



# Sheppard Pratt

**Written Testimony  
Senate Finance Committee  
House Health and Government Operations Committee  
SB3 / HB123 The Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021  
January 27, 2021**

**Position: SUPPORT**

Sheppard Pratt thanks the Maryland General Assembly for your longstanding leadership and support of mental and behavioral health providers in Maryland. This testimony outlines the Sheppard Pratt support for SB3/HB123 The Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021. It is our hope that the Maryland General Assembly will pass this legislation to cement these temporary measures into permanence.

As the COVID-19 pandemic began in Maryland, Sheppard Pratt worked tirelessly to ensure that we could continue to help both individuals in crisis and our existing patients access life-changing care.

Thanks to emergency orders enabling reimbursement for telehealth, we successfully launched our Virtual Crisis Walk-In Clinic. With a swift pivot from an in-person walk-in clinic (which we still continue to provide), Sheppard Pratt expanded our crisis services to telehealth—offering psychiatric triage and referrals to our other virtual and in-person care options through a secure, online platform. The Virtual Crisis Walk-In Clinic is available to any individual living in Maryland who needs urgent psychiatric care. Licensed therapists and clinicians schedule a follow up virtual or in-person appointment for therapy and/or medication management or recommend inpatient admission once the assessment has been conducted.

This virtual expansion equated to thousands of individuals who have been able to access the care they desperately needed—many of whom had previously been hindered by location, lack of transportation, or other common barriers. In fact, this service has eased burdens on emergency departments across the State at a time when all available beds are needed for our acute care patients.

Importantly, telehealth is being used for more than just crisis, initial consultations, and follow-ups. It's also being utilized for psychotherapy, group sessions for both substance use and mental health, and more intensive programs. This has allowed us to maintain our programs and provide outpatient services to those in need throughout the crisis.

To date, our team has provided more than 250,000 telehealth visits since the beginning of the pandemic including 80,000 telephonic visits. Sheppard Pratt stresses the need to continue the audio-only and telephonic options. We cannot emphasize enough the value this expansion has been to our most vulnerable Marylanders—the BIPOC communities, those on Medicaid, the homeless, and those in a mental health crisis. Based on our experience supporting clients throughout the pandemic there are a large number of clients who have phones but do not have access to video-based technology. Without audio services they will not be able to access mental health treatment.



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Sheppard Pratt asks that you **support the Preserve Telehealth Access Act** because it will ensure the extension of four policy changes that continue to remove barriers to telehealth during COVID-19 and beyond:

- Eases restrictions on originating and distant sites, meaning that both providers and patients have greater discretion on the most appropriate physical location to hold their telehealth appointment
- Allows for reimbursement parity between in-person and telehealth services
- Acknowledges value of health care services delivered via audio-only modalities, especially to vulnerable and underserved populations with internet and technology challenges—the communities most likely to have limited health care access
- Removes barriers to coverage for remote patient monitoring services, so providers can identify health issues and intervene before they escalate and require emergency care

It is vitally important that Marylanders have easier access to the quality mental health services they deserve—and we can make that access possible by making permanent the telehealth flexibilities that were granted at the beginning of the pandemic. This bill brings Maryland in line with neighboring jurisdictions that passed legislation to ensure access to necessary health care, regardless of the modality through which it is delivered. Backing away will leave thousands of Marylanders without access to the care they need and deserve.

Sheppard Pratt urges the committee's favorable report on SB3/HB123 Preserve Telehealth Access Act, with amendments confirmed by the Maryland Hospital Association.

## **About Sheppard Pratt**

Sheppard Pratt is the nation's largest private, nonprofit provider of mental health, substance use, developmental disability, special education, and social services in the country. A nationwide resource, Sheppard Pratt provides services across a comprehensive continuum of care, spanning both hospital- and community-based resources. Since its founding in 1853, Sheppard Pratt has been innovating the field through research, best practice implementation, and a focus on improving the quality of mental health care on a global level. Sheppard Pratt has been consistently ranked as a top national psychiatric hospital by *U.S. News & World Report* for nearly 30 years.