

## Susan D. Rich, MD, MPH, DFAPA

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**House Bill: HB0872**

**Senate Bill: SB**

Dear Esteemed Legislators:

It is with honor and urgency that I speak to you on behalf of Maryland's transitional age college students in support of the Cameron Carden Act. Although I do not speak on behalf of any of these organizations, I am past President of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry of Greater Washington, a member of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Distinguished Fellow in the American Psychiatric Association, and a member of the American Medical Association. I give annual lectures at George Washington University and have given lectures and grand rounds at University of Maryland Student Health Services, Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University, Springfield Hospital in Sykesville, and many other teaching hospitals across the US, Canada and Lithuania. I have not been paid by anyone to give this testimony and am not here today speaking as anyone's psychiatrist.

As a private practice child/adolescent psychiatrist in Montgomery County since 2006, I have seen many of Maryland's college students in my home office. Like other transitional age youth, college students are still finding themselves and their place in the world. Most of the college students I have seen as new patients have had difficulty transitioning to college, many of them leaving school in the middle of the semester due to mental health reasons, life stressors, or other extraordinary circumstances. Typically, if they are doing well enough to make it to the end of the semester, they are usually able to stay where they are until they are able to transfer to a different school.

The cost of education on individuals and families is extraordinary. I know something about this as I paid my way through an undergraduate degree in microbiology, a graduate degree in public health and a medical degree. The issue in question is that of reimbursement for tuition at in-state universities if an extraordinary circumstance happens after the deadline for reimbursement has passed. Cameron Carden's case exemplifies such a circumstance. He had grown up in the Annapolis area, excelled academically and in football at the Annapolis Christian School, graduated from the St. Thomas Moore Prep School in Massachusetts and entered the Western New England University in Massachusetts to play football as a freshman. At that point, he was a well-adjusted college student athlete with good self-esteem, resilience, well-spoken, and good citizenship. As the youngest of his siblings, Cameron really wanted to be back in Maryland closer to family where his parents could see him play football. His coach in Massachusetts had graduated from Salisbury University, which influenced Cameron's decision to transfer there. My understanding is that he loved the campus at Salisbury, was impressed by the school's mission, and was excited that his parents could attend some of his games. Unfortunately, a series of traumatic experiences early in his first semester led to him developing fears of attending class, heightened stress response, and other symptoms that progressively worsened leading to him leaving school. At this point, Cameron meets diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with severe panic attacks that have affected his ability to function in social situations.

How did a socially-confident, independent, well-adjusted student athlete end up with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at one of our state's college campuses? Cameron witnessed racist graffiti for the first time in his life, with a derogatory sexual comment and demoralizing racial slur. It was a shock to his naïve nervous system, having been relatively cocooned in predominantly private Caucasian schools where he was included in all aspects of the schools and sports. The demeaning, insulting words left him traumatized, leading to trouble sleeping, focusing, and attending classes out of increasing anxiety, panic symptoms, and fear. When the school painted over the graffiti and it reappeared over night, it confirmed Cameron's anxiety and fear that the school would not be able to keep him safe. He then sought the counsel of a professor who told him simply "Don't let those 'pr\*cks' get to you" (paraphrased), but nothing substantial was done and the episode was not reported. Around that time, while walking to class, he heard someone shout the N\* word. He had never experienced this degree of hate, slander and trauma of systemic racism that other students may have been more desensitized to. Living in that community with triggers for the anxiety eventually led him to call his parents to go home. When they met with the school, the attitude and messages he heard from administration were confusing – "If you leave now that the

deadline has passed, your parents will lose their money (from tuition).” He assured them that it did not matter, that his mental health was more important and that he would pay his parents back.

While Cameron has moved on with his life and education here in Maryland, he and his parents are having to bear the burden of owing Salisbury University the tuition for his first semester there. In my opinion, the impact of the horrific racist graffiti on Cameron’s mental health functioning was a catastrophic and extraordinary circumstance that should have been considered when Cameron requested his tuition reimbursement. There are many other students like Cameron who decide to leave shortly after the reimbursement deadline has passed. Since private elementary and secondary schools have tuition insurance options, perhaps we should consider that in our state.

I feel very strongly as a child/adolescent psychiatrist that The Cameron Carden Act is an example of what we can do in our state to help support families who are already putting so much into their children’s education. Thank you so much for consideration of my testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

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Child/Adolescent & Adult Psychiatrist