

National Multiple Sclerosis Society
Comments Regarding HB 59: Task Force on Higher Education Students with Chronic Health Conditions

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January 20, 2021

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is grateful for the opportunity to submit comments in support of HB 59. We commend Delegate Peña-Melnyk for introducing this legislation to establish a Task Force on Higher Education Students with Chronic Health Conditions in Maryland.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an unpredictable, and often disabling, chronic disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the flow of information within the brain and between the brain and body. Symptoms vary from person to person and range from numbness and tingling to walking difficulties, fatigue, dizziness, pain, depression, blindness, and paralysis. The progress, severity, and specific symptoms of MS in any one person cannot yet be predicted. Recent studies estimate there are nearly 1 million individuals living with MS in the United States.

Though historically seen as a condition predominantly impacting middle-aged women, we know today that MS can impact individuals across the lifespan. Typically diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50 – although diagnoses among children and adolescents are rising – MS is the leading cause of neurological disease in young adults between 18 and 26.

As the number of young adults with MS rises, so does the need to better understand how to support this unique population. Upon graduation from high school many are faced with the decision about whether to attend college or not. Depending on what their high school experience was, what accommodations were necessary, some may be unsure that higher education is an attainable goal. For those choosing to pursue higher education, college is a particularly challenging time as they face additional challenges, including transitioning their healthcare from pediatric providers to adult providers, disability and medication management, the decision to disclose their diagnoses and fear of related stigma, inadequate sleep, and the need to self-advocate for resources and greater understanding of the disease by faculty and peers¹.

As Maryland works to assist students in achieving their higher education goals, it is critical to examine the data on students with chronic health conditions like MS across the state and address the unique challenges they face. By establishing the Task Force on Higher Education Students with Chronic Health Conditions, Maryland is taking an important step towards identifying and eliminating barriers to postsecondary education faced by students with chronic illness. We respectfully request the Committee favorably report HB 59.

¹ Hoffman, H., Geisthardt, C., & Sucharski, H. (2019). College students and multiple sclerosis: Navigating the college experience *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, (32)(2), 119-132. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1228961>