

**HB612 Written Testimony – Ways and Means Committee (2/12 at 1:00 PM)**

*Public Schools - Lifesaver Schools Program - Establishment*

Maya Tarantino- BCPS alum from Dulaney High School

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Maya Tarantino, a freshman at Duke University and a proud alumna of Baltimore County Public Schools. I write to you today on behalf of Maryland students to urge a favorable report on House Bill 612.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers ages 15-19—a devastating reality. Even more devastating is being just 18 years old and already having lost four of my peers to suicide during my high school years alone. As a former Maryland public school student, I have seen firsthand the critical need for improved mental health education and crisis response within our schools.

Currently, there is a severe lack of education and training within school buildings to address social and emotional crises. Students, recognizing this urgent gap, have taken matters into their own hands. While at Dulaney High School, I co-founded *Not On Our Watch*, an advocacy group dedicated to preventing further tragedy. Our 50 members have worked tirelessly to drive change within our school community. Through my recent research on mental health education, I have found that peer-to-peer education programs—like those championed in the Lifesaver Schools Program—are among the most effective solutions. This bill will not only validate the work students are already doing but will also empower more schools to adopt life-saving mental health initiatives.

Last year, I passionately advocated for this bill and was heartbroken to see it stall in the House. Now, as a public policy major, I have a deeper understanding of the immense responsibility that legislators hold in shaping meaningful change. The time to act is now. Our federal government has been prioritizing youth mental health—Maryland must do the same.

Since starting college, I have heard countless stories from students across the country who, like me, have lost friends, peers, and family members to suicide and untreated mental illness. By enacting HB612, Maryland can set a powerful precedent for other states, proving that mental health policies in schools must be a priority.

Experts are calling this a national mental health epidemic. HB612 is a no-cost, life-saving solution that will enrich education and protect students across our state. On behalf of all students, I ask you to show your support and help in ensuring no more lives are lost at the hands of our education system, not on our watch. Accordingly, I respectfully request a favorable report on HB612 from the committee. Thank you for your time.