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Education, Health, and
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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of SB857- Health - Maryland Behavioral Health and Public Safety
Center of Excellence - Establishment**

March 11th, 2021

Chairwoman Kelley, Vice-Chair Feldman, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 857. Over the past year, I have had the honor to serve as the co-chair of the Public Safety and Judicial Systems Subcommittee of the Lieutenant Governor's Commission to Study Mental and Behavioral Health. The Commission has offered me the unique opportunity to hear from advocates who are working with individuals with behavioral health disorders, many of whom are stuck in a cycle that leads to incarceration due to untreated mental and behavioral health needs. In 2020, my co-chair Dr. Lynda Bonieskie and I, in collaboration with Opioid Operational Command Center Executive Director Steve Schuh, obtained funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) and organized the first Maryland State Summit on Behavioral Health and the Justice System, using the Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) as a framework to review opportunities for improvement in the State of Maryland.

The Maryland State Summit on Behavioral Health and the Justice System brought together a diverse set of stakeholders from across Maryland to evaluate strengths and areas of improvement for mental and behavioral health services across the justice system. Advocates, community service providers, healthcare and justice professionals all participated in the Summit to develop 13 recommendations to strengthen services, close gaps, and create a continuum of care. Maryland needs an implementation body accountable for these goals, and to carry on the work of implementing the Sequential Intercept Model, improving access to behavioral health services for justice involved individuals, and to divert individuals with behavioral health illnesses towards treatment and away from the Justice system.

To begin implementation of the ambitious recommendations of the report, and to continue implementing the Sequential Intercept Model with the goal of increasing the treatment and decreasing the incarceration of individuals with behavioral health disorders, SB857 creates the Behavioral Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence. This Center of Excellence would:

- Act as the statewide information repository for behavioral health treatment and diversion programs related to the criminal justice system;
- Develop a strategic plan for the State of Maryland to reduce incarceration and increase treatment of justice-involved individuals with behavioral health disorders;
- Host an annual State Sequential Intercept Model Summit, and include in their strategic plans implementation strategies for the recommendations arising from those summits.
- Identify and inform stakeholders of grant funding that would support the missions of the Center;
- Facilitate Sequential Intercept Model train-the-trainer programs, with the goal of training 50 SIM facilitators, utilizing funding already secured by my office in 2020;
- And provide technical assistance to localities for the implementation of best practices at the intersection of behavioral health and the justice system;

This legislation also requires that local jurisdictions develop 2-year behavioral health and public safety plans, in collaboration with their local behavioral and criminal justice planning bodies and key stakeholders to assess their behavioral health systems. Through that process, they will come up with solutions to build an adequate behavioral health system of care with due consideration for the unique impacts of their policies on racial minorities throughout the State as well as for the provision of culturally competent care.

According to the Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform, at least 39% of local jail inmates in Maryland have a mental health disorder. It is estimated that 9 out of 10 of those individuals also struggle with a co-occurring substance abuse disorder. According to research conducted by the Treatment Advocacy Center, their jail and prison stays will likely be longer than that of the average incarcerated individual. Their incarceration is also more costly than for those inmates without a mental illness, and they are more likely to present behavioral management problems during their incarceration. This is a systemic problem that fails everyone in our behavioral health, criminal justice, and public safety systems; and it requires a systematic solution. While this Center is by no means a panacea, having a State body dedicated to improving behavioral health, criminal justice, and public safety outcomes for some of our most vulnerable community members will set us on the path to a more just and equitable future. For these reasons **I respectfully request a favorable report for Senate Bill 857 .**

Sincerely,



Senator Katie Fry Hester
Carroll and Howard Counties