

Testimony for SB0634: Health Insurance – Home Test Kits for Sexually Transmitted Diseases – Required Coverage

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I am an infectious diseases clinician and medical director of the Johns Hopkins Hospital John G Bartlett Specialty Practice that provides HIV and primary care to more than 3000 people living with HIV. We also offer pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to a group of patients at high risk for HIV. Both of these groups of patients require routine STD screening. Giving patients more options for testing that include self-collection as well as mail-in options will increase timely screening, treatment and help to address the STD epidemics.

Statement of the Problem

- In 2019 (most recent available data), there were 37,778 cases of chlamydia, 11,597 cases of gonorrhea; the rates of both infections have been increasing year on year since 2015.
- The majority of cases of chlamydia are asymptomatic so many of these infections go undiagnosed and untreated. Gonorrhea can also be asymptomatic in women with genital infection and in both sexes with rectal infection.
- Both infections can have severe consequences including pelvic inflammatory disease which can lead to infertility and ectopic pregnancy, and infection in babies born to infected mothers which can lead to blindness and pneumonia
- Without testing, patients cannot know their status in order to get treated and prevent transmitting STIs to others.
- Stigma and inconvenience of coming to static clinics are both barriers to routine screening.

Why this bill will address the problem of STIs including HIV

- 'Home test kit' refers to home self-collection of specimens that can be tested in a reference lab after being dropped off or mailed in.
- There is no difference in the accuracy of testing with self-collected compared to clinician-collected samples.
- We know that a significant proportion of patients prefer to self-collect samples for STD testing in the privacy of their own homes.
- Maryland will be only the second state in the country to be so forward thinking in passing legislation that will expand the access to non-clinic-based self-collected samples for STD testing in reference labs. The legislative mandate that insurers pay for this kind of innovative screening approach will increase access and uptake of testing

Why now?

- The COVID-19 pandemic massively disrupted STD testing and clinical care and access to essential services including testing due to closure of STD clinics and massively reduced in-person services.
- During that time, the State of Maryland referred clients to I Want the Kit, an on-line program where users could receive self-collection kits in the mail, and then return swabs to our College of American Pathologists-certified lab for high quality testing. There was a 645% increase in orders for this testing during COVID which has been sustained and continues to increase.
- Providers should be able to order and have insurers pay for similar services to make these kinds of alternatives sustainable.

In summary, I applaud the timely introduction of this bill. Creative approaches for reaching people and allowing them to take control over their own sexual health may change the disturbing trends in STD rates. Without testing to find asymptomatic infection, the continually increasing rates of STIs cannot be reversed.