



SB 161/HB 244 – Task Force to Study Access to Mental Health Care In Higher Education

Committees: Education, Health and Environmental Affairs/Appropriations

Date: January 20, 2020

POSITION: Support

The Maryland Coalition of Families: Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) helps families who care for someone with behavioral health needs. Using personal experience as parents, caregivers and other loved ones, our staff provide one-to-one peer support and navigation services to parents and caregivers of young people with mental health issues and to any loved one who cares for someone with a substance use or gambling issue.

MCF enthusiastically supports SB 161/HB 244.

SB 161/HB 244 would establish a Task Force to study access to mental health care in higher education. The Task Force will be directed to study such things as the prevention and treatment of mental illness, and the challenges for community colleges, colleges, and universities to meet the demand for mental health services.

In a recent study of more than 67,000 college students from more than 100 institutions, one in five students reported having had thoughts of suicide, with nine percent making an attempt and nearly twenty percent reporting self-injury. One in four students reported being diagnosed with a mental illness. These rates have continually been on the rise.

Therefore not surprisingly, another recent study found that college students' use of counselling center resources increased by an average of 35 percent over a five-year period, while the average enrollment increased by just five percent during that same time.

Colleges and universities have struggled to meet this demand for mental health counselling.

MCF has a young adult group, Taking Flight. In the course of working with these young adults, I have heard many troubling stories. Recently the Active Minds chapter of the University of Maryland College Park participated in a campaign to protest the lengthy waits that existed to see a counselor on campus. There were reports of individuals having to wait months to secure an appointment. The campaign was entitled "Thirty Days too Late."

I've also heard reports of students who got in to see a college counsellor, only to be told that they were only allowed three - five visits before they had to secure a private counsellor off-campus. Many students do not have the resources to do this, and/or they don't want to tell their parents, and/or they don't have access to transportation to go off-campus. While the use of off-campus counsellors may be one way to address the struggles that college campuses are having keeping up with demand, this approach needs to be undertaken in a thoughtful way that is supportive of the needs of students.

A Task Force is critically needed to look at all of these pressing issues.

While I've heard concerning stories, I've also heard of great success stories from young people who were able to access robust student counselling services. Clearly there is much benefit to being able to provide timely and quality mental health services to students.

We urge as favorable report on SB 161/HB 244..

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