

To: The Honorable Chair, Paul G. Pinsky

Re.: **In SUPPORT of HB 513: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Support Services Program—Established**

Date: March, 23, 2022

From: Betsy Krieger

Yesterday, in an article in the Washington Post, numerous experts concluded that untreated trauma experienced in infancy can lead to long-term health consequences. I am a Trustee of a Foundation where we have learned over the years from experts, about the importance of the first years and the role of trauma and toxic stress in disrupting brain development.

We assume that babies exposed to violence don't understand what's going on around them because they can't verbalize it, but by 8-12 weeks they start to respond based on the experiences they have had.

“According to a [Report of the Task Force of the World Association for Infant Mental Health](#), rates of mental health disorders in infancy (which generally includes birth to age 3) are comparable to that of older children and adolescents. And one small study of 1-year-olds found that [44 percent of those who had witnessed severe violence against their mother by an intimate partner](#) showed symptoms of trauma afterward. . .

Trauma in infancy can [physically alter the developing architecture of the brain](#), according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. [Toxic stress](#) — strong, frequent or prolonged adversity — has been shown in various studies to harm [learning capabilities, memory and executive functioning](#).” (Washington Post 3/20/2022)

Infants and toddlers exposed to trauma and chronic stress reach adulthood with a much higher likelihood of both physical and mental health disorders including diabetes, obesity, and addiction.

But if the child with a trauma history gets help in the form of parents and caregivers who provide protection, they are less likely to be permanently affected by the trauma.

The work of infant mental health providers, who this bill would support, is to help the parents and teachers provide that protection. And when additional help is needed, they are able to refer the family to therapy. In this way, children who have experienced toxic stress are more regulated when they enter school enabling them to learn and to get the support and positive feedback from teachers and peers, are necessary for growth and development.

Providing these resources when children are small, and their brains are more open to change can prevent the very expensive and often not successful interventions when they become adolescents and adults.

As Frederick Douglass said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

Therefore, I request that this committee issue a FAVORABLE report on HB 513.