

Senate Bill 876 Maryland Medical Assistance Program – Limited Behavioral Health Services

Senate Finance Committee

March 12, 2024

Position: SUPPORT

Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of SB 876.

SB 876 requires that Maryland Medicaid provide coverage for a limited array of behavioral health services delivered to a child under the age of 19, regardless of whether the child has a behavioral health diagnosis. Currently, to bill for behavioral health services, a provider must assign a behavioral health diagnosis within the first three appointments.

The limited array of covered services is to include evaluation and treatment planning, family therapy, group therapy, individual therapy and services related to prevention, education, or outreach.

The bill does not prohibit a provider from issuing a diagnosis. However, diagnosing youth, particularly very young children, can be extremely challenging even for the most skilled clinicians. It can be hard to identify mental health conditions in children because typical childhood growth involves rapid change, and the symptoms of a condition can vary depending on a child's age. Often it is only by working with a child and family over time that some clarity emerges. SB 876 gives clinicians that time.

In addition, there are growing concerns about the over-diagnosis or misdiagnosis of children and youth.¹ These diagnoses can follow a child throughout their life and may even impact their career opportunities. Stigma against behavioral health disabilities remains. Families' legitimate fears of their child being labeled can delay or prevent them from seeking help. SB 876 would alleviate those concerns.

Finally, it can be extremely damaging to a child's self-image to be labeled with a psychiatric disorder. A young person can grow up believing that there is something wrong with them, that they are somehow "abnormal." There can be a real benefit to not immediately assigning a diagnosis.

For these reasons, MHAMD supports SB 876 and urges a favorable report.

¹ Eva Merten et al. Overdiagnosis of mental disorders in children and adolescents (in developed countries). Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health. (2017) Accessed March 1, 2024.
<https://capmh.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13034-016-0140-5>