Olivia Bartlett, DoTheMostGood Maryland Team

Committee: Finance

Testimony on: SB0056 - Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Psychiatrist and Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner Telemedicine Reimbursement - Sunset Termination

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: January 27, 2021

Bill Contact: Senator Adelaide Eckardt

DoTheMostGood (DTMG) is a progressive grass-roots organization with more than 2500 members who live in a wide range of communities in Montgomery and Frederick Counties, from Bethesda near the DC line north to Frederick and from Poolesville east to Silver Spring and Olney. DTMG supports legislation and activities that keep its members healthy and safe in a clean environment and which promote equity across all of our diverse communities. Affordable and accessible health care, including mental health care, for all Marylanders is a primary focus for DTMG. We strongly support SB0056 because it will guarantee that some of our most at-risk individuals can continue to receive the vital mental health services they need for as long as they need them.

For individuals experiencing serious mental illness that impairs their ability to live in the community, travel to appointments with medical professionals in facilities like clinics and hospitals can be especially challenging and difficult to achieve. To address this problem, the Maryland Assembly passed legislation in 2018 that allowed psychiatrists to be reimbursed for providing specialized mental health treatment to vulnerable groups via telehealth. In 2019, psychiatric nurse practitioners were added to the list of providers who can treat/prescribe via telehealth if they are participating in Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) treatment programs.

However, this important telehealth reimbursement program is currently scheduled to sunset on September 30, 2021, unless SB0056 is passed by the General Assembly during this 2021 session. Continuation of this telehealth program beyond the current September 30, 2021 sunset date is essential for continuity of care for many vulnerable, at risk individuals.

ACT is a successful, evidence-based program that uses a team approach to serve those with some of the most challenging needs in the public behavioral health system, particularly individuals who do not access services in traditional facility settings and those who are homeless, have comorbid physical conditions, or have substance use disorders. ACT programs helps these individuals become independent and integrate into the community as they strive to manage their mental illness. Continued success of these programs depends in part on continued support for telehealth programs and reimbursement of providers for telehealth visits.

The telehealth provision for psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric nurse practitioners also addresses the general shortage of behavioral health providers and the difficulties in recruiting staff for these types of community-based programs. By reducing the need for ACT team prescribers to spend hours driving around trying to locate the individuals they serve, the telehealth provision allows the providers to make better use of their time and serve more patients.

Telehealth has become an essential part of healthcare delivery across the board during the coronavirus outbreak, allowing services to expand while providing protection for both providers and consumers. Telehealth programs should continue even after the pandemic is over. Permanent continuation of telehealth mental health services is essential in order to provide continued mental health services to those who are most in need of such services. SB0056 removes the sunset provision and guarantees that some of the most at-risk individuals in our communities can continue to receive services via telehealth.

For all of these reasons, DTMG strongly supports SB0056 and urges a **FAVORABLE** report on this bill.

Respectfully submitted,

Olivia Bartlett
Co-lead, DoTheMostGood Maryland Team
oliviabartlett@verizon.net
240-751-5599