



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

November 6, 2020

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

I hope everyone was able to find the time to get a **flu shot**. If not, please put this on your list of things to do, along with encouraging and assisting those under your direction and/or care to get one as well. With the increase in new COVID-19 cases, it is especially important to get a flu vaccination this year. I will continue to encourage you to get vaccinated because I care about you and those you care for and about. I got mine at my local drug store, and I hope you get your vaccine without further delay!

We have become aware that some community programs are relaxing safety measures in protecting against the spread of COVID-19. I would like to emphasize the importance of not becoming complacent in safety and operating procedures and policies — this puts us all at risk. Please continue to take measures to ensure that your staff and those in your care remain safe while accessing your services. COVID-19 remains a threat to community wellness, and as cases surge across the state, now is not the time for any of us to relax safety precautions or fail to fully comply with CDC guidelines. You are responsible for your own safety and the safety of others accessing your services.

As highlighted in my correspondence to you last month, the **Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) training** developed by Johns Hopkins School for Public Health and the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence is now available for free on Coursera and takes approximately four hours to complete. You can access it here: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/erpo>.

On October 20, 2020, BHA and the University of MD's Training Center hosted the annual Fire and Environmental Safety Training for Residential Specialists. For the first time ever, the training was done virtually and in real time. The training was interactive with 44 attendees representing the 20 local jurisdictions.

BHA has embarked on the development of a **Maryland Crisis Model**. This model will guide how we render crisis services systems and provide strategies for implementation and program evaluation. The BHA internal crisis systems workgroup has created the framework for a statewide crisis system that is rooted in evidence-based practice and tailored to meet the comprehensive needs of individuals with behavioral health disorders. As this work continues, BHA will be convening a group of stakeholder advisors who will aid in the development of a strategic plan that will guide us from a vision of a comprehensive crisis services system for Maryland to implementation and evaluation. Though our journey has just begun, we are excited about what has been accomplished to date and look forward to a collaborative partnership. For more information please contact Stephanie Slowly, stephanie.slowly1@maryland.gov, or Darren McGregor, darren.mcgregor@maryland.gov.

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BHA was very excited to launch the **BHA/MedChi Behavioral Health Webinar Series: Helping the Helpers and Those They Serve** on October 29. These jointly sponsored webinars are for Maryland's community and hospital health care workers of all disciplines. They are designed to enhance both health care worker self-care and resultantly the care they provide, as they combat numerous stressors including the COVID-19 pandemic, social justice issues, and other stressors that can potentially impact delivered care. CMEs are available at no cost, as are Participant Certificates, which for other disciplines can qualify for continuing education credit. We encourage your participation. Please also share with any health care workers that you know.

Topics and speakers for November and December are as follows:

- November 12: **Stress Management During COVID-19 with Attention to Financial Distress.**
Speaker: Richard Silver, MD. Moderator: Alexander Chan, PhD, LMFT.
Register for this webinar at this link:
https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JpVkaE9ESHGm6w7NFdOBGQ
- December 3: **Coping with the Ambiguous Losses and Stress of the Pandemic.**
Speaker: Alexander Chan, PhD, LMFT. Moderator: Hinda Dubin, MD.
Register for this webinar at this link:
https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_mpKfaqQvR6CMyRbodp3L8Q
- December 17: **The Impact of Racial Trauma on Providers.**
Speaker: Stephanie Slowly, MSW, LCSW-C. Moderator: Shanta Powell, MD.
Register for this webinar at this link:
https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_kLD_IQoqQSOVIJ-mbdQPhg

You can also register for these and future webinars, which will be on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of each month (5-6pm), by going to the [BHA/MedChi webinar webpage](#) where webinar recordings will also be posted. If you are interested in delivering a presentation, being a moderator for a specific webinar, or have self-care topics/presenters to suggest, contact Steve Whitefield at steven.whitefield@maryland.gov.

BHA has initiated an interagency workgroup focused on **older adult behavioral health**. Available data indicates an increase in suicide deaths, emergency department visits related to suicidal ideation, and unintentional overdoses in Marylanders over age 65 in recent years and these trends may worsen due increased stress, anxiety, and isolation resulting from the pandemic. On October 26 and 27, BHA engaged its partner agencies, Maryland Department of Aging, Maryland Medicaid's Office of Community Long Term Services and Supports, the Office of Health Care Quality, the Maryland Department of Disabilities, as well as Optum Maryland and the local behavioral health authorities, to review the available data, current interventions and programs, and to commit to working together to reverse these trends and ensure older adults with behavioral health conditions have access to necessary supports and services.

More recently, some additional guidance was provided to the Local Behavioral Health Authorities that provided clarification of **Targeted Case Management Monitoring Visits and Mental Health Residential**

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Program Inspection Requirements during the COVID-19 State of Emergency. This clarification will continue to help improve the quality of care at these programs. For further information, contact Steve Reeder, BHA's Deputy Director of Adult Clinical Services at steven.reeder@maryland.gov.

The BHA **Behavioral Health Equity Workgroup**, continues to work towards developing a strategic plan that will address health disparities within the behavioral health system. I look forward to presenting "Reconfiguring Public Health for Improved Minority Mental Health Impact" at MDH's Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities' 17th Annual Health Equity Conference, on December 3. Learn more and register here: <https://health.maryland.gov/mhhd/Pages/MHHD-Health-Equity-Conference.aspx> For more information or to join the BH Equity Workgroup, contact Stephanie Slowly, Director of Systems Management at stephanie.slowly1@maryland.gov.

The **Psychiatric Rehabilitation Program (PRP) Workgroup** remains busy. Since our last update, the workgroup pulled PRP service utilization data to examine PRP service by fiscal year, jurisdiction, and associated expenditures. The PRP Data sub-workgroup is working on finalizing metrics and data sources for a baseline data exploration to monitor and determine the efficacy of the treatment service.

Over the course of the last few months, BHA's **Office of Children, Adolescents and Young Adult Services (CAYAS)** has been focused on implementing SOR funded initiatives dedicated to providing opioid use disorder services ranging from prevention to treatment, which includes: partnering with local jurisdictions to expand evidenced-based services offered in the existing eight adolescent clubhouses, establishing four new adolescent clubhouses, as well as two new recovery housing programs. CAYAS continues to partner with the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) at the University of Maryland School of Medicine to expand provider training on and use of evidence-based (promising) practices from early childhood programs to adolescent and young adult programs. CAYAS is also partnering with our sister agency, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), on the Project AWARE-SEA grant to support the creation of additional programs that will help promote the healthy mental health of school-aged youth and we recently began a small pilot with the consumer quality teams (CQT) to include visits and surveys at child and adolescent PRP sites.

BHA's Finance Office has been working diligently to get all approved **jurisdictional grant awards** distributed by mid-November. These are the funds used to help individuals with behavioral health disorders access needed services and supports across the State.

Last month, we shared funding information from Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) on new available **Provider Relief Funds** for all qualified providers of healthcare, services, and supports. The funds are directed for health care-related expenses or lost revenue due to COVID-19. Providers were directed and encouraged to apply for financial support if they lost revenues and/or expenses attributable to COVID-19 that have not been reimbursed by another source. As a reminder, the deadline to apply is today, Friday, November 6. We will continue to share other funding opportunities with you as they become available. Learn more: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/10/1/trump-administration-announces-20-billion-in-new-phase-3-provider-relief-funding.html>

Opioid-related overdose deaths continue to increase in Maryland at an alarming rate. Deaths for the first half of 2020 were up by 11% over the same period in 2019 and are tracking closely with the 2018 numbers for the first half of the year. Third quarter data, while preliminary, continues to track

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substantially higher than the 2018 and 2019 numbers. BHA projections indicate that the number of deaths is on pace to surpass 2018 numbers over the next month and end the year 13% higher than 2018. The **Multi-Agency Opioid Overdose Prevention Strategy meeting and Clinical Advisory Team** continue to focus on sharing information with and hearing from the Local Behavioral Health Authorities who are seeing a rise in overdose deaths in their respective jurisdictions. BHA has developed an early detection system to aid in the identification of potential increases in overdose deaths and suspected overdose events across the state. This data will be updated and shared with the jurisdictions on a monthly basis. The format provides an update on efforts to address these increases through a shared learning environment. We appreciate the participation of our partners in this effort to prevent as many overdoses as possible.

Over the course of the last month, the following **FAQs** were provided and posted on the [BHA COVID-19 webpage](#), along with the **Friday webinars for Behavioral Health Providers with Public Health**. These webinars and postings will continue until further notice. Additionally, Public Health is reviewing all the previous guidance we have shared with you on how to remain safe during the COVID-19 epidemic and any update or change in the guidance will be communicated to you as it becomes available.

- **Behavioral Health Partners**
 - [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (October 6)
- **Providers**
 - [Opioid Treatment Programs \(OTP\) and Buprenorphine Providers: Frequently Asked Questions](#) (October 6)

Also last month, MDH released two BHA press releases:

- [MDH awards more than \\$50 million in new grant funding to combat opioid crisis in local communities](#) (October 28)
- [MDH launches virtual mental health first aid training for first responders](#) (October 22)

I would be remiss if I did not take this time to acknowledge the issues our behavioral health community has expressed concerning their challenges with the transition to our new Administrative Services Organization, Optum Maryland. I want to assure you that BHA, Medicaid and Optum are working tirelessly to address your concerns. We have been made aware that for some providers this transition has impacted their financial stability. In the coming weeks, we will be inviting our provider community to participate in a “risk survey” to better understand the scope of the problem and to help inform our efforts to be most helpful.

In closing, now that fall is in full swing and November has crossed the threshold, it is that time of year we find ourselves reflecting on what we may be most thankful for. With the **Thanksgiving holiday** just a few weeks away, I am sure that amidst the many challenges we have faced in 2020, if we are able to read and comprehend this letter, we know that there are many things yet to be grateful for. We stand in solidarity with those of you who have lost loved ones to this pandemic or any other cause. Though the holidays bring their cheer, they can also be painful reminders of those who are no longer here to celebrate with us.

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As a behavioral health community, I know that we will continue to remain sensitive to these struggles and vigilant in our proactive approach to help people cope and heal. We will continue to deploy our active listening skills, our caring spirit, and our patience as we help our communities, coworkers and even ourselves reconnect to peace and joy. Taking the time needed to exercise a little extra care and concern can make the holidays a little easier for those struggling and help bring the spirit of Thanksgiving to all of us. I wish all of you the very best this holiday season, and I remain thankful for your support and your spirit of giving as we work together to improve Maryland's Behavioral Health System. Thank you.

Be safe, until we meet again. Please wear your mask, keep six feet apart, wash your hands, and get your flu shot!

Happy Thanksgiving Season to everyone!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aliya Jones', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

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