



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

September 4, 2020

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

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

Happy Suicide Prevention Month and Happy Recovery Month!

Thank you for your ongoing support, flexibility, and the essential services you provide to consumers of behavioral health care and the community. Your partnership allows us to be as effective as possible in meeting community needs, and I sincerely appreciate all of our partners in this collaborative effort.

With the talk about a COVID-19 vaccine in the not too distant future, there is indeed a faint light at the end of this long tunnel. However, after managing this pandemic and its effect on our personal and professional lives for the past six months, along with continued episodes of police brutality towards black and brown people and the resultant months of protests, it would come as no surprise that we may find ourselves feeling less positive, less energetic, and increasingly overwhelmed. These feelings are understandable. As a behavioral health community, we need to continue to identify and implement strategies that will help us to support our internal resilience, and share these centering and encouraging actions and rituals with our peers, consumers of our services as appropriate, and throughout our communities. While we want to provide some reassurances, it is important that we do not dismiss or minimize one another's emotional positions. We are not all in the same place, many of us are not "OK" all of the time, and that is "OK." May we be as compassionate with one another and with our families and friends as we are with those who come to us for care and support.

Repeated studies have and are showing that those who we serve are at the greatest risk of having a trauma- or stress-related reaction, worsening of mood and/or anxiety and initiation or exacerbation of substance use in response to the pandemic, physical distancing, economic hardships, social unrest and various other very real challenges during this time. We must be more responsive to our communities now than ever before, by enhancing our prevention and intervention activities adapted to our current environment. This has been a prioritization at the state and local levels.

September 4, 2020
Letter to BH Partners

As we mentioned last month, BHA applied for two **Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grants** – an adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) grant, and the State Opioid Response II (SOR II) grant. I am thrilled to report that we were awarded the SOR II grant. The SOR grant application was for \$50.7 million for enhancing treatment, prevention and recovery supports for those who have stimulant use disorders in addition to opioids. We are grateful for our talented team that submitted a successful grant application to make such a substantive difference in our ability to combat opioid and stimulant use disorders. Thank you. And congratulations to those who will be granted funding. We will continue to pursue opportunities to enhance awareness of and responsiveness to ACEs in the community at large, and among those we serve.

BHA was also awarded \$537,800 from SAMHSA/FEMA to provide crisis counseling under the **Regular Services Program**. Using these funds, we will launch a digital messaging campaign to provide much needed information to frontline workers and first responders about monitoring their mental health and accessing services if needed. This will include the production of digital ads and audio spots that will be broadcast statewide through web platforms, radio, and streaming services. In addition, BHA has partnered with Psych Associates of Maryland (PAM) on developing a first responder initiative, called **Operation Courage** that we look forward to launching in the coming weeks. It will provide mental health care and improve access to behavioral health services to first responders. Look for more details in the coming month.

As a result of Maryland's behavioral health partners and the BHA team's commitment to improve our behavioral health service system, **Maryland was recognized as one of the top five mentally healthy states in the U.S.**, according to [The State of Mental Health in America 2020](#). The report, recently published by [Mental Health America](#), provides a baseline evaluation of each state's mental health system, including prevalence of mental illness and substance use disorders, as well as access to care. Maryland's ranking improved this year since being ranked 13th last year. While we are honored by this recognition, we will use this achievement to propel our work forward.

BHA and University of MD will be issuing another **short survey** on client well-being, access, and telehealth by mid-September, 2020. It will be sent out through many stakeholders, including our advocacy and service partners, local behavioral health authorities, and an Optum Provider Alert. Results from the first survey, sent out in May, were used to determine specific ways we could assist those we serve (e.g., Open For Business social media campaign, telehealth training webinar). We plan to use this follow-up survey in the same way. Thank you in advance for your participation!

Over the course of the last month, we provided the following updated guidance, and we will continue to provide updates as needed:

Behavioral Health Partners

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (August 14)

September 4, 2020
Letter to BH Partners

Several **training/webinars** were held during the month of August and will be made available in the coming weeks on the BHA web page. Below is a summary of a few educational trainings that were offered in August and upcoming training and webinars during the months of September and October.

August Trainings:

- **Training for Peers: CCAR & Ethics**
Over 20 Peers participated in each two-day session
- **Voices of Recovery: Celebrating Connections — Recovery Month Kick Off**
More than 160 people registered for this exciting event with an emphasis on International Overdose Awareness Day, Recovery Messages and interactive workshops, and featuring Keynote speaker, the sensational Nadia Richardson, PhD, Founder and Executive Director of No More Martyrs
- **Best Practices in Telehealth**
This webinar provided an overview of telehealth and technology-based interventions best practices, HIPAA-compliance measures, and ethical considerations. This initial telehealth webinar registered over 200 behavioral health practitioners and was facilitated by local telehealth expert Jay Ostrowski, MA,LPC-S, NCC, ACS, BC-TMHPd, LCSW-C, LCADC.
 - BHA is planning additional telehealth webinars focusing upon issues our Maryland practitioners face while providing treatment services during a pandemic, further exploration of HIPPA measures and reimbursement.

Upcoming Trainings:

- **September 15**
Mental Health and Racism Symposium, hosted by BHA. Registration quickly filled up to full capacity at 905 registrants with over 450 individuals on the waitlist. This is clearly a necessary and important area for BHA to amplify, and we appreciate everyone's interest. Everyone will be able to view the webinar from the BHA website once it is posted after September 15.
- **September 15–17**
Motivational Interviewing Webinars
2 hours, 2 CEUs 10:30 am – 12:30 pm
Facilitated by Christine Higgins, MI expert and Member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers.
Behavioral health practitioners can register for any of the sessions, registration information will be on the BHA website.
 - **Topics to be explored:**
September 15: Using MI in Virtual Communication
September 16: MI and Stages of Change
September 17: Using MI to Increase Change Talk

September 4, 2020
Letter to BH Partners

- **September 23**
Annual OTP and Residential Treatment Providers Collaboration Conference

- **September 28 – 29**
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Webinars
Facilitated by One Love Foundation
Registration information and additional details coming soon.

- **Other webinars coming in September:**
Ethics & Boundaries for Psychiatric Rehabilitation Programs

- **October 2020:**
 - In partnership with the University of Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling, BHA will be hosting a webinar on Recovery-Oriented Money Management. It will equip behavioral health providers with tools and best practices to help PBHS recipients successfully manage funds. Registration and more information will be available mid-September.

 - BHA has partnered with MedChi to bring resilience building webinars to a broad provider community. Stay tuned for more information on this series of virtual webinars.

As mentioned in the greeting, September is **National Recovery Month**. The theme this year is “Join the Voices of Recovery: Celebrating Connections.” See our press release: [Maryland observes International Overdose Awareness Day and Recovery Month 2020 with a message of commitment](#). As we know, this is a national observance that is held every September that brings awareness to the fact that substance use treatment and mental health services and supports can help people recover and live healthy lives. BHA held a kick-off conference on August 31, which is also recognized as International Overdose Awareness Day. Maryland’s theme for International Overdose Awareness Day and Recovery Month 2020 is “Recovery: Pass it on, Keep it going!” Being intentional about staying connected is more important now than ever before. Over the course of the last week, BHA collected a number of video clips from our community partners to share messages throughout the month to highlight the important message of recovery, that treatment works, so let’s ‘keep it going.’ We are still collecting videos up until September 10 and would be grateful for your participation in this initiative. For more details, see the **enclosed flyer**. We want the entire public to know how important and possible recovery is. For more information about Recovery Month, the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website is a great resource, which can be found at recoverymonth.gov.

September is also Suicide Prevention Month. BHA is collecting videos and photos about why suicide prevention is important to you. Participants can record a brief clip with 1-2 sentences leading off with "I talk about suicide because..." or "Suicide prevention is important to me because..." For more information, please contact natalie.miller@maryland.gov.

September 4, 2020
Letter to BH Partners

We remain focused on improving the quality and effectiveness of **Psychiatric Rehabilitation Programs** in the state. To ensure that only those who truly need these services are accessing them, we have instructed Optum to resume screening for medical necessity upon authorization for services, and we are continuing to work on upgrading the accreditation-based licensing system contained in the COMAR 10.63 regulations to establish basic compliance requirements that will provide a basis for continuous quality improvement through the accreditation process. We are currently designing a stakeholder engagement process to assist in our initiatives of developing quality frameworks, processes, procedures and guidance for implementation of services and achievement of outcomes.

The **Optum ASO** is now in its fourth week of paying “live” claims based on authorizations entered into the system since July 1, and performance is improving every week. A process of reconciling estimated payments with actual claims paid is ongoing. We, along with Medicaid, will continue to monitor the ASO performance.

As we look to the coming fall, remember that the 2020–21 flu season will coincide with the continued or recurrent circulation of the coronavirus, so flu vaccination is more important than ever. Vaccination of persons aged six months or older is recommended by the CDC to reduce the prevalence of illness caused by influenza. Influenza vaccination already saves lives, but more lives can be saved if there are fewer cases of flu combined with COVID-19. Less flu will keep hospital and ICU beds available for COVID-19 patients. Health care staff and patients should be getting their flu shots now, especially those who the CDC indicates are at increased risk for [severe illness from COVID-19](#), such as those 65 years and older, residents in long term care facilities, persons of all ages with certain underlying medical conditions, and [certain racial/ethnic minority groups](#). COVID-19 is affecting Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color the most. [Persons at high risk for influenza complications](#) include young children, children with neurologic conditions, pregnant women, those 65 years and older, and those with certain underlying medical conditions. We will be meeting with various provider types to discuss strategies to maximize immunization efforts in the coming months, in partnership with our MDH Public Health colleagues.

Speaking of Public Health, I would like to take this time to thank Rebecca Perlmutter, MPH, CIC, the Healthcare Associated Infections Program Coordinator, for her partnership in presenting COVID-19 updates at our Friday Provider webinars. These webinars have been well received and based on feedback will continue each week from 10:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. We hope that you will join us and send us any questions that you may have about COVID-19. Please send your questions to sydney.rossetti@maryland.gov. To join the webinar:

1. Go to <https://mdhealth.webex.com/mdhealth/k2/j.php?MTID=t7d7079a58d7488a03c3ee7bc27eeb8d3>
or

September 4, 2020
Letter to BH Partners

2. Dial: 1-415-655-0001
Access code: 619 926 983

Thank you again for your continued support and responsiveness to our communities. Please remember to be safe — wear your masks, maintain physical distance and wash your hands frequently — encourage others to do the same. I look forward to the next steps in our journey together towards building community wellness.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aliya Jones". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

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

Enclosure