



Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Acting Secretary

**Behavioral Health Administration**

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February 2, 2021

Dear Behavioral Health Provider Community,

Thank you to the hundreds of behavioral health providers who participated in our first two surveys on individuals receiving behavioral health services in Maryland during the COVID-19 pandemic. We posted the latest survey results on the [BHA COVID resources webpage](#).

Based upon the common challenges reported in survey results, BHA is recommended the following actions that behavioral health treatment providers should consider as you continue to engage patients/consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- There is considerable **fear about going out in public**, which is complicating the scheduling of first appointments, adherence with in-person appointments, and maintaining treatment plans. To address these challenges, we recommend that providers:
  - increase use of mail-order for medications whenever possible to reduce unnecessary trips to the pharmacy for patients;
  - communicate program safety protocols for in-person visits;
  - make sure PPE is available for patient visits, and ensure that patients are aware that PPE will be available to them before coming to their appointments;
  - use social media to communicate that programs are open for business; and
  - use telehealth and other measures to keep patients safe during their appointment.
- There continue to be some **barriers to the utilization of telehealth**. We encourage providers to:
  - continue to explain to patients what telehealth is and how it works, particularly those with more impairing psychiatric conditions;
  - share resources, such as the [Telehealth Resource Guide](#), our [Telehealth FAQs](#), and the [Telehealth Locator Map](#); and
  - adjusting your telehealth guidance and approach to accommodate patients who may find the use of technology intimidating.
- Recognizing that many **schools are using virtual learning**, providers may want to:
  - consider increased accommodations for patients with childcare responsibilities (e.g., evening and weekend telehealth appointments); and
  - prioritize those patients with children for free/subsidized telehealth resources should

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- they become available.
- To respond to decreases in patients accessing or continuing **SUD treatment services** during the pandemic (and the associated increase in the relapse rates and fatal overdoses), we recommend that providers:
  - embrace the use of, or increase the use of medication assisted treatment (such as buprenorphine or long acting naltrexone) for the treatment of opioid use disorders in all behavioral health treatment settings;
  - increase harm-reduction messaging to patients in all treatment settings, especially for those at risk of relapse;
  - share information on [virtual supports](#), such as [online support groups](#) and [MD Mind Health](#) texts;
  - send appointment reminders between scheduled visits; and
  - communicate with patients between appointments to remind them to reach out if they're experiencing distress.
- To address the **significant disruption in daily activities** and the associated challenges for those with behavioral health conditions, we recommend that providers:
  - remind patients of their next appointment at the end of the current appointment and send appointment reminders before the next appointment;
  - remind patients to take medications as prescribed;
  - recommend that patients make more frequent appointments during difficult times;
  - if available, use peers for outreach to patients struggling to keep appointments or staying stable;
  - inform patients about warning signs for when they should request more frequent appointments, such as the return of symptoms or relapse;
  - push [mental health resources](#) to patients, including [MD Mind Health text messages](#) and [online virtual recovery groups](#); and
  - maintain regular screening for symptoms that may not have been present at intake, especially substance use, depression, and anxiety.

Thank you again for your continued efforts and hard work during this important time.

Sincerely,



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Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health