

January 28, 2021

**House Bill 123 – Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021- SUPPORT**

Chair Pendergrass, Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 45,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations and service providers. NAMI Maryland is dedicated to providing education, support and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

NAMI fights for policies to ensure people get the best possible care. About one in five Americans experience a mental health condition, but only half receive treatment. Comprehensive coverage of mental health care should be the standard for everyone in our country, along with access to quality treatment when and where people need it. Telehealth is an excellent example of all of the above, and as we've seen with the pandemic, have become invaluable to continuing behavioral health care during the COVID-19 pandemic – even more so after state and federal regulators took additional steps to expand access to telehealth for Marylanders.

Please protect these expansions – telehealth has been a lifeline for seniors, families, children, those with disabilities or in rural and underserved communities to stay well and access affordable care. The telehealth expansions NAMI Maryland supports include:

- Audio-only telehealth where appropriate. Not everyone has the same access to technology and everyone needs to receive care whether or not their wi-fi is strong. Almost half a million Marylanders lack access to high speed internet.
- Remove originating and distant site restrictions – meet patients where they are. Feeling safe is of the utmost importance for behavioral health patients.
- Allow the same reimbursement for clinically necessary services.
- Parity. Prevent health insurance carriers from restricting access to telehealth services for mental health or substance use issues.

In addition to the expansions in HB 123, we urge the committee to include important provisions from HB 191, too:

- Access for Marylanders enrolled in Medicaid to continue telehealth services by extending reimbursement parity for Medicaid providers.
- Reimbursement for peers and paraprofessionals – behavioral health workers who ensure individuals can access the care they need and receive mental health treatment and connections to additional services as needed.
- Protects consumer choice, ensuring that a patient may not be required to use telehealth in lieu of an in-person visit.

This legislation focuses on increasing access to health care where it's most needed – safely, in the homes of Marylanders during the pandemic. Please preserve the telehealth expansions above to ensure the best continuity of care possible. For these reasons, NAMI Maryland asks for a favorable report on **HB 123**.

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