

**Testimony Before the House Health & Government Operations Committee
February 21, 2024**

HB 691 - Legally Protected Health Care - Gender-Affirming Treatment

****SUPPORT****

The National Association of Social Workers – Maryland Chapter is a professional organization representing over 3,000 social workers statewide. We are writing to you in support of House Bill 691- Legally Protected Health Care - Gender-Affirming Treatment.

This proposed bill further expands upon the civil and human rights work established through the recent passage and implementation of critical legislation such as the Trans Health Equity Act.¹ NASW-MD supports the proposed efforts incorporated in HB 691 to include altering and modernizing the definition of “legally protected health care” to include gender affirming care (GAC), and to include prohibiting disciplinary action against licensed healthcare practitioners for providing or supporting the provision of GAC.

As social workers (licensed healthcare practitioners) – we have long recognized that GAC is a critical component of whole-person care and that access to this type of evidence-based and individually focused medical and behavioral health care significantly improves the social and mental health outcomes for transgender and gender diverse individuals (TGD).

Access to GAC improves life satisfaction² for TGD individuals while drastically reducing rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Furthermore, access to GAC also improves the mental health and well-being of parents, caregivers, and family members – many of whom experience collateral traumatic stress resultant from trying to navigate a highly fragmented and often hostile healthcare system to help link their loved ones with timely access to affirming care.

We also recognize that TGD people and their parents, families, and support systems are under extreme duress given the exponential rise in LGBTQIA+ legislation – much of which targets TGD adolescents. This social context has forced many individuals, families, and their support systems to flee states that have passed GAC bans because it is no longer safe to live, work, or even exist.

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Such legislative efforts have also simultaneously criminalized helping professionals like social workers, physicians, nurses, and other allied care providers for providing evidence-based care to TGD individuals. Our explicit commitment to social justice is enshrined within our Social Work Code of Ethics, which calls upon us to protect and support historically marginalized people (which includes TGD people and communities). No provider should be subject to disciplinary action or any other such consequences for rendering, for supporting, or for enabling access to life-saving Gender Affirming Care.

It is of the utmost importance that you support the passage of HB 691 so that the state of Maryland can remain a leader in the civil and human rights and can continue to maintain a robust mental health and healthcare workforce.

We remain grateful that those entrusted with the governance of this state have taken meaningful actions to emphasize that this will be a safe place for TGD people. In a time that is seemingly defined by hostility and by division, our state can continue to be a place of hope and opportunity where all are welcome.

On behalf of NASW-MD we urge a favorable report on HB 691.

Respectfully,

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1 The Trans Health Equity Act requires Medicaid to cover additional gender-affirming care, ensuring equitable health care access for individuals who are transgender and gender diverse.

2 James, S.E., Herman, J.L., Durso, L.E., & Heng-Lehtinen, R. (2024). Early Insights: A Report of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey. National Center for Transgender Equality, Washington, DC.