

Senate Bill 492 Public Schools - Student Telehealth Appointments - Policy and Access

Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

February 28, 2024

Position: Support

Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) 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 SB 492.

MHAMD strongly supports SB 492, which would increase access to telehealth for children and adolescents by requiring each county board of education to establish a policy for accommodating appointments during the school day. It would require each public middle and high school to designate a private space for these appointments, which we see as a critical tool in supporting access to behavioral health care for Maryland's students.

For over a decade the mental health of children and youth has been worsening. In the 10 years leading up to the COVID pandemic, depression increased by about 40% in young people,¹ and the mental health of youth deteriorated dramatically in the wake of the pandemic. In 2021, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) joined together to declare a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health.² Maryland youth have not been immune to these trends. Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey of 2021-22 shows that 29% of Maryland high school students and 23% of middle school students reported that their mental health was not good most of the time or always.³

Many of these youth need behavioral health treatment, but treatment is not always easy to access. There is a tremendous shortage of behavioral health providers (especially those who specialize in treating children and youth) and coveted evening and week-end appointments are difficult to secure, meaning that parents/caregivers must take off work (if they are able) to take their child to an in-person appointment during the day. In-person appointments can also increase the amount of time a student is out of the classroom, impacting learning. Student access to behavioral telehealth appointments during the school day is an obvious solution to these challenges.

¹ Kids' mental health is in crisis. Here's what psychologists are doing to help. American Academy of Pediatrics. January 1, 2023. Accessed January 14, 2023. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/01/trends-improving-youth-mental-health>

² A declaration from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children's Hospital Association. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. October 2021. Accessed January 14, 2023. <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>

³ Maryland Department of Health releases 2021-2022 Youth Risk Behavioral Survey and Youth Tobacco Survey data. Maryland Department of Health. March 3, 2023. Accessed January 14, 2023. <https://health.maryland.gov/newsroom/Pages/Maryland-Department-of-Health-releases-2021-2022-Youth-Risk-Behavior-Survey-and-Youth-Tobacco-Survey-data.aspx#:~:text=More%20than%20one%2Dthird%20of,or%20always.%20Female%20students%20were>

For more information, please contact Ann Geddes at (443) 926-3396

In addition, access to telehealth appointments in schools promotes equity. Frequently it is the parents/caregivers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are unable to take time off from work, or who don't possess the transportation, to take their child to an in-person behavioral health appointment.

Of course, any space designated for students to access telehealth appointments in schools must be private. While space constraints may make this a difficult for some schools, the many benefits of facilitating access to telehealth appointments in schools outweigh the challenges. Space can be identified if this is made a priority.

By requiring schools to develop policies to facilitate access to telehealth appointments, and to designate space for telehealth appointments, SB 492 would significantly support the mental health of students. For this reason, MHAMD supports SB 492 and urges a favorable report.