



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

Behavioral Health Administration

Aliya Jones, M.D., MBA
Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health
55 Wade Ave., Dix Bldg., SGHC
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January 8, 2021

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

Happy New Year to all of you! This New Year is off to a more challenging start than anticipated, nonetheless, we hope that all of the hopes imbued in a New Year are realized.

Over the course of the past year, you have demonstrated great resolve. I am grateful for your diligence, your support, and your trust that together we can continue to build and rebuild community wellness. I am confident that *whatever* we face in 2021, our united approach will continue to enable us to address any challenge and bring hope and health to Maryland families. As COVID-19 vaccinations become more widely available, we are hopeful that 2021 will end the spread of this virus and enable us to be reunited with families and friends beyond the virtual settings that became the norm in 2020. Until then, with COVID positive cases still on the rise, we need to remain vigilant in our efforts to keep ourselves, our families, our staff, and those under our care safe. MDH will continue to follow the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP).

The State remains at Vaccination Phase 1A. Based in part on the recommendations of the federal government's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, the state has updated and expanded priority populations for vaccinations.

Phase 1A. The state continues to progress through Phase 1A and has expanded the priority populations to include all licensed, registered, and certified healthcare providers. Local health departments have begun to make arrangements with providers to get them vaccinated in the coming days and weeks.

We hope that you will avail yourselves of the opportunity to get vaccinated as soon as possible. Reach out to your local health department, if they have not yet reached out to you, about getting your vaccine. We will keep you posted about announcements regarding patient vaccination. Knowing the vulnerability of the behavioral health population, we have advocated for prioritizing this population for vaccination. Vaccine hesitancy will be a barrier to protecting

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ourselves as well as our consumer community, we encourage you to engage consumers of your services in conversations about the vaccine to help increase the likelihood of them accepting a vaccine when it is available to them. Please let us know if you have insights as to how we might more effectively assist with vaccine hesitancy in your treatment environments.

Given the recent events at the Capitol, many of us may be feeling even more anxious, unsettled and despondent than previously. Know that you are not alone. We encourage you to talk about how you are feeling with trusted co-workers, friends and family. Remember to focus on what you can control and apply techniques that will help you cope. Without a doubt our consumer communities will need additional encouragement and support during these confusing and concerning times. We want to remind you to share the mental health supports and resources that the Behavioral Health Administration has made available, including [Mental Health Supports During the COVID-19 Crisis](#) and [FAQs about Mental Health, Stress and Anxiety](#), which can help individuals cope with the increased anxiety and stress they may be experiencing, COVID-related or not.

Recently, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, announced that he has issued a **renewal of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, effective January 21, 2021** to help individuals access needed services. Assuming another full 90-day extension, this will extend the Public Health Emergency, with its telehealth flexibilities, through **April 21, 2021**.

Since my December communication, we were able to provide an updated **FAQ** and an updated **Resource Guide** which have been posted on our web page, and can be found at [Frequently Asked Questions \(December 10\)](#) and [Wellness and Recovery Support Resources \(December 15\)](#). Additionally, we provided [Coping during the 2020/21 School Year \(School Resource Guide\)](#), a resource guide for students and young adults.

The **BHA/MedChi Behavioral Health Webinar Series: Helping the Helpers and Those They Serve**, and the **Friday Provider Webinars with Public Health** were both postponed through the holidays but will resume this month. The Friday Webinar began January 8th at 10:00 am and has the following **new call-in information**:

Session number: 178 873 7910
Session password: K9Fp2D2hPNP

To join the training session

1. Go to <https://mdhealth.webex.com/mdhealth/k2/j.php?MTID=t4fd2d9341eb2218059aa0282490f5fcf>
2. Enter your name and email address.
3. Enter the session password: K9Fp2D2hPNP
4. Click "Join Now".

5. Follow the instructions that appear on your screen.

To view in other time zones or languages, please click the link

<https://mdhealth.webex.com/mdhealth/k2/j.php?MTID=t3b29336c3d339b497e188863bda1167a>

To join the session by phone only

To receive a call back, provide your phone number when you join the training session, or call the number below and enter the access code.

US Toll:+1-415-655-0001

Global call-in numbers:

<https://mdhealth.webex.com/mdhealth/globalcallin.php?MTID=tb860a208e8f914c4dccc90a0a895ae3a>

Access code: 178 873 7910

The **BHA/MedChi Webinar Series: Helping the Helpers and Those They Serve** begins again on January 14th. This webinar series has been immensely beneficial to the hundreds of healthcare workers who have participated. We hope that you make the time to take care of yourselves by joining us. Information and links to register can be found below:

- January 14: **The Approach to Impaired Clinicians**
Martin Rusinowitz, MD. Moderator: Avery Brow, MA.
Register for this webinar at this link:
https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_KiWRoALKRcyhulUUGpNp3Q
- January 28: **Vicarious Trauma and Self-Care for Health Care Workers During COVID-19**
Tonya Phillips, PhD, LCSW-C, LCADC. Moderator: Hinda Dubin, MD.
Register for this webinar at this link:
https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_R0s2GTkWRgqGD45VkfAeSQ

You can find more information about each of these webinars at

<https://bha.health.maryland.gov/Pages/bhamedchi-behavioralhealthwebinarseries.aspx>.

Additionally, twice a month BHA provides behavioral health speakers for the Maryland Department's Primary Care Programs' **(MDPCP) webinar for primary care providers**. On January 20th Adam Kaplin, MD, PhD will discuss Behavioral Health Symptoms in Those with COVID-19, and on February 3rd Megan Buresh, MD will discuss The Impact of Substance Use Disorder Stigma in Health Care. You can register for these at the MDPCP webpage found at <https://health.maryland.gov/mdpcp/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx>, where recordings and slides of previous webinars are archived.

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At this time, we would like to formally congratulate the **HSCRC Regional Catalyst Crisis Grant awardees:**

- Greater Baltimore Regional Integrated Crisis System (Baltimore City/County, Howard, Carroll Counties)
- Tri-County Behavioral Health Engagement (The Lower Eastern Shore)
- Total Linking Care (Prince George's County)

We look forward to partnering with you, as you seek to improve crisis behavioral health services in your respective jurisdictions.

Emergency department utilization by people experiencing behavioral health crises is beginning to increase as the pandemic continues. Given we are still in a surge of the COVID pandemic and our community hospitals need to have as many emergency department staff as possible to be available to attend to ill COVID-positive individuals, BHA has hosted a number of **Behavioral Health Hospitalization Surge Workgroup** meetings since December 2020. Our goal is to work with our hospital and community stakeholders to provide more expedient dispositions to therapeutic settings, both from the community to inpatient units and then back to the community. This is obviously in the best interest of patients in crisis situations, especially now as COVID positive patients fill up emergency rooms. One of our first successes in this work, with the assistance of our partners in Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Outbreak Response Bureau, was getting the outbreak definition for Sheppard Pratt Hospital (SEPH) changed to the definition used for acute care hospitals rather than long term care facilities. This enables Sheppard to operate with fewer restricted units even when there are COVID-positive individuals in their facilities, enabling them to continue to accept new patients from emergency rooms and med/surg units across the state. We are thankful to our partners for working with us to address some of the bed utilization challenges that are exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.

The **ASO transition** is ongoing, with gradual progress being made at regular intervals. We are now in the Assisted Reconciliation phase, and hope that you are taking advantage of this opportunity to get additional support, and to provide feedback to Optum and MDH about how to improve the reconciliation process.

The **BHA Budget Hearings** are scheduled for early March. As always, we appreciate your ongoing support in advocating for the preservation of our budget, so that we can continue to serve individuals with behavioral health disorders and expand service availability as needed. In these uncertain times, we are grateful to the Governor for approving a provider increase of 3.5 percent, effective January 1, 2021.

The **Multi-Agency Opioid Response Strategy workgroup** will be meeting this month on January 27th. We continue to engage jurisdictions that are experiencing spikes in opioid overdoses. We appreciate the participation of jurisdictional behavioral health leadership as well as our State partners in these important meetings. Strong leadership is being demonstrated all across the

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State as we try to mitigate against continued increases in opioid overdoses being primarily driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and its various negative impacts on mental health/wellbeing and social determinants. If there are any providers or programs looking for naloxone to distribute to their patients, please reach out to Erin Russel from The Center of Harm Reduction Services at erin.russell@maryland.gov. I am certain that it is because of our constant focus on ensuring access to treatment, and our collective attention to intervening in response to recent spikes in overdoses, that though the number of overdoses that we are experiencing are higher than ever, the rate of increase is not as high as most other states. Your partnership matters.

In conclusion, this month we will honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Thank you for using your voices to advocate for the behavioral health community. We look forward to hearing from you during this legislative session, to learning more about your priorities and to continuing our shared work of ensuring that the needs of those with behavioral health conditions are met by effective, high quality treatments and interventions.

Thank you for your partnership and support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aliya Jones", written in a cursive style.

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