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Testimony for Senate Bill 56

Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Psychiatrist and Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner Telemedicine Reimbursement - Sunset Termination

January 27, 2021

Madam Chair Kelley and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present Senate Bill 56: Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Psychiatrist and Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner Telemedicine Reimbursement - Sunset Termination.

Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) is an evidence-based program that uses a team approach to serving those in the public behavioral health system with some of the most challenging needs. These are individuals who – due to their psychiatric disability – cannot or will not access services in traditional facility settings. Many are homeless and have co-morbid somatic conditions and substance use disorders.

ACT teams are required to have dedicated prescribers (psychiatrists or psychiatric nurse practitioners), social workers, registered nurses, substance use disorder professionals, peers, and employment specialists. They are subject not only to statutory and regulatory requirements but must also pass fidelity audits that measure each team's compliance with the ACT model.

Maryland, like other states, is facing a serious psychiatric prescriber shortage. It has become increasingly difficult for community-based programs to recruit and retain psychiatrists and psychiatric nurse practitioners for the salaries they can afford to offer. In addition, due to ACT clients often being homeless, prescribers spend hours driving around trying to locate the individuals they serve.

As a solution to this problem the General Assembly passed HB1652/SB704 in 2018, allowing psychiatrists on ACT teams to provide their services via telehealth. In 2019 psychiatric nurse practitioners were added to the legislation (via HB605/SB524). These bills were passed pre-COVID when telehealth was not widely used in healthcare delivery, so language was added to sunset these bills on September 30, 2021 if no further action was taken.

The world has changed radically since then. COVID has pushed the use of telehealth to the forefront of healthcare delivery. Unfortunately, unless the sunset is removed from the initial enabling legislation, ACT prescribers will once again have to provide services in-person, requiring them to waste precious (and expensive) time driving around to find the clients they see.

Thank you for your consideration and I respectfully ask for a favorable report of Senate Bill 56.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Addie C. Eckardt". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Senator Addie C. Eckardt