UPDATED FINDING OF EMERGENCY OF THE

DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

DIVISION OF WORKERS’ COMPENSATION

REGARDING THE CALIFORNIA LABOR CODE

TITLE 8, CALIFORNIA CODE OF REGULATIONS

DIVISION 1. DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

CHAPTER 1, DIVISION OF WORKERS’ COMPENSATION

Article 4, PRACTICE PARAMETERS

Section 46.3 QME Emergency Regulation in Response to COVID-19.

Government Code Section 11346.1 requires a finding of emergency to include a written statement with the information required by paragraphs (2), (3), (4), (5) and (6) of subsection (a) of Section 11346.5 and a description of the specific facts showing the need for immediate action.

The Administrative Director of the Division of Workers’ Compensation (DWC) finds that the adoption of this regulation is necessary for the immediate preservation of the public peace, health and safety, or general welfare, as follows:

# FINDING OF EMERGENCY

**Basis for the Finding of Emergency**

* The emergence of COVID-19 variants, such as the Delta and the burgeoning Omicron variants, is demonstrating that the ongoing pandemic is not subsiding but remains a serious threat to public health.[[1]](#footnote-1) The widespread prevalence of these variants and their increased transmissibility have resulted in increased risk of exposure and disease relative to the previously-dominant strains of COVID-19.[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore action is necessary to reduce exposure to the virus.
* Individuals infected with COVID-19 in a healthcare setting can transmit the infection to persons in their homes and communities, resulting in an increase in infection rates. As of November 5, 2021, there have been 4,688,285 cases of COVID-19 infection and 71,852 COVID-19 deaths in California.[[3]](#footnote-3) Telehealth for medical-legal evaluations provides a safer option for the physician and injured worker by reducing potential infectious exposures and minimizing a surge of patient demand on facilities as well as reducing the use of personal protective equipment by healthcare providers.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* As recognized by Governor Newsom in Executive Order N-16-21 (September 27, 2021), the use of telehealth or telemedicine during the COVID-19 medical crisis is an effective means of providing continued healthcare and observing social distancing as well as limiting exposure to the virus.
* As also recognized in Executive Order N-16-21 (September 27, 2021), the use of telehealth is necessary at this stage in the pandemic to protect healthcare workers and ensure access to healthcare services during surges in COVID-19 cases. Action is necessary in order to implement, on an emergency basis, the ability of physicians in California’s workers’ compensation system to continue to provide telehealth medical-legal evaluations when COVID-19 cases surge due to the Delta and Omicron variants.
* Action is necessary in order to allow injured workers and physicians’ flexibility with regard to evaluation locations given various regional restrictions and to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

**Background**

* The DWC develops regulations to implement, interpret, and make specific the California Labor Code.
* Qualified Medical Evaluators (QMEs) provide medical-legal evaluations of injured workers to resolve medical issues in dispute between parties to a claim or litigation regarding workers’ compensation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these evaluations included a physical examination of the injured worker for specified periods of face-to-face time where the physician and injured worker were in the physical presence of each other as required by California Code of Regulations, title 8 sections 49-49.9.
* On March 19, 2020, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-33-20, a stay-at-home order to protect Californians from and slow the spread of COVID-19. The order prohibited operations at all but essential businesses and workplaces.

In-person face-to-face time for QME evaluations was not possible under the terms of the Executive Order and subsequent local lockdown orders.

* In response to the Executive Order and to protect the safety of QMEs and injured workers, the Division of Workers’ Compensation adopted in May 2020 an emergency regulation allowing the use of telehealth or telemedicine for medical-legal examinations. The regulation, found at California Code of Regulations, title 8, section 46.2, was readopted in March and October 2021. It is set to expire on January 10, 2022.
* The Division of Workers’ Compensation did not initiate formal rulemaking to permanently adopt section 46.2 as by October 2021 most businesses, including medical offices, were reopening to the public.
* Various medical-legal evaluations can be performed effectively without the need of a physical examination. An emergency regulation is necessary to facilitate the performance of these evaluations.

# AUTHORITY AND REFERENCE

The Administrative Director of the Division of Workers’ Compensation, pursuant to the authority vested in him by Labor Code sections 59, 111, 133, 139.2, 4603.5, 5307.3 and 5307, proposes to reestablish Subchapter 1 (Article 4) of Chapter 4.5, of Title 8 California Code of Regulations, and adopt section 46.3.

# INFORMATIVE DIGEST

Summary of Existing Laws

**Labor Code section 139.2** is the enabling statute enacted to establish the Qualified Medical Evaluator Program in the California workers’ compensation system. Subsection (j)(1)(C)(2) empowers the Administrative Director to develop procedures to be followed by all physicians in evaluating the existence and extent of permanent impairment and limitations resulting from an injury. Subsection (j)(5)(A) directs the Administrative Director to establish minimum times for patient contact for any medical-legal evaluations that are not valued pursuant to Labor Code section 5307.6.

**Labor Code section 4628** is an anti-ghostwriting statue enacted to govern the responsibilities of a reporting physician and requirements for a medical-legal report. An examination of the injured worker is one of the requirements enumerated in this statute.

**Labor Code section 5307.6** is the enabling statute directing the Administrative Director to adopt and revise a fee schedule for medical-legal expenses. Subsection (a) mandates that the procedure codes and relative values used in producing fees shall recognize the amount of time spent by the physician in direct contact with the patient.

# TECHNICAL, THEORETICAL, OR EMPIRICAL STUDIES, REPORTS, OR DOCUMENTS RELIED UPON

* [Governor Gavin Newsom - EXECUTIVE ORDER N-16-21, September 27, 2021](https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/9.27.21-Telehealth-EO.pdf)

https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/9.27.21-Telehealth-EO.pdf

* [Governor Gavin Newsom - EXECUTIVE ORDER N-43-20, April 3, 2020](https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4.3.20-EO-N-43-20.pdf)

https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4.3.20-EO-N-43-20.pdf

* [California’s Current Safety Measures and What to do now. August 11, 2021](https://covid19.ca.gov/safely-reopening/#what-to-do-now). https://covid19.ca.gov/safely-reopening/#what-to-do-now
* [Tracking COVID-19 in California](https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/#todays-update)

https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/#todays-update

* [Los Angeles Times – “Omicron sweeping through California with staggering speed, raising alarms” by Rong-Gong Lin II, December 23, 2021](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-23/omicron-sweeping-through-california-with-staggering-speed-bringing-alarm-and-questions) https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-23/omicron-sweeping-through-california-with-staggering-speed-bringing-alarm-and-questions
* [Delta Variant: What We Know About the Science updated Aug. 26, 2021](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/delta-variant.html?s_cid=11512:covid%20delta:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY21) https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/delta-variant.html?s\_cid=11512:covid%20delta:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY21
* [CDC, Potential Rapid Increase of Omicron Variant Infections in the United States Dec. 20, 2021](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/forecasting/mathematical-modeling-outbreak.html)

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/forecasting/mathematical-modeling-outbreak.html

* [Husch Blackwell – California: State-by-State COVID-19 Guidance, April 8, 2021](http://www.huschblackwell.com/california-state-by-staecovid019-guidance) www.huschblackwell.com/california-state-by-staecovid019-guidance
* [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Using Telehealth to Expand Access to Essential Health Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic, June 10, 2020](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/telehealth.html)

http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/telehealth.html

* [Governor Gavin Newsom - EXECUTIVE ORDER N-33-20, March 19, 2020](https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EO-N-33-20-COVID-19-HEALTH-ORDER-03.19.2020-002.pdf) https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EO-N-33-20-COVID-19-HEALTH-ORDER-03.19.2020-002.pdf
* [Centers for Disease Control, web link, “How to Protect Yourself”](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html) https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html

[Using Telehealth to Expand Access to Essential Health Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic; June 10, 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/cornavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/telehealth.html)

www.cdc.gov/cornavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/telehealth.html

# SUMMARY OF PROPOSED REGULATIONS

The Administrative Director adopts an administrative regulation governing the provision of telehealth medical-legal evaluations and office location flexibility during the pendency of the COVID-19 medical crisis. This regulation implements, interprets, and makes specific Labor Code sections 139.2, 4628, and 5307.6 during the pendency of the COVID-19 medical crisis as follows:

**Section 46.3 QME Emergency Regulations in Response to COVID-19**

This new section sets forth the process that addresses the ongoing need for medical-legal evaluations and to prevent a backlog of medical-legal evaluations resulting from the stay-at-home order. This regulation will help injured workers and employers continue to move their workers’ compensation claims towards a resolution and avoid additional or undue delay.

1. **Subsection (a)** defines a telehealth medical-legal evaluation when injured worker and physician are not in the same physical space or site during the evaluation.
2. **Subsection (a)(1)** defines a telehealth medical-legal evaluation and establishes parameters for when a telehealth medical-legal evaluation can be performed if a physical examination is not necessary. These parameters include 1) there is a medical issue in dispute involving AOE/COE, termination of indemnity benefits, or appropriate work restrictions; 2) there is agreement to the evaluation by telehealth by all parties to the action; 3) telehealth evaluation is consistent with appropriate and ethical medical practices and 4) the physician attests that there is no need for a physical examination.
3. **Subsection (a)(2)** defines the scope of telehealth evaluations to be remote visits via video-conference, video-calling or similar technology that allows each party to see the other and have an audio connection. Provides that the evaluation must have the same standard of care as an in person examination.
4. **Subsection (b)(1)** allows the initial QME evaluation to take place at any office that is certified for qualified medical evaluations as long as there is agreement to this arrangement by all of the parties to the action.
5. **Subsection (b)(2)** provides for identification of office location when a telehealth evaluation occurs.

# DETERMINATION OF SIGNIFICANT STATEWIDE ADVERSE ECONOMIC IMPACT DIRECTLY AFFECTING BUSINESS

Physicians who provide medical-legal evaluations will be able to provide services through use of telehealth in order to reduce exposure to COVID-19 during the pendency of the COVID-19 medical crisis.

The Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Workers’ Compensation, has made an initial determination that the adoption of this regulation will not have a significant, statewide adverse economic impact directly affecting business because it merely offers an option for telehealth and flexibility with office location evaluations. The Division of Workers’ Compensation has not considered proposed alternatives that would lessen any adverse economic impact on business and invites you to submit proposals. Submission may include the following considerations: (i) consolidation or simplification of reporting requirements for qualified medical evaluators; and (ii) the use of performance standards rather than telehealth.

# POLICY STATEMENT OVERVIEW

The objective of the proposed emergency regulation is to implement the provision of telehealth medical-legal evaluations during the pendency of the COVID-19 medical crisis, and to clarify the interpretation of the relevant statutes and regulations by way of the proposed emergency regulation in a manner that allows for the above referenced actions.

# MATTERS PRESCRIBED BY STATUTE APPLICABLE TO THE AGENCY OR TO ANY SPECIFIC REGULATION OR CLASS OF REGULATIONS

NONE

# MANDATE ON LOCAL AGENCIES OR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Workers’ Compensation has determined that this proposed regulatory action would not impose a mandate on local agencies or school districts.

# FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

A. Cost or Savings to any state agency: NONE

B. Cost to any local agency required to be reimbursed under Part 7 (commencing with Section 17500) of Division 4: NONE

C. Cost to any school district required to be reimbursed under Part 7 (commencing with Section 17500) of Division 4: NONE

D. Other nondiscretionary cost or savings imposed on local agencies: NONE

E. Cost or savings in federal funding to the state: NONE

STATEMENT OF CONFIRMATION OF

MAILING OF FIVE-DAY EMERGENCY NOTICE

(Title 1, CCR section 50(a)(5)(A))

The Division of Workers’ Compensation sent notice of the proposed emergency action to every person who has filed a request for notice of regulatory action at least five working days before submitting the emergency regulations to the Office of Administrative Law in accordance with the requirements of Government Code section 11346.1(a)(2).

1. Los Angeles Times – “Omicron sweeping through California with staggering speed, raising alarms” by Rong-Gong Lin II, December 23, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See [CDC, Delta Variant: What We Know About the Science (updated Aug. 26, 2021)](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/delta-variant.html?s_cid=11512:covid%20delta:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY21;), available at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/delta-variant.html?s\_cid=11512:covid%20delta:sem.ga:p:RG:GM:gen:PTN:FY21; CDC, Potential Rapid Increase of Omicron Variant Infections in the United States (Dec. 20, 2021), available at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/forecasting/mathematical-modeling-outbreak.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [CDPH. Tracking COVID-19 in California. “Today’s Update](https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/),” updated November 5, 2021; accessed November 5, 2021. https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Using Telehealth to Expand Access to Essential Health Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic; June 10, 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [↑](#footnote-ref-4)