



*Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Robert R. Neall, Secretary*

**Behavioral Health Administration**

Aliya Jones, M.D., MBA  
Deputy Secretary/Executive Director  
55 Wade Ave., Dix Bldg., SGHC  
Catonsville, MD 21228

June 4, 2020

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

When we experience unrest — like we're seeing across the country and close to home in DC and Baltimore as a result of the tragic and unnecessary death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement — the Behavioral Health Administration (BHA) must respond to offer a measure of calmness and reassurance. Civil unrest raises tremendous anxiety, fear, and stress for everyone, and certainly more so for African Americans today due to these recent traumatic events fueled by ongoing racism, inequities, and cultural incompetency.

As a result of this, people across the country are protesting together, all races, civilians, and law enforcement as a symbol of unity to end the brutality and advocate for equality to end racial disparities. Peaceful protests can bring a loud voice to the message — enough is enough. Unfortunately, there are some individuals that use these protests as venues for destruction, theft, and more violence. This results in even more heightened fear and anxiety for all law-abiding citizens and law enforcement who support peaceful demonstrations for change. More than ever, BHA calls upon our behavioral health partners to aid in a coordinated response to help communities heal.

First, we must give ourselves a safe space to express our own feelings and find support that gives us strength. Then, help our children understand what they are feeling, and give them reassurances of their own safety, and provide them comfort knowing that we will get through this together. Next, we may want to help others in our communities regain hope and wellness by advocating for peaceful demonstrations of justice and equality. In addition, to address the stress, anxiety, anger, and fear that many of us are experiencing, we should widely share the resources and support we have made available as part of our COVID 19 response. These are very difficult and unnerving times and it calls upon all of us to work together to protect ourselves and all those we love and those in our lives — our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, neighbors, and colleagues. Unity in building community wellness can save lives, so let's continue to work together and support each other through these more recent unsettling events. I welcome any suggestions you can offer.

Since my May 1 update on BHA's COVID-19 response, Governor Hogan implemented Phase 1 of his reopening plans. As certain businesses and services begin to reopen, we must continue to follow the CDC guidance on how to remain safe to limit the spread of COVID 19. The Governor's plan to reopen is a comprehensive, coordinated effort to protect our communities from this health crisis while returning to some level of normalcy in living and work. In order to be successful, we all must do our part.

We all must continue to be compliant with practicing social distancing and wearing masks. These measures will demonstrate our support to helping Maryland regain community wellness and keep ourselves and our families as safe as possible. I thank you for your ongoing support and diligence in doing your part to help all those we care about, and those we serve, stay safe and well.

Over the course of the last month, we continued with our **weekly FAQs**, various provider-specific **webinars**, including the primary care provider Wednesday evening webinars with Maryland's Primary Care Program, and the behavioral health provider Friday morning webinars with Public Health. These resources are posted on [our BHA webpage](#) as well as extensive lists of trainings, support groups, info guides for clinicians, and info guides for the general public, [updated regularly here](#). If you see a resource that we have not included, let us know: [bha.inquiries@maryland.gov](mailto:bha.inquiries@maryland.gov).

Additionally, BHA continues its efforts to help behavioral health programs obtain PPE to help providers remain safe while providing onsite services where telehealth options are not viable.

Since the expansion of telehealth services, we noted over 85% of our provider network are operating via telehealth. As a result, BHA created a **Telehealth Resource Guide** and an [interactive Telehealth Map](#) to help new patients access care. The map includes known behavioral health providers now offering telehealth services across the state. Another new resource from BHA is **Operation Roll Call**, a program that offers veterans regular check-in calls and a chance to talk to someone who can offer support. An emergency contact is called if a veteran cannot be reached. Inspired in part by the Department of Aging's Senior Call Check-in, this new resource will continue for veterans after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

As we transition to more normal operations, we will keep you informed on how this will impact the various regulations that were relaxed to allow for the expansion of telehealth services and other waivers to allow continuity of care. In addition, we are closely monitoring any potential changes that may impact the delivery of services moving forward. We will do all that we can to advocate for and guide this transition as a phase-in process to make it as seamless as possible to help limit any challenges that would prevent us from being successful. Our focus is to continue to support the safety of our communities and preserve and even enhance access to services and the quality of care. We will again need your support and ask that you closely monitor the impact of this transition so that we can continue to work together to address any barriers to our success in moving toward normal operations.

**Maintaining mental health wellness** is an issue for many of us, particularly during such long periods of isolation. Over the course of the last few weeks, I was able to speak on the issue, which was a good follow-up on some of the guidance we have previously presented, and the Public Service Announcements that we developed. A local radio and television station provided me an opportunity to address some of these issues and outline some steps individuals can do to help protect their mental health. I again emphasized that it is important to pay attention to our own self-care. We also continue to support **Mind Resilience**, a program that helps educators and organizers understand self-care, well-being, and a resilient mindset. I encourage you to share the tips on the website: [mindresilience.org](http://mindresilience.org).

Mental wellness has always been important for frontline health care workers, however now it is more important than ever, as they face the challenge of diagnosing and treating and/or caring for patients with COVID-19. As a result, we [just announced](#) our partnership with the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems (MIEMSS) to provide the **Maryland COVID-19 Mental Health Crisis Support Program**, a new initiative offering mental health support for people working in skilled nursing and other long-term care facilities impacted by COVID-19. Anyone interested in this free and confidential program can contact MIEMSS at [miemss.crisisresponse@maryland.gov](mailto:miemss.crisisresponse@maryland.gov). In addition, in partnership with Psych Associates of Maryland, we are developing a number of initiatives, including a designated webpage and call center, focused on addressing the mental health needs of and access to quality services for our first responders, which will include frontline health care workers.

Almost three months into physical distancing as a result of COVID-19, we are closely monitoring community wellness. Our Crisis Helpline has experienced an increase in calls over this period. From January to April 2019, there were 7,846 contacts made to Maryland's Helpline (211, Press 1). For the same period in 2020 (January to April), there were 10,143 total contacts made, a 29% increase. Between February and March 2020, there was also a 77% increase in total contacts to the helpline. In order to address the increased demand for these services, BHA is providing \$185,000 in additional grant funding for the crisis helpline in FY 2021.

BHA is interested in learning more about the overall impact of the pandemic on health care seeking individuals currently receiving as well as those who may be seeking services. Thus, BHA, in partnership with the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) created [a brief survey](#), which was recently distributed. We anticipate the results of that survey to be posted on the BHA website around July 2. Many providers have already taken the survey, however if you have not and are interested, please do so by **Friday, June 5**. Your voices and experiences about the impact of the changes in practice are important, and we want to hear from you. We are also closely monitoring data to identify emerging changes and trends in suicides/suicidal behavior as well as fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose rates across the state and working closely with internal and external stakeholders to proactively respond to on-the-ground changes in a coordinated way.

Since my May 1 letter to you, we provided the following guidance:

**Orders from the Secretary of Health**

- [Amended Directive and Order \(May 6\): COVID-19 Testing, Reporting, Elective Procedures, PPE Conversation, and more](#)

**Behavioral Health Partners**

- [Frequently Asked Questions \(May 15\): COVID-19 and Behavioral Health Administration Partners](#)

**Community**

- [Wellness and Recovery Support Resources \(May 19\)](#)
- [Telehealth Resource Guide](#)

**Telehealth**

- [Telebehavioral Health Provider Locator Map](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions \(May 7, 2020\): COVID-19 and Telehealth](#)
- [Hospital-Based Outpatient Programs \(May 29\)](#)

As a follow-up to my previous correspondence on the BHA/ASO estimated payments issue, estimated payments will continue until the end of June. In conclusion, we will continue to bring you the latest information to keep you well-informed to help you remain safe, well, and operational.

Working together, we will identify and offer lessons learned to build a stronger, resilient system of care to build resiliency throughout Maryland's communities. Today, throughout Maryland, we are challenged by COVID 19 and civil unrest. In the coming months we are seeking your help and continued collaboration to support our communities as we collectively mobilize to address mental health, and trauma-related needs. In the coming months and years, we will be even more deliberately addressing the impact of social determinants on mental health. I thank you for all that you do and continue to do. Your unyielding commitment to being responsive to the behavioral health needs of our communities is greatly appreciated. Your self-care is equally important to us, so take care of yourself, so we can continue our work together.

Sincerely,



Aliya Jones, M.D., MBA  
Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health