

The University of Maryland Student Government Association
Testimony for HB01504
Committee on Appropriations, Thursday, March 5, 2020
Task Force to Study Access to Mental Health Care in Higher Education
POSITION: FAVORABLE

On behalf of the Student Government Association, we would like to thank Delegates Valentino-Smith, Carr, Charles, W. Fisher, Fraser-Hidalgo, Korman, Ruth, Terrasa, and Williams for introducing this bill. We would also like to thank the Committee on Appropriations for reviewing our testimony for this bill.

The decision to pursue Higher Education allows students to identify and explore areas of academic interest, develop new personal and professional connections, and experience a heightened sense of independence, often for the first time. However, feelings of stress and anxiety often accompany the college experience as students consistently strive to balance their academic and personal lives. If left unchecked, these feelings can manifest into more serious mental health concerns.

The increased student need for mental health care services in institutions of Higher Education is well documented. According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2019 Annual Report, the percentage of students seeking counseling with symptoms of depression or anxiety has escalated over the past ten years. Further, the number of intake appointments at University of Maryland's Counseling Center has increased 15% during the 2018 and 2019 academic year and 26% from the previous three-year average according to the 2018-2019 Annual Counseling Center report. Despite the implementation of a novel triage-counseling approach, students still struggle to schedule with a counselor in a timely fashion.

Numerous student-led and faculty-led initiatives have been directed toward increasing mental health awareness and combating the stigma associated with receiving treatment for mental health concerns. However without further research into the specific challenges institutions of Higher Education face in meeting the demand for mental health services, there is no guidance for these initiatives. With the establishment of a Mental Health Task Force, Higher Education schools will be able to align their practices with the most effective mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment strategies. The implementation of this task force is crucial in ensuring students are able to foster a successful personal, mental, and professional environment.

The data collected in the Mental Health Task Force's reports can be utilized by counseling centers and student activists across the University System of Maryland (USM). All students, not just those with documented mental health concerns, deserve for their mental health to be prioritized. Efforts need to be made at the institutional level to decrease perceived and structural barriers surrounding mental health care and access.

This bill would give Higher Education officials the tools necessary to better address their structure for mental health care, therefore advancing Maryland Higher Education schools as environments where mental health is prioritized and students can thrive. On behalf of the University of Maryland Student Government Association, we urge you to support this bill and provide University of Maryland students, and all USM students, with this task force, necessary for the identification and removal of structural inefficiencies that prevent effective mental health care across the USM today.

Sincerely,



Ireland Lesley
Student Body President



Samay Singh Kindra
Director of Government Affairs



Kelly Sherman
Director of Health and Wellness