Over 54 million Americans live in rural areas, making up twenty percent of the population. Of the 518 mental health professional shortage areas, 75% were in rural areas. Telepsychiatry, an interactive psychiatric communication practiced through a telecommunications network, is a solution to the lack of mental health professionals in rural areas.

Rural residents suffer higher rates of suicide, addiction, and substance abuse than do urban residents. 23% to 56% of individuals with a diagnosable Axis I mental disorder also have a substance abuse or dependence disorder. Due to the serious lack of mental health and substance abuse treatment options, rural residents often go untreated.

Currently three significant bills support the funding, research and delivery of mental health to rural communities. Rural Mental Health Accessibility Act of 2001/ S. 859 SEC.330L and the Rural Telecommunications Enhancement Act/H.R. 2669 would provide funding for the delivery of mental health care as well as mental health education. The Medicare Telehealth Validation Act of 2001/H.R. 2706 would provide grants for the development of telehealth networks and would improve the provision of telehealth services under Medicare Program, making telepsychiatry more affordable to rural residents. I recommend support of these bills and the use of telepsychiatry to increase access to mental health services for rural communities.