



SB 534 – Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023

Committee: Health and Government Operations

February 22, 2023

POSITION: Favorable

Maryland Coalition of Families: Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) helps families who care for a loved one with behavioral health needs. Using personal experience, our staff provide one-to-one peer support and navigation services to family members with a child, youth or adult with a mental health, substance use or gambling issue.

MCF strongly supports SB 534.

In our work with families during the pandemic, we saw how beneficial telehealth for behavioral health disorders can be to so many families. It can be an overwhelming challenge for families to access behavioral health care for a child. In order to get a child to a therapist or psychiatrist appointment, parents/caregivers must:

- find an appropriate behavioral health provider that is within a reasonable distance;
- have reliable transportation;
- perhaps take time off from work; and/or
- find someone to care for other children.

Any one of these can prove to be an insurmountable barrier to accessing treatment. Indeed, of families referred by their child's pediatrician for their child to receive specialty mental health treatment, fewer than one-half actually had an appointment with a mental health provider within the next six months. Telehealth has allowed many families to get help for their child when they otherwise could not.

Not only have many families discovered that telehealth has made accessing services much easier, they also have found that telehealth is a means of delivering extremely effective treatment. Families who before the COVID-19 pandemic would not have considered using telehealth for behavioral health treatment have now become great advocates.

At the same time, we have seen numerous families for whom mental health and substance use telehealth has not worked. Children can be particularly hard to engage via remote communication, and providers have reported especial difficulties working with a younger population.

SB 534 addresses the needs of both populations by continuing to support the widespread availability of telehealth services after the Sunset ends, while maintaining consumer choice. Easy access to behavioral health services is more important now than ever. The mental health of people has dramatically worsened in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Adults saw an increase in rates of depression from 6% to 25% from 2019 to 2021.¹ Emergency department visits for potential suicidality for youth aged 12-17 increased 39% from 2019 to 2021.² The United States and Maryland are experiencing a mental health crisis, and this is especially true of youth. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children’s Hospital Association joined together to declare a National State of Emergency in Children’s Mental Health.

SB 534, by preserving the current regulations that are in effect, ensures that telehealth for behavioral health disorders will continue to be a viable option. Consumers need to be permitted to receive telehealth services from their homes or wherever else they are located. They need to be allowed to use audio-only communication, since many do not have any or reliable access to broadband communication.

Moreover, in order to preserve the capacity of behavioral health providers to deliver telehealth for mental health and substance use disorders, they must be reimbursed at the same rate as in-person services. They should be reimbursed at a level that is commensurate with the amount of time and work they must put in, which is the same regardless of how they are delivering services.

Therefore we urge a favorable report on SB 534.

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¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics (November 2022). Anxiety and Depression.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (June 2021). Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts among Persons Aged 12-25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, January 2019-May 2021.
