

**House Bill 829 Public Health – Service Sector Employees – Mental Health First Aid Training**

House Health and Government Operations Committee

February 28, 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 House Bill 829.

HB 829 requires that the Department of Health, subject to the limitations of its budget, provide a virtual Mental Health First Aid training program to service sector employees, and promote awareness of the availability of the training program.

HB 829 is needed. The mental health of both adults and children worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic and levels of mental distress remain elevated in its wake. While numbers are down somewhat from their peak, one in three adults reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder in February 2023.<sup>1</sup>

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training is one way to help. MHFA teaches participants how to identify signs of mental illness and substance use disorders. It provides skills needed to provide initial help and support to someone with a mental health or substance use problem, and knowledge of resources that can be shared. Finally, it teaches participants how to identify a mental health or substance use crisis and how to respond in the event of a crisis.

The implementation of MHFA training in the United States has been widely studied. In the last 10 years, there have been over 45 peer reviewed articles published. Research has shown that MHFA not only increases participants' knowledge, but it also increases their willingness to help others, reduces stigma and promotes empathy. In addition, people trained in MHFA use the skills and information they learn to manage their own mental wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

MHAMD has been involved with the implementation of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) since its introduction to the United States. MHAMD worked with the Maryland Behavioral Health

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<sup>1</sup> Nirmita Panchal, et al. The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use. (March 2023). Accessed February 22, 2024. <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

<sup>2</sup> Mental Health First Aid Research and Evidence Base (2023). Accessed February 22, 2024. <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/about/research/>

Administration, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, and the Missouri Department of Health to adapt MHFA for the United States. Since 2009, MHAMD has been responsible for the development, oversight and implementation of the statewide *MHFA Maryland* program. The program has trained over 83,000 Marylanders, including over 2500 instructors. MHAMD utilizes a corps of instructors and master trainers who primarily deliver free and scholarship-based trainings through a state grant. This ensures that no one seeking MHFA training is turned away.

Given the high number of people who are experiencing mental health or substance use challenges, and the many benefits of MHFA, it makes sense to offer the training to many segments of the population, including service sector employees, who frequently come into contact with the public and may be the ones to witness a mental health or substance use crisis.

For these reasons, MHAMD supports HB 829 and urges a favorable report.