



To: The Honorable Chair, Delegate Shane E. Pendergrass, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee

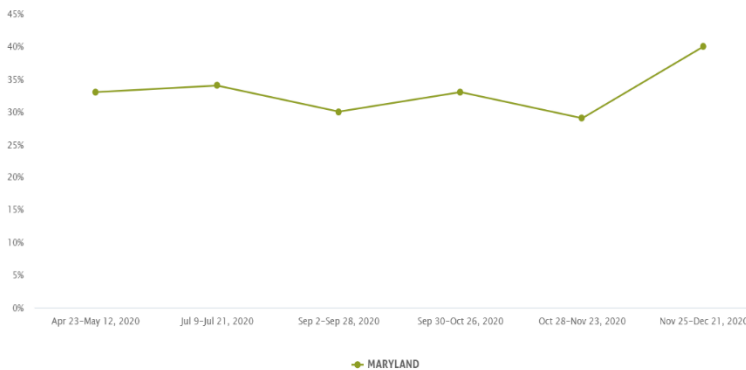
From: Melissa S. Rock, Birth to Three Strategic Initiative Director

Re.: **HB 551: Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance - Coverage and Reimbursement of Telehealth Services**

Date: February 10, 2021

Position: **SUPPORT**

Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) applauds Maryland's Department of Health (MDH) for their swift expansion of access to telehealth somatic and behavioral health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did the pandemic increase the medical needs of Marylanders statewide, the need for behavioral health support also increased exponentially. As stated in an MDH press release, "Maryland's crisis hotline saw a significant increase in volume in recent months, especially in text messages. From March 2019 to March 2020, text messages increased by 842 percent; 'chats' increased almost 84 percent; and calls increased almost 25 percent. Between February 2020 (1,619 calls) and March 2020 (2,345 calls), calls to Maryland 211 increased by 45 percent."¹ ACY has also seen a spike in children experiencing anxiety² and children experiencing depression.³ (See tables below.)



Adults Living In Households With Children Who Felt Nervous, Anxious Or On Edge For More Than Half Of The Days Or Nearly Every Day In The Past Week (Percent)

National KIDS COUNT
KIDS COUNT Data Center, datacenter.kidscount.org
A project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

With the help of the increased ability to scan brains, we now know that 85% of brain development happens before a child turns 3 years old. That brain development is highly influenced by a young child's experiences. For children experiencing toxic levels of stress—like those children living in poverty, or exposed to violence, their brains do not develop at the same rate because of the impact on their bodies responding to that toxic stress.⁴ However, a strong attachment to one primary caretaker can buffer the negative impacts toxic stress can have on brain development and ensure brain development progresses appropriately.⁵ A parent can only provide that strong attachment to their children if they are

receiving the behavioral health treatment they need.

¹ <https://health.maryland.gov/newsroom/Pages/Maryland-Department-of-Health-launches-%E2%80%99MD-Mind-Health%E2%80%99.aspx>

² <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/line/10894-adults-living-in-households-with-children-who-felt-down-depressed-or-hopeless-for-more-than-half-of-the-days-or-nearly-every-day-for-the-past-week?loc=22&loct=2#2/22/false/2047,2042,2034,2033,2032,2028,2027,2002,1997,1996/asc/any/21182>

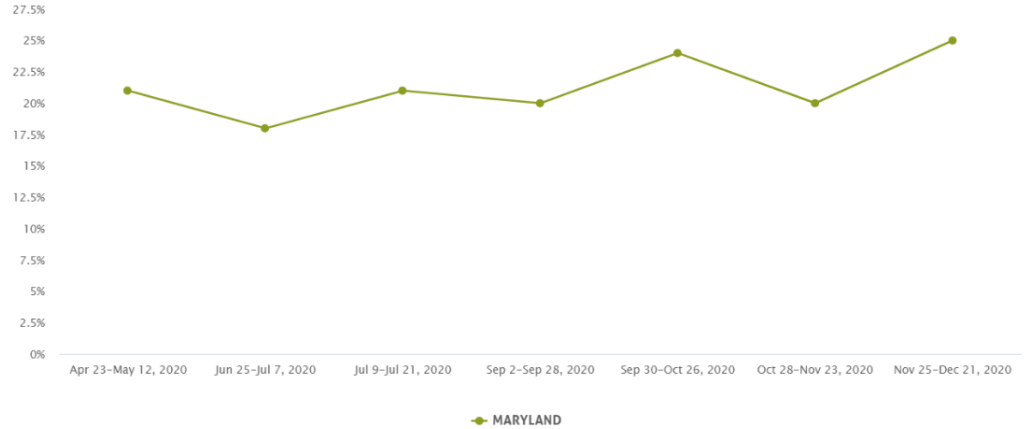
³ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/line/10893-adults-living-in-households-with-children-who-felt-nervous-anxious-or-on-edge-for-more-than-half-of-the-days-or-nearly-every-day-in-the-past-week?loc=22&loct=2#2/22/false/2047,2042,2034,2033,2032,2028,2027,2002,1997,1996/asc/any/21180>

⁴ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-toxic-stress/>

⁵ https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Executive_Summary_FB2PBl.pdf



When clinically appropriate and permissible to a patient, telehealth eliminates a lot of barriers than exist for many Marylanders living in under-resources areas even when there is no global pandemic. For many families, transportation to medical and behavioral health is a barrier. While Medicaid transport is intended to eliminate that barrier, adults cannot bring their children with them when utilizing Medicaid transportation, and many of these parents do not have access to childcare. Telehealth also makes these



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appointments much less time consuming. For parents in low-wage jobs with limited access to paid time off, decreasing the time for appointments eliminates a significant barrier to receiving important treatment. **HB 551** will ensure that these telehealth expansions stay in place beyond the pandemic.

There are some important ways **HB 551** expands upon HB 123- Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021. **HB 551 requires payment parity for behavioral health treatment for Medicaid providers** (rather than only private providers), which creates equity issues for Marylanders without the resources to obtain private insurance. **HB 551 also requires patients utilizing private insurance to consent** to their treatment being via telehealth rather than in person. We think it's essential that patients consent to their treatment being provided via telehealth services and that it is deemed clinically appropriate to receive the treatment via telehealth rather than in person.

ACY urges this committee to issue a favorable report on HB 551 to help eliminate many of the access barriers for somatic and behavioral health for families across Maryland.