

Written Testimony Submitted to the Maryland State Senate Finance Committee
Testimony of Carol Zimmerman, member, AFT Healthcare-Maryland, Local 5197
SB 693 – State Personnel – Maryland Department of Health – Pay Rates and Staffing Requirements
March 5, 2020

SUPPORT

Good morning Madam Chair and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Carol Zimmerman and I am an employee for the state of Maryland, working in the Department of Health at Springfield Hospital. I am also a member of the AFT Healthcare-Maryland, AFT Local 5197, representing professional healthcare employees who work for the state of Maryland. On behalf of those state employees, we ask for a favorable report to SB 693, the bill to bring pay equity to the state employees working at Perkins Hospital, the Behavioral Health Administration, and the Developmental Disabilities Administration.

I have served the state of Maryland as a Therapeutic Recreator since 2013. Therapeutic Recreators at Springfield Hospital Center remediate, restore, and rehabilitate individuals with severe and persistent mental illness. Treatment modalities include Physical activities and movement, Cognitively oriented games, remediation and literacy, Social Skills training, Creative Arts and Music. The treatment groups in the acute services building (Solomon) are made up with greater than 95% of the individuals treated being forensically involved, admitted as Incompetent to Stand Trial and dangerous, or returning from the community with a Hospital warrant.

I was present when a coworker, also a recreation therapist, a leader in the Prevention and Management of Aggressive Behaviors training had the end of their finger bitten off. I saw this patient spit my co-workers' finger onto the floor of the seclusion room. I have also witnessed a coworker, therapeutic recreator as well, who was viewing a movie with the patients, yanked to the ground by their ponytail and pummeled in the face as if she was in a street fight, for no identified reason. Unfortunately, I could tell you stories all day long about the violence towards and enacted upon employees perpetrated by patients. We treat many of the identical patients as Perkins has and we deserve the same level of compensation.

As an additional comment, for the past 3 years the Rehabilitation Department at SHC has been unable to fill 5 vacant Therapeutic Recreator Positions. These positions have been posted and reposted, creating no applicants, or applicants who do not show up for interviews, or on the rare occasion of an interview and job offer is made, the applicant declines the offer, relaying that the lack of pay was too severe to accept the position. Lack of staffing creates unsafe working conditions for those of us who are currently employed.

With this bill, we are asking that we close a loophole that was created years ago that left several state workers behind. Years ago, when the state decided it would increase pay for some nurses at Perkins in order to recruit and retain high-quality staff, some other staff who also work with the same clientele at the Hospital were not included. Just as the state needed to more fairly compensate the nurses who work under these circumstances, so too must the state, if it wishes to recruit and retain the best staff, make compensation for these valuable employees competitive.

This bill, SB 693, will close that loophole by compensating employees who work under these difficult conditions. Additionally, this bill assures that other employees who work at facilities within the Behavior

Health Administration and the Developmental Disabilities Administration if those facility has a forensic admission rate greater than 75%. This provision is necessary, as it is quite common for forensic patients from Perkins to be transferred to other state facilities. In order to be sure these patients are treated appropriately with the staff that is best trained to handle their cases, the state needs to be sure it can recruit and retain staff with a competitive package of compensation and benefits and provide quality of care to the patients.

Madam Chair and members of the committee: no one who decides to spend their careers in the service of our state does so with the idea that they will become rich. We love our state and we do feel a sense of community when we are able to bring important services to the residents of Maryland in order to make our state the best it can be. We do hope that we as state workers will be compensated fairly, and at an appropriate level based on our expertise, experience, and level of training. We therefore ask for a favorable report for SB 693. Thank you.