



February 22, 2023

**Senate Finance Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

SB 534 – Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 78,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports SB 534 – Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023. This commonsense bill extends the sunset on audio-only telehealth reimbursement and telehealth payment parity at a time when the long-term opportunities and considerations of telehealth behavioral health care are still unclear. The sunset extension will provide the state with additional time to assess the impact of telehealth on consumer access and choice, ultimately contributing to a stronger permanent policy.

Maryland expanded telehealth reimbursement for behavioral health during the COVID-19 pandemic. This service played a huge role in maintaining access to services and continues to be critical to ensure consumer access. Many beneficiaries may not have reliable transportation and may prefer telehealth options to aid in work and childcare scheduling. It is essential to maintain payment parity to avoid a reduction in telehealth access or behavioral health provider capacity.

Audio-only services are also critical in recognition of the large proportion of Marylanders who do not have the data plans and technological hardware for a video telehealth appointment. Audio-only services have become commonplace, and 44 states have continued to offer these services. Maryland should remain one of them.

A further assessment of Maryland’s behavioral health telehealth policies is prudent. The marketplace is still disrupted by the pandemic and resulting workforce shortage. Maryland should seek policies that maintain access and give beneficiaries the choice of audio-only telehealth, video telehealth, and in-person services. Forthcoming recommendations from the federal government required by the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act will help, along with more time to assess Maryland’s unique experiences. **We urge a favorable report of SB 534 to extend these telehealth policies for two more years.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142