



**HB 551 – Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance –
Coverage and Reimbursement for Telehealth Services**

House Health and Government Operations Committee

February 9, 2021

POSITION: Favorable

Maryland Coalition of Families: Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) helps families who care for someone with behavioral health needs. Using personal experience as parents, caregivers and other loved ones, our staff provide one-to-one peer support and navigation services to parents and caregivers of young people with mental health issues and to any loved one who cares for someone with a substance use or gambling issue.

In our work with families during the pandemic, we have seen how beneficial telehealth for behavioral health disorders has been to so many families. It can be an overwhelming challenge for families to access behavioral health care for a child. In order to get a child to a therapist or psychiatrist appointment, parents/caregivers must:

- find an appropriate behavioral health provider that is within a reasonable distance;
- have reliable transportation;
- perhaps take time off from work; and/or
- find someone to care for other children.

Any one of these can prove to be an insurmountable barrier to accessing treatment. Telehealth has allowed some families to get help for their child when they otherwise could not.

Not only have many families discovered that telehealth has made accessing services much easier, they also have found that telehealth is a means of delivering extremely effective treatment. Families who before the COVID-19 pandemic would not have considered using telehealth for behavioral health treatment have now become great advocates, and some have submitted testimony today.

At the same time, we have seen numerous families for whom mental health and substance use telehealth has not worked. Children can be particularly hard to engage via remote communication, and providers have reported especial difficulties working with a younger population.

HB 551 addresses the needs of both populations by supporting the widespread availability of telehealth services after the State of Emergency ends, while maintaining consumer choice. Easy access to behavioral health services is more important now than ever, because we know that there has been a tremendous growth in need owing to COVID-19 - just one example: the CDC reported that mental health-related ED visits across the United States increased sharply beginning in mid-March 2020 and continued into October (when the analysis ended), with increases of 24% among children aged 5–11 years and 31% among adolescents aged 12–17 years, compared with the same period in 2019.

HB 551, by preserving the current regulations that are in effect, ensures that telehealth for behavioral health disorders will continue to be a viable option. Consumers need to be permitted to receive telehealth services from their homes or wherever else they are located. They need to be allowed to use audio-only communication, since many do not have any or reliable access to broadband communication. Moreover, in order to preserve the capacity of behavioral health providers to deliver telehealth for mental health and substance use disorders, they must be reimbursed at the same rate as in-person services. They should be reimbursed at a level that is commensurate with the amount of time and work they must put in, which is the same regardless of how they are delivering services.

Therefore we urge a favorable report on HB 551.

Contact: Ann Geddes
Director of Public Policy
The Maryland Coalition of Families
10632 Little Patuxent Parkway, Suite 234
Columbia, Maryland 21044
Phone: 443-741-8668
ageddes@mdcoalition.org