



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1287
Alcohol and Drug Counseling – Alcohol and Drug Trainees – Practice Through Telehealth

Dear Chair Pendergrass and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

HB1287 is a bill to expand access to mental and behavioral telehealth services. This is a COVID response bill. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have made life hard for everyone, and even harder for those with substance use disorders. Last year, this legislature wisely expanded telehealth for behavioral and mental health so that people can get the support they need. But the stress and uncertainty of this time have taken their toll, and the people of Maryland need help.

Our state was in a substance use crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is even more dire today. More Marylanders died of drug and alcohol overdoses in 2020 than the year before. Of the 2,025 “unintentional intoxication deaths” between January and September, 90% were linked to opioids, a significant increase over the previous year¹.

Before the pandemic, access to mental health services was difficult for myriad reasons with which this Committee is already familiar. The emergency expansion of telehealth services has helped. For example, providers report increases in client retention and satisfaction across the board, due to expanded telehealth.

And yet, the gap between supply of, and demand for mental and behavioral health care persists. For example, calls to local crisis hotlines have surged as people experience previously unimagined levels of isolation and fear².

The bill before you will help close that life threatening gap by increasing the supply of available telehealth counselors now and long after the emergency orders fade away. The bill will permanently allow specialized counseling providers-in-training to provide reimbursable telehealth services. The Board of Professional Counselors & Therapists recommended this change.

¹ Baltimore Sun. “Overdose deaths jump in Maryland, likely due to coronavirus pandemic, health officials say.” 13 Jan. 2021, accessed at <https://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-hs-overdose-rate-maryland-coronavirus-pandemic-20210113-rl13kzzv3jd6he2bf44wah5cbm-story.html>

² Baltimore Sun. “As coronavirus rolls on in Maryland, mental health toll surges, with experts fearing spike in suicides.” 29 Sept. 2020, accessed at <https://www.baltimoresun.com/features/bs-hs-mental-health-covid-20200929-yzjfdfc2jjb4vab7o3v4g7q25a-story.html>

This expanded authorization for these specialized alcohol and drug counseling trainees, or ADTs, will save lives. This particular cadre of providers-in-training represents 40% of all certified counselors.

Right now, there is a statutory obstacle that prevents these trainees from providing telehealth services. This bill simply removes that obstacle.

This bill does not alter the scope of practice of ADTs, nor does it change supervision requirements. ADTs must continue to work in state-licensed behavioral health programs; they may not work in a private practice. The bill leaves unchanged current regulations defining what these trainees can and cannot do.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned our world upside down. It has also presented opportunities for us to respond by fixing broken parts of our health care system. This bill is a COVID response, and also improves our health care system for the long term. With that I thank you for your consideration and ask for a favorable report.