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SB 567 - Telehealth Services – Expansion
Position: Support
Senate Finance Committee
February 17, 2021

Dr. Aliya Jones, Deputy Secretary, Behavioral Health Administration, Maryland Department of Health
Jake Whitaker, Deputy Legislative Officer, Governor's Office

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of the Committee:

Senate Bill 567 (SB 567) will increase meaningful access to health care by significantly expanding the availability of services delivered through telehealth. This bill alters the statutory definition of telehealth to include audio-only conversations like telephone calls. Additionally, SB 567 would require private health plans and Medicaid to reimburse health care providers for telehealth services delivered through audio-only modalities.

SB 567 will reduce barriers to accessing health care in low-income communities and rural areas. Many Maryland patients do not have the financial resources to purchase expensive audio-visual technology to meet the current statutory requirements for telehealth. Marylanders living in rural areas often do not have access to broadband internet infrastructure that makes quality audio-visual communication possible. Audio-only conversations, like telephone calls, help eliminate these barriers to treatment and result in a more equitable delivery of medical services.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Hogan issued an executive order on March 20, 2020 allowing providers enrolled in the Medicaid program or those participating in Behavioral Health Administration programs to deliver health care services using audio-only calls or conversations. The availability of audio-only services has been lauded by the provider community as a safe and effective modality for delivering medical care. However, the current telehealth statute excludes audio-only conversations from the definition of telehealth. SB 567 will remove the current exclusion of audio-only conversations and ensure that Marylanders continue to benefit from the expansion of telehealth services after the conclusion of the state of emergency.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges for individuals with substance use disorders and mental health issues. Overdose deaths in Maryland and across the United States have increased since the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, the number of individuals in Maryland who accessed substance use disorder treatment services using telehealth has risen from 1,720 in 2019 to 26,084 in 2020. Patients living in underserved communities and rural areas are often disproportionately impacted by these challenges, as these communities frequently lack the medical resources and information technology infrastructure to receive quality

health care services. SB 567 will ensure that the Marylanders most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have increased access to critical behavioral health services after the state of emergency has ended.

Since taking office, Governor Hogan and Lieutenant Governor Rutherford have remained committed to addressing the heroin and opioid epidemic, including expanding access to critical behavioral health and substance use disorder treatment services. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the need for these critical treatment services. Improving access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment services will remain critical even after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. SB 567 is an important step in making sure that these important health care services are more accessible and remain available to Marylanders after the conclusion of the state of emergency.

For these reasons, the Administration respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 567.