

Senate Finance Committee
SB 163: Health-General Article – References to Mental Health

January 15, 2025

POSITION: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the federally-mandated, state-designated Protection and Advocacy agency for the State of Maryland, charged with defending and advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. DRM envisions a world where people with disabilities participate fully in all aspects of community life, and we champion their rights to self-determination, dignity, equality, opportunity, and freedom from discrimination and harm. For these reasons, DRM supports SB 163, to remove outdated references to “mental hygiene” in the Health-General Article, and replace them with “mental health” instead.

Stigmatizing language reinforces negative stereotypes and dehumanizes individuals with disabilities. Using respectful language that emphasizes the humanity of the individual is crucial. Although the mental hygiene movement was initiated in 1908 by consumers of psychiatric services and professionals interested in improving the conditions and the quality of treatment of people with mental disorders, the term “mental hygiene” is now antiquated and has a negative connotation, implying that a person with a mental health disability’s mind is somehow unclean or their disability resulted from actions within their control.

In 1948, the World Health Organization was created, and in the same year the first International Conference on Mental Health was held in London. Originally promoted as an “International Conference on Mental Hygiene,” it ended with a series of recommendations on “mental health.” As a result of these recommendations, the International Committee on Mental Hygiene was superseded by the World Federation for Mental Health.¹ Since that time, the term “mental health” has become predominant in the field of public health, and the term “mental hygiene” has become disfavored. Maryland is only 77 years late to this party.

Similar to usage of the terms “handicapped” or “crippled,” our usage of language around disability has changed significantly over the years. The words we use have power, and can reveal our deeply ingrained beliefs about the value and culpability of people with disabilities. It is time for Maryland to update its public references to “mental hygiene.”

For these reasons, we recommend that Senate Bill 163 be given a favorable report. Should you have any questions, please contact Luciene Parsley, Litigation Director at Disability Rights Maryland, at 443-692-2494 or lucienep@disabilityrightsmd.org.

¹ “The Roots of the Concept of Mental Health,” *World Psychiatry*. 2008 Jun;7(2):113–116. doi: 10.1002/j.2051-5545.2008.tb00172.x.