

January 20, 2021

Senate Bill 161 - Task Force to Study Access to Mental Health Care in Higher Education-SUPPORT

Chairman Pinsky, Vice Kagan, and members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 45,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations and service providers. NAMI Maryland is dedicated to providing education, support and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

NAMI Maryland supports **SB 161**, legislation to create a Task Force to Study Access to Mental Health Care in Higher Education. This Task Force would look at things like reducing barriers to providing mental health services on campus, improving the use of telemedicine and expanding of counseling services.

On average, mental illness impacts about one in five adults and one in six adolescents, and despite these staggering numbers, only about half of those individuals seek help in a given year. In a higher education setting, mental illness can lead to social isolation, slipping grades and is a leading driver of failure to complete a degree. Students with untreated mental health and behavioral health conditions need an approach that starts with access to high-quality mental health services but does not stop there. Additional steps are needed to support our student population and target the students who never seek out the services provided by the campus counseling center, including:

1. Identify at-risk students.
2. Decrease stigma, increase help-seeking behavior.
3. Provide access to high-quality free or low-cost mental health services.
4. Clear crisis protocols.
5. Promoting social networks.
6. Cultural competency.
7. Additional initiatives – community partnerships, support groups, education, and peer support.

We thank Delegate Valentino-Smith and Senator Eckardt for including NAMI Maryland in this important Task Force and have one proposed amendment. Staff should be permitted to select the right participant on the Task Force rather than our Board of Directors. Process-wise that is what works better for our organization, and our proposed amendment would be on p.2, line 6. deleting “designated by the Board of Directors of the Chapter.”.

Developing the right array of services and supports is critical to creating a college environment that allows students to both academic success and overall emotional well-being. This Task Force is designed to do just that. However, we strongly urge the General Assembly to consider swift action on Task Force recommendations. There are things that can be done today to make positive change for this at-risk population and while consensus and information gathering is important, our youth deserve as much progress and material support we can provide them. For these reasons, NAMI Maryland asks for a favorable report on **SB 161**.

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