

## Health and Government Operations

### House Bill 322: Public Health – Home– and Community–Based Services for Children and Youth

February 21, 2023

\*\*\*Support\*\*\*

The National Association of Social Workers represents social workers across the State of Maryland. We support House Bill 322: Public Health – Home– and Community–Based Services for Children and Youth, a bill to expand funding and access to evidence-based behavioral health services, high fidelity wraparound, and case management services to prevent escalation of behavioral health issues and the need for residential care.

Invisible to most Marylanders, over the last two decades the state’s foster care system became the provider of residential behavioral health care for children and youth with high intensity needs. For as many as 60% of youth ages 14 – 17 in one large local department of social services, behavior is identified as the leading factor driving placement, while in another fully 25% of all foster care entries were attributable to behavior health needs and parents unwilling and/or unable to continue providing care. Behaviors are typically trauma driven and present a serious risk to self and/or others including complex pica, sexual impulsivity, compulsive self-mutilation, aggression, encopresis, and so on.

Child welfare is ill-equipped to become the provider of residential therapeutic care for children and youth with very high intensity needs, and closing roughly 350 residential beds during the same time period resulted in denying children care. Now because there is literally no program who will accept the youth, they are on overstay in hospitals and being ‘placed’ in hotels at the cost of \$35,000 or more a child per month out of funds intended to preserve families.

The significant increase in behavioral health conditions suffered by children and adolescents in the last few years is well known. A by-product of the trauma associated with the unpredictability and fears that accompanied the pandemic, both depression and anxiety have grown by as much as 30%.

House Bill 322 proposes to focus on prevention by strengthening community-based, in-home behavioral health services and dedicating funding to customize services and goods and enable individualized plans made in collaboration with families and youth. Specifically targeting youth at risk of foster care placement, the bill proposes 100 slots for mental health case management. Children and youth are always better off being cared for at home by their own parent or kin caregiver.

Given the nexus between behavioral health and child welfare, including public child welfare experts in the stakeholders group is critical.

We urge a favorable report for House Bill 322.

Judith Schagrin, LCSW-C  
Co-Chairperson, Legislative Committee