



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 517

Consumer Health Access Program for Mental Health and Addiction Care - Establishment

*House Health and Government Operations Committee
February 23, 2022*

Submitted by Julia Gross and Kali Schumitz, Co-Chairs

Member Agencies:

211 Maryland

Advocates for Children and Youth

Baltimore Jewish Council

Behavioral Health System Baltimore

CASH Campaign of Maryland

Energy Advocates

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Job Opportunities Task Force

Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services,
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Maryland Center on Economic Policy

Maryland Community Action
Partnership

Maryland Family Network

Maryland Food Bank

Maryland Hunger Solutions

Paul's Place

St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore

Welfare Advocates

Marylanders Against Poverty

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Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) strongly supports HB 517, which aims to improve equitable access to life-saving mental health (MH) and substance use disorder (SUD) treatment for all Marylanders by establishing a Consumer Health Access Program (CHAP).

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an unprecedented need for mental health and substance use disorder treatment. In Maryland, [the number of fatal overdoses reached 2,799 in 2020](#), which represented an increase of 17.7 percent when compared to the prior year, and also the largest annual total in Maryland's history. Additionally, in February 2021, nearly [40% of adults in Maryland reported symptoms of anxiety or depression](#). On top of that, nearly 57,000 Maryland youth between the ages of 12-17 were also living with depression, 45.5% of whom were unable to receive care in the past year.

The CHAP established by HB 517 will help remove the barriers to these services by delivering assistance through a spoke and wheel model with a central hub with branches in 8 regions across Maryland. This will help centralize resources such as:

- Education for improving health literacy regarding benefits coverage, available services, and insurance enrollment;
- Customer representation and assistance in filing complaints, grievances, and appeals related to issues with coverage;
- Data collection and analysis to identify system-wide gaps in coverage and access and recommend improvements.

Not only will this model be staffed by individuals with lived experiences to help reduce stigma, but it will also be rooted in prioritizing equitable practices and tailoring services to reach the most vulnerable and hard to reach populations.

While the need for mental health and substance use disorder treatment continues to rise, barriers to identifying and accessing critical services have long prevented too many Marylanders from receiving critical lifesaving help. Marylanders deserve a Consumer Health Access Program to help understand insurance coverage and access the providers and services they need.

MAP appreciates your consideration and urges the committee to issue a favorable report for HB 517.

Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) is a coalition of service providers, faith communities, and advocacy organizations advancing statewide public policies and programs necessary to alleviate the burdens faced by Marylanders living in or near poverty, and to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty.