access to technology emerges as a new social determinant of health. Additionally, to best serve our members and patients, we remain committed to building a high-performing, diverse, and inclusive workplace based on acceptance and trust. CCA is proud to partner with MAHP and its member organizations on these critical health care services and workforce initiatives to address equity and access at a broad level.”

### **Dennis Lenoard, President and CEO Delta Dental of Massachusetts**

“As we continue to reckon with the impacts of systemic racism as a country, those of us in the healthcare space must take real action to better understand and eliminate health inequities. The data shows that oral health care is no exception. Black adults are 68 percent more likely to have an unmet dental need than white adults and Latinx adults are 52 percent more likely than white adults to report having difficulty doing their job due to poor oral health. This is unacceptable. The initiatives that MAHP is announcing today are important steps necessary to better understand and address disparities in access and outcomes.”

### **Richard Burke, President and CEO of Fallon Health**

“At Fallon Health, we believe everyone deserves access to health care without discrimination. We celebrate diversity and are committed to providing inclusive services for all. Holding organizations accountable to this goal is important, and we are pleased to continue the work we are already doing around health equity. We also recognize that having more representation among our workforce will ultimately benefit this goal. The support behind this initiative speaks

volumes about how much health plans like Fallon care. We are proud to work with MAHP in continuing to ensure Fallon has an inclusive workplace culture.”

**Michael Carson, Vice Chair of MAHP’s Board and President and CEO of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care**

“We are proud to be a part of these important initiatives as there is much work to be done. A more diverse workforce is inextricably linked to the success of each of our plans. Through the collective experience of a more diverse workforce, we can generate a higher level of innovation, create better abilities to serve our communities, and make a bigger difference in the lives of our members. Telehealth has proven critical for those who have limited access to health care, but for Black and Brown communities, who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, they have had the least access to it. We need to continue to use the pandemic as a catalyst for change and work to remove all barriers that limit equitable access to health care.”

**Richard Swift, President and CEO, Health New England**

“Health New England fully supports these important initiatives. As a health plan, we serve and employ people of all races, genders, sexual orientations, religions, and levels of ability. Diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging are foundations on which we serve our members and our community. We aim to create an environment of trust and equity, address health disparities, and advance health outcomes for all. We look forward to collaborating with MAHP to impact change in social and racial disparities in health care delivery and within the workforce.”

**Stephen Farrell, CEO for UnitedHealthcare’s New England Health Plan**

“UnitedHealthcare continues to close gaps in care; address the underlying social determinants of health; and create a workforce that best reflects the individuals we are honored to serve, and we look forward to collaborating with our colleagues and other community leaders to achieve greater health equity in the Commonwealth and across the country.”

**David Morales, General Manager, UniCare**

“At UniCare, we strongly believe that a diverse and inclusive workforce is a crucial ingredient for long-term success. Our team’s diversity drives our culture and our ability to bring world-class service and products to our members. Our diversity also enables us to better understand the factors driving disparities in our health care system and we strive to address them so that every Bay Stater has the opportunity to live the healthiest life possible.”

**About MAHP**

*The Massachusetts Association of Health Plans represents 17 health plans covering nearly 3 million Massachusetts residents. It is dedicated to improving health for all in Massachusetts by promoting affordable, safe, and coordinated health care.*

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