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Senate Bill 534 Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023

Health and Government Operations Committee

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of Senate Bill 534.

SB 534 extends for another two years the time-limited provisions requiring coverage for audio-only telehealth and telehealth rate reimbursement for providers on par with in-person services.

As Maryland works to tackle a persistent behavioral health workforce shortage and address an increasing demand for quality mental health and substance use services, we must ensure the tools currently expanding access to care do not lapse. The use of video and audio-only telehealth has proven invaluable in serving those with mental health and substance use disorders who otherwise would have foregone the treatment and support services that help avert the use of higher – and more expensive – levels of care.

Audio-only telehealth is vital. Many Marylanders lack the financial means to purchase smart phones or other video technology and the data plans to support them. Others live in rural areas where broadband coverage is spotty at best. Without ongoing supports through audio-only telehealth these individuals will face great difficulty in accessing needed behavioral health care.

Likewise, rate parity between services provided through telehealth and those conducted in-person is critically important. The use of telehealth helps behavioral health providers allocate scarce resources to best meet the increased demand for behavioral health care. Allowing lower rates for the use of telehealth in the middle of a behavioral health workforce crisis would jeopardize providers' ability to maintain already stretched staff and likely cause those providers to eliminate telehealth as an option.

This bill will ensure people with behavioral health needs can access care in a manner that works best for them. **For this reason, MHAMD supports SB 534 and urges a favorable report.**

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