

**House Bill 123 Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021**

Health and Government Operations Committee

January 27, 2021

**Position: SUPPORT**

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present this testimony in support of House Bill 123.

Expanded use of telehealth has been a critical component in Maryland's effort to mitigate spread of the coronavirus. Increased flexibility in the delivery of these services has protected providers and patients from exposure to the virus, ensured continuity of care for Marylanders unable to access in-person treatment, and increased overall access to care. The service expansion has become a vital part of Maryland's continuum of care and it must be preserved.

The increased access to care that telehealth allows will be particularly important as Maryland works to address the serious behavioral health impact of COVID-19. Isolation, loss of income and grief resulting from the loss of a loved one – not to mention the threat of actually contracting the virus – are all having a profound effect on our mental health. Up to 40% of Marylanders have reported feeling anxious or depressed as a result of the pandemic and state crisis hotlines are receiving a startling increase in calls from individuals at risk for suicide. Drug-and-alcohol-related deaths jumped by more than 18% in the second quarter of 2020 as compared to the same period a year earlier, including a 30% increase in opioid-related deaths. If we expect to meet this increased demand, HB 123 is essential.

The bill does several important things:

- It expands access to audio-only telehealth in Medicaid and commercial health plans. This is an important health equity issue. Low-income families without access to the internet or smartphones and families living in rural communities with poor broadband service are unable to access audio-visual telehealth services.
- It prohibits Medicaid from limiting the delivery of telehealth based on the location of the recipient. This is particularly important for Marylanders experiencing homelessness and for individuals who may not feel safe accessing behavioral health treatment in their home.
- It requires commercial health plans to reimburse providers for telehealth services at the same rate as in-person care.

These provisions are vital in our efforts to address the health and behavioral health needs of Marylanders across the state. It is important to note, however, that HB 123 does not include several

critical provisions that are addressed in another telehealth bill (HB 551) this committee will consider later in session. These additional provisions are essential to the behavioral health community, and they should be adopted in whatever telehealth legislation this committee chooses to advance. They include:

- Reimbursement of behavioral health programs for telehealth services delivered by peers and paraprofessionals – two critical sectors of the behavioral health workforce.
- Protection of consumer choice and assurance that a patient may not be required to use telehealth in lieu of an in-person visit.
- Reimbursement parity for telehealth services provided in the Medicaid program.

Telehealth is a critical tool in our efforts to meet an increasing demand for mental health and substance use treatment. For this reason, **MHAMD supports HB 123 and the additional telehealth provisions included in HB 551.**

*For more information, please contact Dan Martin at (410) 978-8865*