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Testimony on HB869 Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2025

February 13, 2025

House Health and Government Operations Committee

POSITION: SUPPORT

The Community Behavioral Health Association of Maryland (CBH) appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 869. CBH is the leading voice for community-based providers serving the mental health and addiction needs of vulnerable Marylanders. Our 87 members serve the majority of individuals accessing care through Maryland's public behavioral health system. These providers deliver vital outpatient and residential treatment, day programs, case management, Assertive Community Treatment (ACT), employment supports, and crisis intervention services to those in need.

HB869 will ensure that the telehealth services our members provide continue to be accessible, effective, and equitable for Maryland's most vulnerable populations. The ongoing behavioral health workforce crisis calls for creative, flexible, and practical solutions. Telehealth – both video and audio-only – has proven to be one of the most effective means of delivering care, and its continued use is essential in addressing Maryland's growing behavioral health challenges.

An October 2024 study conducted by the Maryland Health Care Commission (MHCC) on telehealth highlights that behavioral health care is one of the most frequently used modalities and is growing in its overall share of telehealth services.¹ Telehealth continues to be invaluable for individuals living with mental health and substance use disorders who would otherwise face barriers to care. For many, telehealth reduces the need for travel, provides access to care in underserved areas, and removes stigma that often delays or prevents treatment.

While video telehealth services are an important tool, we emphasize the need for continuing audio-only telehealth services. Many individuals in the public behavioral health system lack access to the technology or reliable internet service necessary for video-based services. Many are financially unable to purchase smartphones or data plans, and others live in rural areas where broadband access is inconsistent or unavailable. For these individuals, audio-only telehealth provides a lifeline, allowing them to receive essential services such as medication management and therapy that they would otherwise forgo. Without continued access to audio-only telehealth, these individuals would face difficulty accessing care, which would likely

¹ *Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2023 Behavioral Health Care - Treatment and Access Report*, Maryland Health Care Commission, October 2024.



result in worsened outcomes and an increase in the need for more expensive interventions.

CBH strongly supports the continuation of rate parity between telehealth and in-person services. Telehealth services, whether delivered through video or audio-only modalities, require the same licensure and documentation standards as traditional, in-person services. In fact, telehealth enables providers to offer care to a broader range of individuals more efficiently, which is essential as Maryland continues to face a shortage of behavioral health professionals.

According to the *Investing in Maryland's Behavioral Health Workforce* report published by the MHCC in October 2024, Maryland currently has only 50% of the behavioral health professionals needed to meet demand,² and this shortage is projected to grow. Telehealth allows providers to make the most efficient use of limited human resources and helps meet the increasing demand for services. Forcing lower reimbursement rates for telehealth services would jeopardize the continued viability of telehealth in the behavioral health sector, forcing providers to reduce or eliminate this crucial service.

Telehealth has proven to be an effective and popular modality for both clients and providers in Maryland's behavioral health system. Providers have reported high levels of satisfaction with telehealth services, citing increased efficiency and reduced no-show rates. Clients have expressed appreciation for the flexibility that telehealth offers, particularly those who face challenges such as transportation difficulties, restrictive work schedules, and childcare issues.

Telehealth, in both video and audio-only formats, has fundamentally changed the delivery of behavioral health services in Maryland. It has increased access, reduced barriers to care, and allowed providers to better serve individuals with serious behavioral health needs. HB869 will ensure that telehealth remains an accessible, effective, and equitable option for Maryland's most vulnerable populations. We respectfully urge the Committee to give HB869 a favorable report.

For more information contact Nicole Graner, Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy, at 240-994-8113 or Nicole@MDCBH.org

² *Investing In Maryland's Behavioral Health Workforce Report*, Maryland Health Care Commission, October 2024.