



January 27, 2021

**Senate Finance Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

SB 3 Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021

and

SB 393 Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance – Coverage and Reimbursement of Telehealth Services

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. **Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 77,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.**

BHSB is pleased to support SB 3 Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021 and SB 393 Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance – Coverage and Reimbursement of Telehealth Services.

The use of telehealth for behavioral health treatment and support services provides people with safe, flexible access to care and helps to address racial inequities that limit access to care for people of color. Telehealth is an important part of a health care delivery system to ensure that individuals receive care in the least restrictive, more cost-effective setting that is best situated to promote long-term recovery.

In addition, the expanded use of telehealth has been a critical component in Maryland’s effort to mitigate spread of the coronavirus. Increased flexibility in the delivery of these services has protected providers and consumers from exposure to the virus, ensured continuity of care for Marylanders unable to access in-person treatment, and increased overall access to care. The service expansion has become a vital part of Maryland’s continuum of care and it must be preserved.

These bills are similar in several ways:

- Both expand access to audio-only telehealth in Medicaid and commercial health plans. This is an important health equity issue. Low-income individuals and families without access to the internet or smartphones and people living in communities with poor broadband service are unable to access audio-visual telehealth services.
- Both prohibit Medicaid from limiting the delivery of telehealth based on the location of the recipient. This is particularly important for Marylanders experiencing homelessness and for individuals who may not feel safe accessing behavioral health treatment in their home.
- Both require commercial health plans to reimburse providers for telehealth services at the same rate as in-person care.

SB 393 includes some very important additional provisions:

- It authorizes reimbursement of behavioral health programs for telehealth services delivered by peers (people with lived experience) and paraprofessionals – two critical sectors of the behavioral health workforce.
- It protects consumer choice by providing another behavioral health care delivery option along the continuum of care.
- It extends reimbursement parity to telehealth services provide in the Medicaid program.

Telehealth expands access behavioral health treatment and improves care outcomes, makes it easier for consumers to connect with their providers, and helps cut costs to consumers and providers alike. **As such, BHSB urges the Senate Finance Committee to pass SB 3 and SB 393.**