

**HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS TESTIMONY
IN SUPPORT OF
SB 637 – Health and Health Insurance - Behavioral Health Services - Expansion
(Behavioral Health System Modernization Act)**

**Senate Finance Committee
February 23, 2022**



Health Care for the Homeless supports SB 637, The Behavioral Health System Modernization Act, which includes a variety of reforms and enhancements designed to meet the increasing demand for high quality mental health and substance use care. While we fully support the entire bill, one such provision is particularly applicable to our work - expanding resources and support for certified peer recovery specialists, including Medicaid reimbursement for Certified Peer Recovery Specialists. As Health Care for the Homeless has found our peer recovery specialists an indispensable part of our behavioral health work, our we will focus on testimony on this piece.

Peers are an essential ingredient in the physical and mental health, prosperity and stability for the clients we serve, those who experience homelessness or housing instability. In some cases, there is a connection between a Peer and a client that is unattainable by other licensed professionals, and in many cases, our peers are the pathway to life-saving services.

Peer support has existed in behavioral health for decades. Its rapid growth in recent years is for good reason. Research and experience show that peer support providers have a transformative effect on both individuals and systems. Peer support has been shown to:

- Improve quality of life
- Improve engagement and satisfaction with services and supports
- Improve whole health, including chronic conditions like diabetes
- Decrease hospitalizations and inpatient days
- Reduce the overall cost of services

One of our former Peer Recovery Specialists recalls the story of one of his clients:

Mr. S, had experienced homelessness and become housed—and who, as soon as the ink dried from his signature on the lease, used his home as a hiding space. He literally cut himself off from the world and ate himself into a state of unhealthiness. The only time he opened his front door was to pay for food he had ordered, which over time caused him to gain an unimaginable amount of weight, which then lead to diabetes. There were times this client didn't feel worthy of being alive. It took not only the skill set of a therapist, but the unwavering support, advocacy and dedication of a Peer to pull this client out from his own demise. It was the Peer-to-client trust-filled relationship that allowed the client to trust the process. While appointments were scheduled, it was "Peer Power" that reminded the client, escorted and supported him. It was the mix of "Peer Power" and therapy that allowed this client to feel safe enough to once again go out and purchase groceries and break free from his "lockdown" mindset. He is now receiving proper behavioral health and medical care. He is building, nurturing and enjoying new relationships, and as he puts it, he is "Getting fly for the ladies." His growth was in full display at the annual holiday dinner we do for our clients each December: his brand, new haircut and groomed appearance were only superseded by his illuminating confidence and self-worth.

which would expand Medicaid coverage of lifesaving gender-affirming care. Instead of protecting the wellbeing of low-income Marylanders, our Medicaid program categorically denies dozens of gender-affirming services. SB 682 ensures that, among other things, Medicaid will provide medically necessary care based on up-to-date standards, prevents state officials from interfering with the patient-physician, and reduces sex-based discrimination by providing healthcare based on clinical need.

Peers play an essential role in the behavioral health of many of the clients we serve, as much as many of the currently Medicaid reimbursable roles at our agency. As such, Certified Peer Recovery Specialists should be reimbursed by Medicaid. We stand in strong support of SB 637 and we urge a favorable report on the bill.

Health Care for the Homeless is Maryland's leading provider of integrated health services and supportive housing for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. We work to prevent and end homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families by providing quality, integrated health care and promoting access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy, and community engagement. We deliver integrated medical care, mental health services, state-certified addiction treatment, dental care, social services, and housing support services for over 10,000 Marylanders annually at sites in Baltimore City and Baltimore County. For more information, visit www.hchmd.org.