



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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**Senate Bill 3 - Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021
With Amendments
Senate Finance Committee
Position: Support**

March 8, 2021

Senator Melody Griffith
220 James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Senator Griffith,

The Mental Health Advisory Committee of Montgomery County (MHAC), as mandated by the State of Maryland, is dedicated to monitoring the delivery of mental health services to county residents. The Committee also collaborates with community partners to advise and advocate for an effective comprehensive mental health system of care for all. Increasing access to mental health services through telehealth is one of our main priorities.

We are writing to express our support for **SB 3 - Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021 with the amendments**. We strongly support SB 3 with the amendments because it will help consumers from all walks of life, including those in underserved urban and rural areas, access much needed mental health and substance use disorder services, thereby reducing health disparities. This bill includes altering the health care services the Maryland Medical Assistance Program, subject to a certain limitation, is required to provide through telehealth; requiring that certain services provided under the Program include counseling and treatment for certain disorders and conditions; and requiring the Program to allow a recipient to select the way a service is delivered. This bill also establishes that a health care service provided through telehealth is equivalent to the same health care service when provided through an in-person consultation, and requires insurers, nonprofit health service plans, and health maintenance organizations to provide certain coverage for services delivered through telehealth regardless of the location of the consumer at the time the services are provided.

During the COVID-19 public health emergency, the telehealth flexibilities and waivers have played a critical role in increasing access to needed mental health and substance use disorder services, while reducing providers' and the individual service recipients' risk and exposure to the coronavirus. Telehealth flexibilities have intrinsically become a part of the new normal and will be needed beyond

the COVID-19 public health emergency so that individuals will be able to continue to access mental health and substance use disorder services. Telehealth has become an integral part of the Maryland's continuum of care and has helped to reduce or eliminate barriers to accessing health care services. It also has reduced health disparities in underserved communities.

We also are pleased to see regulations regarding telehealth reimbursed by the Maryland Medical Assistance Program ensure that requirements for reimbursement of mental health and substance use disorder services delivered through telehealth comply with the federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act. Reimbursing for health care services delivered through telehealth at a lower rate creates financial hardships for providers and disproportionately affects those who serve consumers residing in underserved and low-income communities. Having pay parity for telehealth visits will enable providers to continue to deliver services to consumers, especially the elderly and other vulnerable people in underserved communities who have encountered many barriers that limited their access to mental health and substance use disorder services. The need for mental health and substance use disorder services has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of telehealth also has increased during the pandemic. With an escalating need for mental health and substance use disorder services and an increase in telehealth utilization, there needs to be adequate reimbursement rates for providers. Pay parity for health care services delivered through telehealth is essential to sustain a financially viable and stable provider network.

We support SB 3 with the amendments and hope that the advances made will go beyond a certain time period to become permanent.

Sincerely,



Helga Luest and Garrett Mannchen
Co-Chairs, Mental Health Advisory Committee

