



Testimony in Support of SB 857

March 9, 2021

SB 857 – Maryland Community Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence

Ida Etey-Benissan

CASA, Lead Contact Tracer, Health and Human Services Department

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair and Members of the Finance Committee :

My name is Ida Etey Benissan, I am the Lead Contact Tracer within our Health and Human Services Department at CASA, the mid-Atlantic region's largest immigrant serving and advocacy organization with over 90,000 members statewide. CASA offers a wide array of services including health, legal, employment and education services while engaging members to work collectively to advocate for solutions that address structural inequities present in these very same fields. As such, on behalf of my organization and our members, I urge you to vote in favor of Senate Bill 857, which would help significantly advance efforts to create effective diversion programs aimed at reducing the number of the incarcerated in our state with behavior health needs.

The appalling number of individuals in our prison system with behavioral health needs is a shameful reminder of how we have chosen to deploy our law enforcement to address situations that do not require such measures, and rather call for much more strategic interventions involving our behavioral health and social service infrastructure. This bill seeks to assist those jurisdictions interested in using data and best practices to help create effective diversion programs that can address this issue. The Center of Excellence proposed here would act as a central repository of resources for the purposes of improving our behavioral health and justice systems. Additionally, the legislation as proposed would generate more opportunities for data sharing between departments and community providers that would allow for greater data driven programmatic evaluation and implementation.

As an organization working daily to address racial and ethnic disparities, we believe it is vital these efforts encompass a racial impact analysis as proposed in the legislation. Understanding the data behind how communities of color are disproportionately impacted by current standards of practice is vital to creating an effective diversion system that is inclusive. Such an evaluation must also include criteria that evaluate standards and practices in culturally competent care. Culturally competent behavioral care for the Latino community is essential to the success of any diversion program targeted for that population. There has long

existed gaps in the availability of that type of care for the immigrant community, as such we hope this legislation will help define standards of practice that will increase accessibility for those most vulnerable.

For the reasons outlined above, we ask for a favorable report for SB 857

Thank you

Ida Etey-Benissan

CASA – Health and Human Service Department

