



February 16, 2021

**Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

SB 646 Alcohol and Drug Counseling - Alcohol and Drug Trainees - Practice Through Telehealth

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.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore is pleased to support SB 646 Alcohol and Drug Counseling - Alcohol and Drug Trainees - Practice Through Telehealth. This bill allows alcohol and drug professionals to provide therapeutic counseling services through telehealth.

Therapeutic alcohol and drug counseling services are an important aspect of the treatment regime for people with substance use disorders and support individuals with overall recovery. In Baltimore City, many people in our communities who are living with a substance use disorder do not have access to the counseling and support services they need to recover and lead productive, healthy lives because of barriers to access of these services, including lack of reliable transportation, having no childcare options, and the overall the shortage of behavioral health counseling professionals.

An effective approach to addressing barriers to access to alcohol and drug counseling services through the PBHS is to allow for alcohol and drug counseling services to be provided through telehealth.

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. Telehealth for alcohol and drug counseling services can lead to success in reaching several important goals:

- Expands access to these services in the communities that people live, in particular in underserved communities and for people of color,
- Improves patient adherence with treatment plans and long-term recovery,
- Enhances patient-choice and provides another behavioral health care delivery option along the continuum of care.

Telehealth expands access behavioral health support services and improves health outcomes, making it easier for patients to connect with their providers, and helping to cut costs for patients and providers alike. **As such, BHSB urges the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee to pass SB 646.**