

Benjamin S. Barnes, Chair
Mark S. Chang, Vice Chair
House Office Building, Room 121
6 Bladen Street, Annapolis, MD 21401

HB0275
Supporting

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Members of the legislature, I am writing to you to ask that you vote in support of HB 0275. I am a fifth-year doctoral student at the University of Maryland School of Public Health. I would like to share my experience as a graduate research assistant (RA) at UMD-College Park. The standard agreement for all RAs is that the student will assist with their supervisor's research tasks for an average of 20 hours per week. In my first semester, I immediately learned that this agreement was not enforceable as I was made to regularly work 40-60 hours per week. When I brought my concerns of overwork to my supervisor, I was casually chided that "20 hours per week is unreasonable. It just doesn't happen for doctoral students." I was subsequently shamed in public meetings and accused of being uncommitted to the "very important work" of the lab. By point in late 2019, I had already written 12 grant applications, drafted 3 manuscripts, managed 6 projects, mentored 15 undergraduate students, and given dozens of presentations at conferences and meetings—all in addition to taking regular academic courseloads—but was consistently told that I was not working hard enough.

When I brought these concerns to my department chair and unit director, I was informed that "it is known" that my advisor regularly overworks their students and that I should come up with a plan on my own. Furthermore, shortly after, my supervisor reprimanded me for "going over his head." Fearing retribution, I resigned to not making further complaints. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic made this situation virtually untenable. Like many, I lost several family members to the disease. Many of them older adults whom had been in my life since childhood. Citing the ever-increasing workload, my supervisor discouraged me from taking time to heal from these losses. During this time, several of the female members of the lab who were also worn-down opted to transfer to other supervisors, significantly extending their time to degree completion, and, in one case, giving up on the doctoral degree altogether. This contributed to an even more burdensome and hostile environment in the lab where those of us who remained were met with thinly veiled threats of retaliation from our supervisor who proudly exclaimed that he "can really hold a grudge." I felt trapped.

By the end of 2021, my emotional and physical health had degraded so much in this toxic work environment that I seriously contemplated committing suicide—fearing that there was no way to continue working like this, but also no way to continue working in my field with a black mark from my scorned supervisor. Thankfully, after participating in mental healthcare services including a therapy group comprised of other graduate students, I was empowered to leave the lab of my former advisor, though, at the cost of losing all access and ownership to more than three years of collected data and research. Additionally, as I am now a graduate administrative assistant (AA) in Behavioral and Social Sciences Department of Facilities, I spend 20 hours per week on tasks that have no association with my degree.

Members of the legislature, I am writing to tell you that this is not an extreme scenario. I have spoken with dozens of peers throughout the University System of Maryland who have experienced exactly what I have experienced. Collective bargaining rights will not rid academia of bad supervisors. But these basic democratic rights will help give voice to those of us who the USM continues to ignore. Your vote in favor of passing HB0275 speaks truth to power: A workplace-induced mental health crisis should not be a prerequisite for workers' voices to be heard.

Sincerely,

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