

# THE COST OF AN APPOINTMENT FOR A TEXAS PATIENT IN PAIN

Texans seeking treatment for pain are required to visit a physician's office in order to receive a referral for treatment by a Physical Therapist. The referral mandate is an unnecessary restriction to access that limits a patient's choice while increasing their wait times and costs.



## LONGER WAIT TIMES

- Out of all the states in the nation, Texas was ranked 47<sup>th</sup> in access to physicians in a 2015 Merritt Hawkins study.
- According to the Texas Department of state Health Services, the statewide physician shortage will increase 67% by 2030.
- According to a 2017 Merritt Hawkins study, patients in Houston wait an average of 19 days to access a primary care physician, and patients nationwide wait an average of 24 days to access a primary care physician
- Shortages of physicians in areas of Texas such as the Rio Grande Valley will grow, leading to 32.3% of demand for physician treatment going unmet by 2030.<sup>1</sup>



## HIGHER COSTS

- An analysis of *Blue Cross-Blue Shield* claims showed that the total paid claims for treatment of physician referred patients was 123% higher than the paid claims for treatment of patients with direct access to PT.
- A *Health Services Research* study found that the average total cost for physician referred patients was \$420 compared to \$347 on average for direct access patients.
- A 2018 study<sup>2</sup> showed that the total health care cost of patients who had early access to physical therapy services was less than half the total health care cost of patients who waited three months to a year after a physician visit to access physical therapy services.

## ↑ INCREASED WAIT TIMES AND COSTS ↓ DECREASES QUALITY OF CARE

- Findings from a *Health Services Research* study raised questions about whether patients who were referred by physicians have appropriate access to physical therapy. The authors of the study wrote that their results are, "suggestive of problems with access to care and/or inappropriate referral. This may ultimately have an impact on the quality and cost of care for persons with musculoskeletal conditions."
- A May 2018 study<sup>3</sup> on patients with low back pain found that patients who saw a physical therapist at the first point of care significantly lowered out of pocket costs and the chances of utilizing other costly services including opioid prescriptions, imaging services, and emergency department visits.
- Results from a 2018 study<sup>2</sup> on patients with neck pain supported the findings from the study on low back pain, with the authors of the study adding that "current trends in health care costs are becoming unsustainable for payers and patients and are not resulting in improved outcomes...consulting a Physical Therapist early may provide an opportunity to mitigate downstream health care utilization while containing costs."

1. Texas Department of State Health Services. (2018) *Texas Projections of Supply and Demand for Primary Care Physicians and Psychiatrists, 2017 - 2030*. Austin, TX: Texas Health and Human Services  
2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3699-0>  
3. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-6773.12984>