



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 16, 2021

The Senate Finance Committee

**SB 646 Alcohol and Drug Counseling -Alcohol and Drug Trainees - Practice Through Telehealth
Statement of Support by Bill Sponsor Senator Mary Beth Carozza**

Thank you, Chairman Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee for the opportunity to respectfully ask for your support of Senate Bill 646- Alcohol and Drug Counseling - Alcohol and Drug Trainees - Practice Through Telehealth. This bill, co-sponsored by Vice Chair Kagan, is intended to provide a permanent allowance for alcohol and drug trainees to provide services via telehealth after the current public health emergency declarations are lifted. Last spring, the Board of Professional Counselors and Therapists recommended that alcohol and drug trainees – or ADTs – be allowed to provide services via telehealth. This was a life-saving measure as ADTs represent 40 percent of the overall workforce at the certified level.

Many of our districts are hard hit by health care workforce shortages, especially in the rural parts of the state. Our hospitals, schools, long-term care facilities, and community providers need more flexibility to provide both in-person and telehealth services. The experience in the field these last 10 months with the use of telehealth among all providers has been overwhelmingly positive. Behavioral health programs have seen decreases in no-show rates, increases in retention rates, flexibility in conducting appointments to better meet the needs of clients, and significant client satisfaction with these services.

This bill simply removes a statutory barrier that would prevent ADTs who are currently providing services via telehealth to continue to do so. The bill does **not** change the scope of practice of ADTs nor the supervision requirements. ADTs can only work in a state-licensed behavioral health program, not in private practice. The bill does **not** change the regulations that define ADTs nor their supervision requirements.

This Committee has prioritized telehealth services, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. I supported and appreciated having the opportunity to work with Vice Chair Kagan of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee on her emergency telehealth bill last year – Senate Bill 402 Health Care Practitioners – Telehealth and Shortage, which was one of the few bills that were signed into law by Governor Hogan. The State has made tremendous progress in increasing access to health services using technology over the last year – as has the entire country. Other bills are being considered this Session that deal with the definitions and continuing use of telehealth, including one of my own, Senate Bill 139-Interstate Occupational Therapy Licensure Compact.

My bill today, Senate Bill 646, lifts the prohibition on alcohol and drug trainees from using telehealth to deliver their services, and ADTs like all other health occupations would be subject to the uses and limitations defined by other legislation. It would allow ADTs who are currently providing services via telehealth during COVID-19 to continue to do so after the pandemic.

Access to alcohol and drug counseling through telehealth is increasingly important especially given the devastating data from the Maryland Health Department and Opioid Operational Command Center. There were 2,025 overdose deaths in Maryland in the first three quarters of 2020. That is a 12 percent increase from the same period in 2019. Also, there are disturbing trends related to the impact of opioid overdose deaths among Black and Hispanic communities.

These numbers make it clear that Maryland cannot let up in our efforts to provide the needed counseling services and treatment to those with alcohol and drug addictions. Senate Bill 646 would ensure that alcohol and drug trainees can continue to provide telehealth services after the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am pleased to report that there is broad support for SB 646 including the Board of Professional Counselors and Therapists, the Maryland Addiction Directors Council, the MD Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence, and several other organizations across the state of Maryland.

My panel today includes Patrick Mattix who works with Project Chesapeake which provides substance abuse and mental health services in several counties including the Eastern Shore. He will be joined by Dwayne Gould and Paris Brooks who are both involved in alcohol and drug counseling and will share with you the importance of telehealth in delivering treatment services.

We know that alcohol and drug counseling services are critical, especially during the pandemic where we have seen a downward trend in mental health. Alcohol and Drug Trainees are key to the makeup of the addictions counseling workforce and essential as we continue to face workforce shortages in the field of substance use disorder treatment. With the expanded use of telehealth throughout our health care system including the allowance of ADTs to provide telehealth services for the last 10 months, it only makes sense to allow ADTs to continue to provide telehealth services so more clients can benefit from these life-saving counseling services. I respectfully ask my colleagues on the Senate Educational, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee for a favorable report of Senate Bill 646.

Thank you for your kind consideration.