



John Hartline, Chairman

50 Harry S. Truman Parkway • Annapolis, MD 21401
Office: 410-841-5772 • Fax: 410-841-5987 • TTY: 800-735-2258
Email: rmc.mda@maryland.gov
Website: www.rural.maryland.gov
Charlotte Davis, Executive Director

Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 857 - Health – Maryland Community Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence –
Establishment
Finance Committee
March 11, 2021

The Rural Maryland Council **Supports with Amendments** SB-857 - Health – Maryland Community Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence – Establishment. The Bill would establish the Maryland Community Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence within the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services. The Center would provide strategic planning, technical assistance, and assist in the coordination between state and local governments to carry out specified purposes.

The intent of the bill is to prevent those with mental health issues from being arrested or returning to incarceration after being released. By providing these individuals with proper behavioral health treatment, it will help reduce arrests against those with mental health disorders and reduce the rate of recidivism for those who have been released. The Treatment Advocacy Center reports 20% of jail inmates and 15% of inmates in state prisons suffer from serious mental illness. The total population of inmates that have a serious mental illness is 356,000. How many of these incarcerated individuals could have avoided being arrested and becoming incarcerated if they were directed earlier to get the proper help that they needed. This issue is targeted through many aspects of the bill, including the sequential intercept model which focuses on diverting those with mental health illnesses away from the criminal justice system and to community mental health and addiction services.

The Rural Maryland Council agrees with the Sponsors amendments, including the addition of funding behavioral health in rural areas, and respectfully suggests the additional amendments as well. First, The Council suggests the Center does a strategic plan, including a local assessment of capacity. There are very few public mental health facilities in rural parts of Maryland, specifically in western Maryland and on the shore. Second, In the Collaboration section of the bill, add local health improvement coalitions. These local stakeholders would have information on what is happening on the ground in their areas.

We believe the creation of a Center will help connect the sparse services that do exist in rural areas with local expertise. The Rural Maryland Council respectfully asks for a **favorable with amendments** report on SB-857.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.