

Testimony for HB 244
Stance: In Favor of
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As a University of Maryland student, I would like to thank Delegate Valentino-Smith for introducing this bill. I would also like to thank the Committee on Appropriations for reviewing our testimony for this bill. This bill has the potential to reach every student on campus at a USM flagship university, directly and indirectly.

When venturing to UMD, I was grateful to explore areas of academic interest and develop new personal and professional connections. As I picked University of Maryland, I had no prior relationship with their counseling center. However, I never realized how institutions and frameworks like these could be so impactful on the student life, if effectively run. For many students, all of the positives associated with higher education can be clouded by other, more negative emotions. Feelings of stress and anxiety often accompany the college experience as students consistently strive to balance their academic and personal lives. And for some, these feelings can manifest into more serious mental health concerns.

There have been articles released by the CDC highlighting the need for mental health support now more than ever. With the COVID-19 pandemic, students are struggling to create sustainable social networks, are constantly in periods of isolation, and many are going through grief as the death toll rises. COVID-19 has challenged us to rethink the means of self-care, wellness, online therapy, shipping prescriptions, and many more innovative measures associated with mental health care. These innovations are crucial to help the overwhelming blanket of despair that drapes over many students. Meanwhile, students are challenged to thrive academically, stare at a screen constantly, and retain information in a less engaging and motivating atmosphere. This creates many drawbacks for student's wellbeing, personal success, and academic intellect.

Numerous student-led and faculty-led initiatives have been directed toward increasing mental health awareness and combating the stigma associated with receiving treatment for mental health concerns. Unfortunately, without further research into the specific challenges institutions of Higher Education face in meeting the demand for mental health services, these initiatives are haphazard. Additionally, the creation of a task force can analyze marketing strategies and implementation styles to make mental health care more accessible to all students at our diverse universities. With the establishment of a Mental Health Task Force, Higher Education schools will be able to align their practices with the most effective mental health promotion, prevention,

and treatment strategies. The implementation of this task force is crucial in ensuring students are able to foster a successful personal, mental, and professional environment.

The data collected in the Mental Health Task Force's reports can be utilized by counseling centers and student activists across the University System of Maryland (USM). This can help individual universities foster a plan that best suits their demographic's needs. All students, not just those with documented mental health concerns, deserve for their mental health to be prioritized. Efforts need to be made at the institutional level to decrease perceived and structural barriers surrounding mental health care and access. Through these institutional changes, students, professors, and the campus community can become empowered to integrate more mental health awareness into their lives long after they leave the USM.

This bill would give Higher Education officials the tools necessary to better combat inequities within their structure for mental health care and innovative methods to streamline mental health care. This achievement would advance USM schools as environments where mental health is prioritized and students can thrive, in and out of the classroom. I urge you to support this bill and provide University of Maryland students, and all USM students, with this task force, necessary for the identification and removal of structural inefficiencies that prevent effective mental health care for all across the USM today.