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TESTIMONY OF SENATOR SHELLY HETTLEMAN
SB950 SEXUAL ASSAULT FORENSIC EXAMINATIONS CONDUCTED THROUGH TELEHEALTH -
REIMBURSEMENT AND STUDY

One in five women in Maryland experience a sexual assault in their lifetime, according to the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This is a horrific, life-altering experience that is too common. Yet, for a variety of reasons, only 18% of those who experience sexual assault report it to the authorities.

This bill would require the Maryland Sexual Assault Evidence Kit Policy & Funding Committee to assess the feasibility of a telehealth pilot program to expand access to treatment and reporting services. The proposed program would enable healthcare providers in any hospital in Maryland to connect with a licensed Forensic Nurse Examiner through telehealth to conduct a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE).

SAFE exams are critical to providing the support survivors need after this type of traumatic event. Typically, when a survivor would arrive at a hospital and get seen by a Forensic Nurse Examiner (FNE), they would be provided a physical and mental health assessment and any needed treatment. This exam would also involve the collection of any evidence, as consented by the patient. Lastly, FNEs can help to corroborate survivor criminal cases, if pursued, in court.

The issue, however, is that there is a nationwide shortage of Forensic Nurse Examiners, to which Maryland is not immune. Many hospitals in Maryland do not have FNEs on staff. If a survivor were to present at one of these hospitals, they would likely be referred to a hospital that can conduct the SAFE exam. After a traumatic assault, this poses great stress and inconvenience and may lead someone to not end up getting the exam they originally wanted. By taking advantage of the technology available in telehealth, this program could make it easier to serve more people, broadening the access to these specialized services.

This bill also ensures that providers are reimbursed for treatment delivered via telehealth via the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB), as is currently done for exams conducted entirely in-person. This is critical to ensure that costs are not being incurred by the survivor. This is the only way we currently have to collect evidence after a sexual assault while maintaining the chain of custody enforced by courts. We expect this bill to enable increased access to these needed services.