



Senate Finance Committee

February 17, 2021

Senate Bill 567

Telehealth Services – Expansion

Support

NCADD-Maryland supports Senate Bill 567 – Telehealth Services – Expansion.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the pre-existing opioid overdose death fatality crisis has worsened. In Maryland, third-quarter data from the Maryland Department of Health shows a 14% increase in the number of opioid overdose deaths in 2020, over the same period the year before. The numbers were up even before the impact of the pandemic early last year. We have also seen a disturbing trend in the increasing numbers of Black Marylanders dying from overdoses.

What the pandemic has taught us is that telehealth is a life-saving tool in the delivery of health care services, including substance use disorder and mental health treatment. With the existence of a massive digital divide, the use of the telephone has been the only way tens of thousands of Marylanders have been able to access health care services. When the public emergency declarations are lifted, the digital divide will unfortunately still be with us. We therefore must continue the use of telehealth, including audio-only technology.

Surveys have shown both consumer satisfaction and efficacy. The Maryland Addiction Directors Council conducted a survey of clients that showed that 78% of those using telehealth had a positive experience either all of the time or most of the time. Specifically with the use of audio-only telehealth, 80% of respondents reported positive experiences all or most of the time.

The Behavioral Health Administration conducted provider surveys in the spring and again in the fall of 2020. The second survey results show the following important outcomes:

- No outpatient SUD respondent indicated an inability to provide telehealth in the second survey, compared to 25% in the first survey;
- 42% of programs reported individuals were keeping their treatment/service appointments more often at the time of the second survey compared to 36% in the first; and

- Outpatient SUD programs were twice as likely to indicate that individuals were taking their medications as prescribed more often (32%) in the second survey than in the initial survey 15%).

With the two guiding principles that telehealth should be used when clinically appropriate, and when preferred by the consumer, the use of telehealth should continue indefinitely. And with the myriad regulations and safeguards that already exist, there should be no hesitation to continue audio-only to ensure everyone has access to care.

We strongly urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 567.

The Maryland Affiliate of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD-Maryland) is a statewide organization that works to influence public and private policies on addiction, treatment, and recovery, reduce the stigma associated with the disease, and improve the understanding of addictions and the recovery process. We advocate for and with individuals and families who are affected by alcoholism and drug addiction.