

Testimony submitted to the House Appropriations Committee
February 18, 2020
Support House Bill 709

I am Wendy Wilcox, Director of the City of Bowie's Youth Services Bureau and Vice Chair of the Maryland Association of Youth Services Bureaus. Thank you for the granting me the time to speak about how HB 709 will benefit Maryland youth and their families.

Bowie Youth & Family Services has been serving our community since 1971. We provide counseling services, parenting classes, psycho-educational groups, crisis intervention services, mentoring, school-based life skills and other programs for hundreds of local youth each year. Our programs are effective, and (literally) save lives.

Bowie, along with the other Maryland Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs), was initially established through a federal prevention grant in the early 1970s. When the federal grant ended, the State of Maryland designated monies within the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) to continue funding of YSBs. A local match requirement was set at 25%. Although there have been occasional cuts in times of economic stress, this state-local partnership (in our case, between the state of Maryland and the City of Bowie) generally worked well by creating a steady funding stream through which YSBs could successfully assist families in need without interruption.

As this state-local partnership began, YSBs were specifically regulated under COMAR 16.07.01. Under COMAR, YSBs were mandated to deliver counseling, referral, crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to at-risk youth and their families. COMAR charged DJS with monitoring all YSBs' compliance with regulatory requirements, including program effectiveness, through annual site visits. This monitoring arrangement continues to the present.

In 2006, change occurred. Funds previously designated in the Children's Interagency Fund (CIF) to go directly to YSBs were eliminated. This change resulted in us having to come to you to protect these funds, something the General Assembly did through Budget language for many years. Since 2015, the funding stream has become even more complicated and limited and created a situation of uncertainty that has been ongoing. To compound the matter, YSBs had to absorb an overall state funding cut of 10% in FY2010; these dollars have never been restored.

In the last five years, there has been an erosion of local control of the CIF funding that flows through LMBs. The change in focus to a limited number of priority areas in 2015 necessitated a shift in how LMBs and YSBs are permitted to use state funds.

We very much appreciate our positive relationships with all parties in both our state funding agency and our LMBs. However, the sum of changes in the last decade have created budgetary uncertainty almost yearly, so that our ability to provide services for all youth who need them is at risk. As it stands, several YSBs have closed because of financial stress.

This legislation, if passed, would enact a return to designated funding for the critical help that YSBs provide to struggling youth in our communities, just as the General Assembly has a history of doing. Please vote in support for HB 709.