

Maryland Jewish Advocacy DAY 2021



Protecting Renters' Rights and Preserving Telehealth Access

The past year has made the importance of having safe and reliable housing ever more apparent. Unfortunately for many in our state, that is not the case. While unemployment surged as a result of the pandemic, rent is continuing to accumulate each month, regardless of whether someone has a steady income. Amid the challenges of the pandemic, the needs of day-to-day life continue, and that includes having access to quality healthcare providers through telehealth. These bills are critical to ensuring everyone can safely access vital services, not only throughout the remainder of the pandemic, but into the future.

Bills We Are Advocating For

Renters Rights

Senate Bill 154/ House Bill 18 (SB154/HB18) – Landlord and Tenant – Eviction Action – Right to Counsel (Senator Shelly Hettleman and Delegate Wanika Fisher)

This bill would establish the right to legal counsel for low-income tenants in rent court who are facing eviction. Additionally, it introduces a number of resources for tenants to help them know their rights throughout the eviction process, creates an Eviction Coordinator position in the Office of the Attorney General, and establishes a taskforce to study and improve tenants' access to council in Maryland.

Just 1% of tenants appear in rent court with representation, compared to 98% of landlords who have representation. This undoubtedly leaves tenants lost in the proceedings of rent court and makes it significantly more likely they will conclude with a negative disposition. Not only would this bill keep more tenants in their homes, it would save the state and localities millions of dollars each year in services for would-be homeless families, while decreasing the burden on law enforcement and the courts. Right to counsel already exists in Baltimore City, and is being implemented in major cities such as New York and San Francisco.

Telehealth

Since the start of the pandemic, the rules surrounding telehealth have been eased to allow patients safe access to healthcare providers without having to leave their home. Seniors, the disabled, and low-income individuals depend on what has become a vital lifeline to healthcare. In fact, the use of telehealth by Medicaid and CHIP beneficiaries rose 2600% in Maryland last year. The digital divide affects Marylanders of all backgrounds and it is vital that patients be covered for all visits including audio only ones. Only 42% of seniors have a smartphone, and in Baltimore City alone 40% of households lack high-speed internet access. Internet access should not determine whether someone is able to access their healthcare provider.

Senate Bill 3 / House Bill 123 (SB3/HB123) Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021 (Senator Melony Griffith and Delegate Joseline Pena-Melnyk)

The future of telehealth in Maryland is currently up in the air. This bill would ensure that telehealth continues to be reimbursed by insurance providers. It also removes some of the restrictions currently in place concerning telehealth. Under this bill, audio-only visits, whether via telephone or a computer, would be covered. Furthermore, any location and distance requirements would be lifted, allowing both the provider and the patient to be anywhere in the state during the time of the telehealth visit.

Senate Bill 393 / House Bill 551 (SB393/HB551) Maryland Medical Assistance Program and Health Insurance – Coverage and Reimbursement of Telehealth Services (Senator Malcolm Augustine and Delegate Heather Bagnal)

In addition to the **Preserve Telehealth Access Act of 2021** this bill would include some crucial additions to telehealth medicine. In addition to traditional medical professionals covered in the previous bill, this bill would cover behavioral health and substance use treatment, by peers and paraprofessionals, two key professional sectors of the mental health workforce. Second, this bill protects consumer choice, meaning a patient can choose between a telehealth and an in-person visit, and not be forced between one or the other. The final provision applies to Medicaid recipients, and provides that telehealth visits are reimbursed at the same rate as in-person visits.

Why are these Bills Good for Maryland and the Jewish Community?

The number of low-income individuals and families seeking emergency financial assistance from The Associated system has continued to increase since the pandemic started, and we know this trend is not unique to just the Baltimore region. We are fortunate to have service providers such as Jewish Community Services and CHAI to serve the community. It is community-based organizations like these, and their hardworking staff, that have always been there to assist those most in need. These bills will provide service agencies with the tools they need to continue assisting clients and patients. JCS has been able to provide vital care and services via telehealth, remotely reaching seniors, mental health patients and those with disabilities right in their homes, when usual home visits are not possible. CHAI has been working to keep clients in their homes by providing assistance and guidance to those facing financial hardships. As Jews we have a responsibility to see that everyone has access to help, and by making sure everyone is represented in rent court, we are doing just that.

What Can Be Done?

Tell your legislators to support each of these bills. Have you or a family member had to rely on telehealth to see a provider during the pandemic? Have you or someone close to you faced financial hardships during the pandemic? Share your story if you feel comfortable.