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**House Bill 1461 Behavioral Health Programs – Outpatient Mental Health Centers –
Medical and Clinical Directors**

Health and Government Operations Committee

March 11, 2020

Position: OPPOSE

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present this testimony in opposition to House Bill 1461.

HB 1461 would require medical directors at outpatient mental health centers to be licensed as physicians/psychiatrists. The bill would undo legislation passed unanimously by this committee and the General Assembly in 2019, and it would reverse a policy MHAMD believes is necessary to prevent the closure of community behavioral health facilities.

A persistent workforce shortage is exacerbating an increased demand for behavioral health services and challenging Maryland's ability to address the unmet need effectively in the community. This is forcing many individuals to seek mental health and substance use treatment in hospital emergency departments when community care would be more efficient and cost-effective. Accordingly, it is critical that Maryland continue working to eliminate unnecessary service and provider restrictions that prevent the broad delivery of care to those in need.

Prior to 2019, Maryland law required outpatient mental health centers to have a medical director who is a psychiatrist. Due to the shortage of psychiatrists, especially in rural areas of the state, and a corresponding difficulty in recruiting and retaining medical directors, the legislature passed HB 1122/SB 944 last session. The bill expanded the pool of potential medical directors by allowing psychiatric nurse practitioners to serve in that role. This policy makes sense. The medical director position is primarily administrative in nature. The role involves quality assurance activities, preparedness for accreditation, and peer review activities – all responsibilities that can be effectively handled by psychiatric nurse practitioners.

Maryland is still working to address a behavioral health crisis that is devastating families across the state. Resources are scarce and disparities in access to mental health and substance use treatment continue to widen. We should be eliminating barriers to care, not creating them. **For this reason, MHAMD opposes HB 1461 and urges an unfavorable report.**

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