



Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Acting Secretary

February 10, 2021

The Honorable Shane E. Pendergrass
Chair, House Health and Government Operations Committee
Room 241, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401-1991

RE: HB 731- Telehealth Services - Expansion Letter of Support

Dear Chair Pendergrass and Committee Members:

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) respectfully submits this letter of support for House Bill 731(HB 731) - Telehealth Services - Expansion. The bill among other things would require health plans and Medicaid to provide health care services through an expanded definition of telehealth, including audio-only telehealth services and removes some restrictions on the originating site and distant site for telehealth services. The bill requires health plans and Medicaid to reimburse for all telehealth services at the same rate as if the services were delivered in-person.

This bill is a cost-efficient way to expand access to care for individuals in Maryland communities and a valuable tool to increase access to residents in rural areas and decrease health disparities in communities. Additionally, allowing for reimbursement of audio-only telehealth services increases access to health care services for those that do not have reliable internet or internet access at all. It equalizes the opportunity to access telehealth services, a health care services that usage of has expanded greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic¹. Data shows an increase in the number of people accessing Mental health services increased **from 7,398 in 2019 to 106,642 in 2020**, and the number of individuals who access Substance Uses disorder treatment services using telehealth rose from **1,720 in 2019 to 26,084 in 2020**².

This bill would codify the reimbursement of any type of telehealth service that has already been taking place during the pandemic, as both government and private payors have allowed telephone communications to be reimbursed as telehealth. Many stakeholders nationally have lauded the sweeping changes in regulation and payment across health care.³

¹ Data collected between mid-March and mid-October 2020 by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services indicates over 24.5 million beneficiaries have received a Medicare telehealth service as compared to around 15,000 beneficiaries per week prior to the PHE.

² Data collected through ASO claims

³ Bart M. Demaerschalk et al., "American Telemedicine Association Telestroke Guidelines," *Telemedicine and E-Health* 23, no. 5 (May 1, 2017).

The Erisa Industry Committee, *Employers on Telemedicine: Government Standing in the Way* (June 17, 2020).

Additionally, a BHA survey of Maryland behavioral health providers examined their views on the effects of COVID-19 on clients receiving behavioral health services in Maryland. It included the question, “Based on your observations or what others are telling you, why are individuals keeping their treatment/service appointments less often? (check all that apply)”. 31% selected “Reluctant to travel or use public transportation,” 25% selected “Reluctance to Be at Service Organization with Others,” and 14% selected “Difficulty in Obtaining Child Care” ([The Effects of COVID-19 on Individuals Receiving Behavioral Health Services and Supports in Maryland](#)). These answers reflect a significant reluctance or inability to receive in-person care, which increased access to telehealth helps address.

MDH respectfully requests a favorable report on House Bill 731 so that any Marylander can have access to the care that they need without being dependent on internet service providers.

I hope this information is useful. If you would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact me at webster.ye@maryland.gov / (410) 260-3190 or Heather Shek, Deputy Director of Governmental Affairs at heather.shek@maryland.gov or at the same phone number.

Sincerely,



Webster Ye
Assistant Secretary, Health Policy