

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 869
Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2025
House Health and Government Operations Committee
February 13, 2025

Social Work Advocates for Social Change (SWASC) strongly support HB 869, which will repeal sunset provisions limiting the recognition of audio-only sessions as a reimbursable service, and guarantee insurance reimbursement parity between telehealth and in-person services. **HB 869 would ensure the continued provision of services that remove barriers to accessing care, increase client choice in choosing how they receive services, and ensure telephonic services that are existing components of gold-standard treatments are reimbursable.**

HB 869 would enhance access to behavioral health care by removing barriers that could otherwise prevent individuals from receiving critical services. Telehealth allows clients to access geographically distant service providers who would otherwise not be an option. SWASC members utilizing telehealth have provided services to clients all over Maryland, including families over 2.5 hours away from the provider location. Additional client-side barriers SWASC members have observed include transportation issues, childcare responsibilities, stigma against seeking treatment, and time constraints. For providers, low or no reimbursement for telehealth services is the number one reason for not offering telehealth services.¹ **HB 869 guarantees payment parity, ensuring providers can continue offering telehealth services thereby decreasing barriers to accessing behavioral services.**

Clients seeking mental health services may find audio-only telehealth services to be their preferred and most effective method of service delivery. The 2022 Maryland Telehealth Report found that audio-only telehealth may be preferred by clients when discussing sensitive topics.² Additionally, members of SWASC have experience working with clients who exhibit a strong preference for audio-only services. Autistic clients may be more at ease and find services without a visual component to be more effective. Similarly, older clients lacking technological literacy may prefer traditional telephonic communication to typical telehealth platforms such as Zoom. **As telehealth**

¹ Technical Report of the Maryland Telehealth Study (2022). *NORC at the University of Chicago*. (Rep).
https://mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/pages/hit/hit_telemedicine/documents/hit_norc_technical_rpt.pdf

² Technical Report of the Maryland Telehealth Study (2022). *NORC at the University of Chicago*. (Rep).
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providers, we have found that audio-only service delivery can be as effective as audio-visual or in-person delivery if it is the client's preference.

Audio-only telehealth services are used in a variety of widely used evidence-based practices and treatments. A key element of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is telephone coaching, through which a client can reach their therapist in between sessions for support during a crisis or for assistance implementing a skill learned in session into everyday life.³ Similarly, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline provides immediate support over telephone to individuals facing mental health or substance use emergencies. **The staggering number of crisis calls received by 988 – over nine million in the two years since its launch⁴ – reflects both an urgent need for accessible mental health resources as well as the effectiveness of audio-only communication in reaching individuals in crisis.**

Telehealth, particularly audio-only, sessions reduce barriers to accessing care, increase client choice in service delivery, and are already recognized components of effective therapy modalities. For these reasons, **Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on HB 869.**

Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

³ *Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT): What it is & purpose.* Cleveland Clinic. (2022, January 24). <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22838-dialectical-behavior-therapy-dbt>

⁴ *988 lifeline performance metrics.* SAMHSA. (2024). <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/988/performance-metrics>