



Alcohol and Drug Counseling – Alcohol and Drug Trainees – Practice Through Telehealth
SB 646
Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee Hearing
February 16, 2021
Support

The Legal Action Center (LAC) is a non-profit law firm that uses legal and policy strategies to fight discrimination, build health equity, and restore opportunity for people with criminal records, substance use disorders, and HIV or AIDS. LAC convenes the Maryland Parity Coalition and advocates for laws and policies in Maryland that will improve access to health care and end discrimination for people with mental health and substance use disorders. **LAC urges you to support SB 646, Alcohol and Drug Counseling – Alcohol and Drug Trainees – Practice Through Telehealth, to ensure that a sufficient substance use disorder workforce is available to provide services via telehealth and meet the increased need for care resulting from COVID. ADTs have delivered services through telehealth, under supervision, since April 6, 2020 and permanent authority is needed to reduce health disparities and improve access to health care.**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Maryland has increased flexibilities for the delivery of telehealth services to ensure Marylanders with substance use disorders (SUD) across the State can receive treatment while minimizing the risk of exposure to and transmission of the virus. Among other executive orders, the Maryland Department of Health issued a directive allowing Alcohol and Drug Trainees (ADTs) to deliver telehealth services within the scope of their practice and with adequate supervision and appropriate technologies. Telehealth has allowed licensed and certified SUD programs in Maryland to remain open and continue treating their current patients, who have reported greater substance use and suicidal ideation over the course of the pandemic, while also treating the growing number of Marylanders who have started or increased substance use to cope with the stress and emotional disruption related to the pandemic.¹

Maryland has a significant shortage of SUD providers, and the provider networks in both Medicaid and private insurance are inadequate to meet the needs of Marylanders. ADTs make up a substantial part of the SUD treatment workforce, and they are critical to the successful operation of the programs in which they serve. To ensure continuity of care, post-pandemic, all practitioners working within a licensed or certified SUD program, especially ADTs, must be authorized to use telehealth to meet the needs of their patients. Licensed programs have supervisory structures and quality assurance practices in place for in-person service delivery, and the telehealth platform does not alter that structure. Rather, telehealth allows programs to continue to deliver treatment to their patients while reducing barriers to care such as stigma, transportation, and financial burdens

¹ Maryland Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration, “The Effects of COVID-19 on Individuals Receiving Behavioral Health Services and Supports in Maryland: Follow-up Survey, Final Report” (Nov. 2020), <https://bha.health.maryland.gov/Documents/COVID%20Survey%202020.0%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>; Nirmita Panchal et al., “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use,” Kaiser Family Foundation (Feb. 10, 2021), <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>.

associated with missed work hours and childcare.

For these reasons, we urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 646 to ensure comprehensive access to telehealth for Marylanders with substance use disorders.

Deborah Steinberg
Health Policy Attorney
Legal Action Center
dsteinberg@lac.org
202-544-5478 x 305