



January 28, 2021

The Honorable Shane E. Pendergrass
House Health & Government Operations Committee
Room 241, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Support with Amendment – HB 123: Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021

Dear Chairman Pendergrass and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Psychiatric Society (MPS) and the Washington Psychiatric Society (WPS) are state medical organizations whose physician members specialize in diagnosing, treating, and preventing mental illnesses, including substance use disorders. Formed more than sixty-five years ago to support the needs of psychiatrists and their patients, both organizations work to ensure available, accessible, and comprehensive quality mental health resources for all Maryland citizens; and strives through public education to dispel the stigma and discrimination of those suffering from a mental illness. As the district branches of the American Psychiatric Association covering the state of Maryland, MPS and WPS represent over 1000 psychiatrists and physicians currently in psychiatric training.

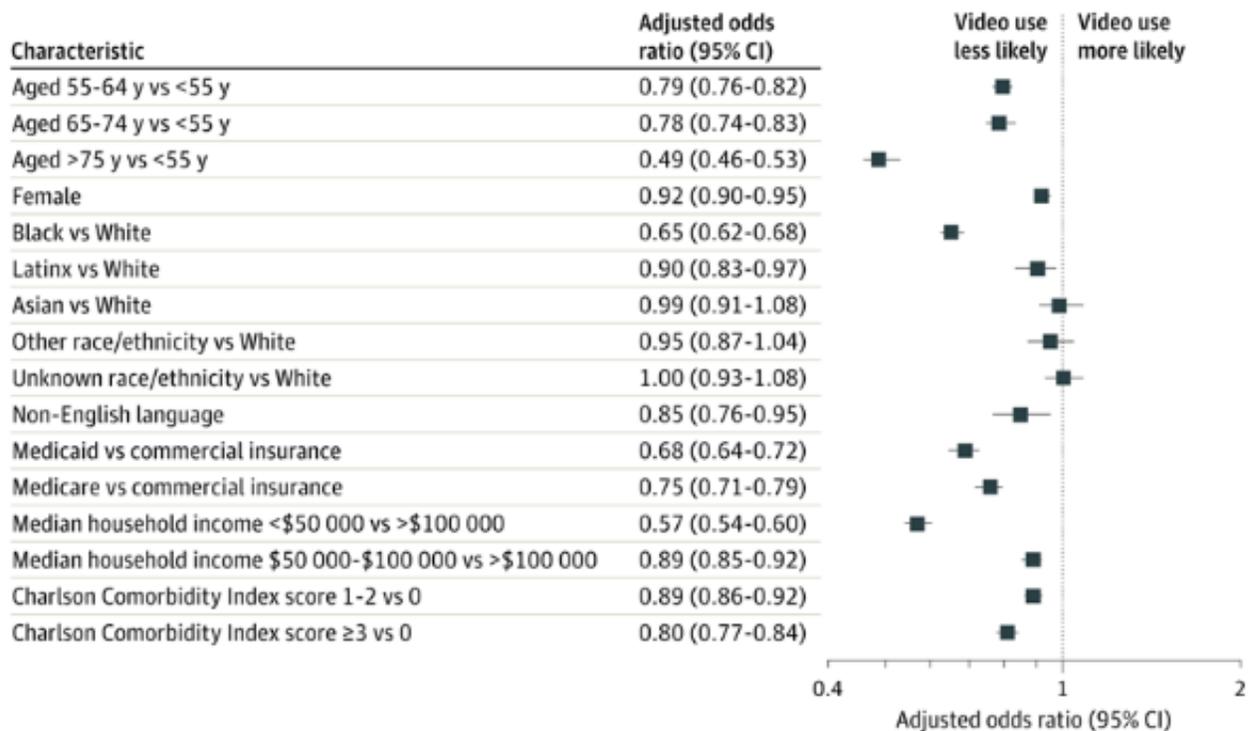
MPS & WPS support House Bill 123: Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021 (HB 123), which would codify many of the temporary changes to telehealth services covered under state commercial plans and Medicaid. The changes have been put in place to ensure continued access to care during the pandemic and have allowed clinics and private practices to stay open when they may have otherwise been forced to close. Furthermore, expanding coverage to telehealth has dramatically changed the way many of our doctors deliver psychiatric care. Our members have quickly adapted to telehealth and note that no-show rates have significantly decreased, with patients no longer having to leave their homes or consider travel to access care.

MPS & WPS support HB 123's provisions for pay parity for telehealth services and its requirement that insurers refrain from using stricter utilization review reviews for telehealth. MPS & WPS are especially grateful for HB 123's inclusion of reimbursement for audio-only services, as we see it as a tool for equitable access to care. For patients who lack broadband access or video-only technology, the ability to reach patients over the telephone during the pandemic has been critical to ensuring continuity of care. A recent study by Johns Hopkins found that despite the growth in telehealth this last year, lower video use was also observed among women (8% less likely), Black people (35%), Hispanics (10%), and low-income families (43% less likely for household income less than \$50,000). Americans over 75 suffered a similar gap, with 51% less ability to use video. Additionally, patients who are hesitant to see a physician face-to-face may feel more comfortable seeking care via audio-only telehealth.

The following chart shows the study's results:



Washington
Psychiatric Society



Ensuring patients continue to receive clinically safe and efficient care should be a priority for legislators as Maryland continues to grapple with the pandemic. In addition to the increased anxiety among individuals afraid of becoming sick, the pandemic’s social distancing policies have also led to people becoming isolated or unemployed. Poor mental health outcomes are linked to both situations. The pandemic has also placed an unmeasurable burden on our frontline workers, and we must address their mental health. Lastly, Maryland’s data shows that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted our Black and Latinx residents. Before the pandemic, these patients were less likely to receive care due to lack of insurance, stigma, and distrust in the health care system. MPS & WPS have seen the promise in telehealth’s potential to expand access to care and help our state save lives.

MPS & WPS respectfully ask that you consider amending the bill to include language that would prohibit insurers from requiring providers to use specific telehealth vendors or technology platforms. This amendment would prevent the bill’s intended telehealth expansion from becoming inhibited by burdensome requirements to providers.

With the amendment adopted, MPS & WPS would then ask the committee for a favorable report of HB 123. If you have any questions with regards to this testimony, please feel free to contact Thomas Tompsett Jr. at tommy.tompsett@mdlobbyist.com.

Respectfully submitted,
The Joint Legislative Action Committee
of the Maryland Psychiatric Society and the Washington Psychiatric Society