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**Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
February 17, 2021**

Senate Bill 646 - Support

Silverman Treatment Solutions, LLC. (STS) urges a favorable opinion on SB 646, to allow Alcohol and Drug Trainee (ADT) counselors to continue the provision of telehealth counseling after the current declared Public Health Emergency (PHE).

Since the start of the Covid-19 PHE, Maryland's long-standing opioid overdose epidemic has only worsened. MDH reports a 14.5% increase in opioid-related fatalities during the first 9 months of 2020 compared to the same time in 2019. The 2,438 annualized opioid-related Marylanders lost in 2020 is an unacceptable 16.7% increase from 2019's total of 2,090, and is an astounding 13.8% higher than the prior peak of 2,143 opioid-related Maryland fatalities in 2018.

As essential healthcare providers, substance use disorder (SUD) programs with ADT counselors have remained open during the pandemic, adding telehealth counseling to provide life-saving services. We have learned from experience that telehealth counseling is an essential and successful method of service delivery. Telehealth expands access and flexibility to receive counseling, improves treatment retention and reduces systemic barriers and stigma associated with counseling within traditional clinic sites. – all Moreover, it increases patient and community safety through social distancing and quarantine.

The State granted ADTs authority to provide telehealth services on April 6, 2020 for the duration of the PHE, and in accordance with ADT scope of practice and supervision requirements.

While many clients will want to return to in-person interactions with counselors and group sessions after the PHE, many will have the need to continue utilizing telehealth. Continued telehealth provides patients a choice to receive high quality counseling services in an effective and accessible manner that supports their continued recovery. During the pandemic successful telehealth implementation has proven that there is no reason not to allow our entire counseling workforce and all of our clients to utilize telehealth technology – telehealth must remain as an available service delivery after the PHE ends.

The Board of Professional Counselors and Therapists' 2019 Annual report states that more than half of all Alcohol and Drug counselor applications; and more than 62% of certificates and licenses issued, were for ADT counselors. At Silverman Treatment Solutions ADT counselors are a vital part of our clinical workforce, providing individual counseling, care management and care coordination, under supervision of a Board-approved Counselor Supervisor. ADT counselors for the SUD program community are an essential part of the SUD treatment workforce, supporting thousands of patients statewide who might otherwise be without care.

SB 646 will permit ADT counselors to continue to provide telehealth counseling while working for licensed SUD programs, and receiving necessary supervision.

Silverman Treatment Solutions, LLC. urges a favorable report for Senate Bill 646.