

February 23, 2024

The Honorable Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk
House Health and Government Operations Committee, Chair
Maryland General Assembly
Room 241
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the National Council for Mental Wellbeing and Mental Health First Aid USA (MHFA), I write in strong support of HB 829, a bill that provides access to life-saving behavioral health awareness training to service sector employees in Maryland. We are experiencing a behavioral health crisis, and a lack of mental health awareness leads to negative impacts on the wellbeing of individuals and their communities. This measure is a critical step toward improving the safety and mental wellbeing of Maryland's residents.

House Bill 829 requires the Department of Health to provide a virtual mental health first aid training program for service sector employees that teaches these individuals how to recognize and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges and provide a basic understanding of the behavioral health and crisis services available in the state. The bill includes a public awareness campaign in partnership with the Department of Labor and the Public Service Commission to increase awareness among service sector employees of the availability of virtual mental health first aid training.

Mental Health First Aid teaches employees how to recognize and respond to an individual who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge, increases confidence in providing support to an individual, and increases knowledge of professional and self-help resources. This bill provides an opportunity to integrate mental health and substance use support as employers grapple with workforce mental health needs — such as rising levels of anxiety and depression. By training more individuals, we can increase the number of people who can recognize and assist other individuals in need and decrease the stigma attached to behavioral health challenges.

The National Council for Mental Wellbeing is a membership organization that drives policy and social change on behalf of nearly 3,400 mental health and substance use treatment organizations and the millions of people they serve. We advocate for policies to ensure equitable access to high-quality services and build the capacity of mental health and substance use organizations. Through our MHFA program, more than 3 million individuals across the U.S. have been trained to identify, understand, and respond to signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use challenges.

As a supporter of this powerful and evidence-based training, I request your support for this bill that will have a profound impact on the lives of Maryland residents.

Sincerely,



Keisha Pitts, JD
Director, State Policy and Advocacy
National Council for Mental Wellbeing

