

The Honorable Shane Pendergrass
Health and Government Operations Committee

Regarding: House Bill 551, Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance – Coverage and Reimbursement of Telehealth Services

Dear Madam Chair Pendergrass and Honorable Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

I am Marissa Goldberg, a practicing psychiatrist in Maryland. Prior to July 2020, I was a resident providing outpatient mental health treatment in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the city, my outpatient office quickly transitioned to telehealth services. From mid-March through June 2020, I provided mental health care exclusively via telehealth.

I am writing in support of House Bill 551 because many individuals rely on audio-only telehealth to receive mental health care.

Because most of my patients, who resided in the poorest zip codes of Philadelphia, did not have access to the technology needed to support interactive audio and video services, I provided treatment mostly via audio-only calls. Most of my patients did not have reliable internet access or the internet speed required to support video teleconferences. Additionally, many of my patients lived in small, cramped spaces that lacked the privacy needed for a video teleconference. If audio-only communication was not an option for my patients, many of them simply would have been forced to forgo treatment.

While a combination of interactive audio and video telecommunications is ideal, it is simply not plausible for the population as a whole. Interactive audio and telecommunication may provide more information about patients and their symptoms than audio telecommunication alone. However, it is not beneficial to have more information than no information which is the inevitable outcome if audio-only calls are no longer considered a vehicle of telehealth services.

The recovery-oriented model of mental health care, which shifts the focus of treatment away from the traditional medical model, is rooted in providing care that is patient-centered. A patient's psychosocial needs must be carefully assessed in order to provide care. In keeping with the harm reduction principle in which the recovery-oriented model is rooted, it is imperative to allow care to be provided in the least restrictive capacity to which an individual has access.

An individual's resources, or lack thereof, should not be a barrier to receiving mental health treatment. Telehealth services provided in some capacity is far superior than failing to provide any telehealth services, particularly during a time of national crisis.

For these reasons, I support House Bill 551.

Thank you for your time and I am available for any questions.

Sincerely,

Marissa Goldberg, DO