

JOSELINE A. PEÑA-MELNYK

Legislative District 21
Prince George's and
Anne Arundel Counties

—
Chair

Health and Government
Operations Committee

—
Rules and Executive
Nominations Committee

Legislative Policy Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Annapolis Office

The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 241
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3502 · 301-858-3502
800-492-7122 Ext. 3502
Joseline.Pena.Melnyk@house.state.md.us

—
District Office

P. O. Box 1251
College Park, Maryland 20741-1251

February 11, 2025

House Bill 869 - Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2025

SPONSOR TESTIMONY: Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable with Amendments)

Madam Chair, Vice Chair, and fellow members of the Committee, I stand before you today to advocate for a bill that could transform how healthcare reaches every corner of Maryland. The Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2025 isn't just another piece of legislation – it's about ensuring that no Marylander has to choose between their health and their circumstances.

When we first passed the Preserve Telehealth Access Act in 2021, we were responding to an unprecedented crisis. What we didn't fully anticipate was how this emergency measure would become a lifeline for so many of our residents. The Maryland Health Care Commission's 2024 report shows us just how vital telehealth has become – behavioral health services delivered through telehealth grew from 15.5% in 2019 to an astounding 59.5% in 2023 among private payers.¹ These aren't just numbers; they represent real people getting the health care they desperately need.

Maryland has already established itself as a leader in telehealth innovation. According to the 2023 State Policy Agenda for Telehealth Innovation by the Reason Foundation, our state stands out as one of the few that excels across multiple telehealth policy dimensions.² We've successfully implemented modality-neutral policies, allowing healthcare to be initiated through any appropriate mode. We've broken down barriers to across-state-line telehealth, and we've created frameworks supporting independent practice - placing us among the most progressive states for telehealth innovation. This bill is the next logical step in our journey.

Think about Sarah, an elderly resident in Western Maryland, who can now speak with her doctor without making the two-hour journey to Baltimore. Or Michael, a single father who can attend therapy sessions during his lunch break without taking time off work. These are the stories of telehealth's impact.

Our neighboring states understand this reality. As of November 2024, 45 states and DC allow audio-only telehealth services, and 23 states have enacted permanent insurer parity laws.³ States like Connecticut have made their pandemic-era telehealth policies permanent, while Michigan has established both private payer coverage and payment parity.⁴ Maryland cannot afford to fall behind.

This bill builds upon our previous successes while ensuring sustainability. It will:

- Remove the June 2025 sunset provision for audio-only telehealth coverage
- Ensure coverage for medically necessary somatic, dental, or behavioral health services
- Protect patient choice in how they receive care
- Maintain payment parity for telehealth services

- require the MHCC to provide a report on the advances in the area of telehealth, including evolving modalities and changes in the cost of delivering services, every four years.

The Maryland Health Care Commission's 2024 recommendations strongly support these measures. Their study shows that telehealth has become a vital component of our healthcare landscape, promoting health equity and extending access to underserved communities.¹

Critics might argue about costs, but consider this: What's the cost of a missed appointment because someone couldn't find transportation? What's the price of delayed mental health care because someone couldn't take time off work? The Commission's findings show that telehealth isn't just about convenience, it's about breaking down barriers to essential care.¹

We stand at a crucial crossroads. If we don't act now, come June 2025, many Marylanders could lose access to healthcare services they've come to rely on. The audio-only option, which has been a lifeline for our elderly and those without reliable internet access, could disappear. The payment parity that has made telehealth sustainable for providers could vanish.

I urge you to consider the real impact this bill has on real lives. Think about the rural family who can now access specialist care without traveling hours, the working mother who can manage her chronic condition without missing work, or the veteran who can receive mental health support from the privacy of their home.

The time to act is now. We cannot allow these essential healthcare services to sunset when we know how vital they've become. Let's show that Maryland remains committed to innovative, accessible healthcare for all its residents. I respectfully request a favorable report on House Bill 869. Thank you!