

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 534 - Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023**

**Senate Finance Committee
February 22, 2023**



Health Care for the Homeless strongly supports SB 534, which would extend a number of telehealth expansions that have existed under the public health emergency and since the passage of the Preserve Telehealth Health Access Act of 2021.

Telehealth has immensely increased access to care for people experiencing homelessness. While this increased access occurred during the public health emergency, the benefits are so concrete that we strongly believe increasing access to telehealth permanently is critical. Make no mistake: the ability to provide phone-only services to our clients is lifesaving. While we support the bill in its entirety, we would like to focus our testimony on the most vital aspects of the bill: maintaining access to audio-only services.

A collection of case studies based on interviews with staff at 17 Health Care for the Homeless programs throughout the country about their experience implementing telehealth demonstrates why increasing access to telehealth permanently is beneficial. Cases specific to Health Care for the Homeless in Maryland are highlighted below.

Contrary to prior belief, telehealth, particularly audio-only telehealth, works well for people experiencing homelessness. With our client population, we have generally found that phones are ubiquitous and inexpensive. Conversely, high speed internet access and video screens are exceedingly inaccessible. Allowing patients to receive services via audio-only telephones can make up for the lack of broadband access in many parts of the State and the lack of affordable internet and computer technology among lower-income families.

Some clients experiencing homelessness report that telehealth feels safer and more accessible. Policies related to reimbursements and ongoing ability to conduct audio-only visits are likely to determine the ongoing use of telehealth. In other words, phone-only telehealth is the only type of telehealth accessible to the vast majority of our clients. If the ability to conduct phone-only visits goes away, so will our ability to provide any level of lifesaving telehealth care.

Audio-only telehealth is just a tool to deliver health care; all clinical standards and expectations still apply.

We believe there are widespread misconceptions about audio-only telehealth. At its core, audio is just another tool for delivering the same type of and level health care. No clinical or medical requirements, regulations, or standards have changed under audio-only telehealth. We provide the same quality therapeutic and medical services as we always have – whether in person, on video or by phone. The requirements to meet billable standards are robust and nothing about the way we practice is relaxed just because they are over the phone. As highlighted in the examples below, checking in with clients by phone

on various issues is a valuable service but not always a billable service. There continues to be a distinct set of criteria for a service to be billable. The distinctions between what is a billable phone telehealth visit versus a non-billable phone call are exemplified below.

We urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 534.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Our mission is to end homelessness through racially equitable health care, housing and advocacy in partnership with those of us who have experienced it. We deliver medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, housing and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.