

March 5, 2020

Dear Chairwoman McIntosh and members of the House Appropriations Committee,

My name is Gideon Epstein and I am a recent graduate from the University of Maryland, College Park. I am here to urge a favorable report on HB 1504, which would establish a task force to study mental health in higher education. Over the past two years, I have seen the direct impact that our lacking mental health infrastructure has on students.

In October 2018, I received a phone call from the Montgomery County police. They told me that my friend had gone missing. The officers explained that he had been at a psychiatric ward and had run away. They wanted to see if I knew where he might be. I was in complete shock. I saw my friend just a few weeks before and he had seemed completely fine. I texted him with calm language to see if he would respond. He didn't. Thankfully, I got a call a few hours later from the police saying that my friend had returned home safely. I texted him again the next day--just to check in and see if we could hang out soon. We texted back and forth several times and I sent him some dates that would work for me. Again, he didn't respond.

Just a couple weeks later, I received a seemingly random phone call from my friend down at Georgia Tech. "Did you hear?" he asked. I had no idea what he was talking about. Then he broke the news: our friend had passed away. The call was silent for about a minute before my friend on the call said, "I know, it's terrible—a suicide." That's how I found out about the tragic passing of my best friend from high school. The consequences of my friend's death have affected who I'm becoming in my young adulthood in ways I could have never imagined.

A feeling of fragile numbness and empty sadness quickly set in and continued for weeks. My personal relationships and academic performance suffered. I didn't know it right away, but I needed to get help. As I would come to learn, grieving and coping with loss are different for each person. One friend made a forceful suggestion that I hadn't previously considered: go to a counseling appointment at the Counseling Center on campus. While at first I was opposed to the idea because I thought I was someone who didn't need counseling, my friend eventually convinced me to schedule an intake appointment.

A week later, I met with a psychologist for an hour. I felt such a release of emotions all at once. After just a single session, the counselor told me that I wouldn't be able to come back to the University Counseling Center because it is vastly underfunded and unable to cover the recent increasing student demand for mental health services. I remember feeling angry and frustrated that our communities and college campuses can't provide the most basic institutional mental health support for people in need.

As it turns out, the approximately 20 counselors on staff at UMD collectively see over 10,000 appointments each year. Many students, like me, don't have access to sustained counseling services. I began to see firsthand the mental health crisis that is so often talked about on college campuses. In different ways, both my friend and I lacked sufficient access to mental health support.

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HB 1504, if implemented, would be a huge first step in getting students the help they need and deserve. I urge a favorable report of HB 1504.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gideon Epstein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G".

Gideon Epstein
Former Student at the University of Maryland, College Park