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March 2, 2021

**House Bill 1280 – Maryland Community Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence**

**Testimony of Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable)**

Chairwoman Pendergrass, and Committee members, I am pleased to present House Bill (HB) 1280 which would do two things: establish the Maryland Community Health and Public Safety Center of Excellence and the Community Online Interactive Network for Safety (COINS).

In November of 2020, a sequential intercept model (SIM) summit was held in Maryland by the Lieutenant Governor's Office and Senator Katie Fry Hester. As defined in the bill, a sequential intercept model is a systems-level framework for criminal justice and behavioral health stakeholders to prevent entrance into the criminal justice system, minimize penetration into the criminal justice system, and engage individuals in behavioral health services and recovery supports as they transition into the community.

In Maryland, 39% of incarcerated individuals have a behavioral health disorder. We know that their stays are likely to be longer than their counterparts. We also know that they are more likely to have continuing encounters with the justice system. The SIM summit recommendations gave us an outline to begin addressing the needs of this population and move them away from the criminal justice system and toward rehabilitation and treatment.

The idea for the Center of Excellence comes from the recommendations of the SIM summit. Through local and state efforts, Maryland has practices, programs, and legislation aiming to improve our criminal justice system and to prevent interaction with the criminal justice system. The Center would be a centralized method for collecting information regarding criminal justice/mental health resources, events, and initiatives that can be enhanced upon to facilitate broader access to relevant material and help foster program development and expansion across the state.

The goal of the Center and future annual SIM summits is to continue bringing more experts together to break new ground in how we divert people with behavioral health needs away from the criminal justice system at all intercept points, including intercept zero: before someone has first contact with the criminal justice system. To continue this work, we need to support our youth who have the passion to work within the confines of our criminal justice system and in behavioral health and make our community safer. For this reason the bill addresses identifying the possibility of scholarships for these students.

To accomplish these goals, we will build upon the existing foundation. Our local jurisdictions will be able to build on their already established programs and initiatives with the support of the Center of Excellence to address the needs in their communities. The Center will direct intentional statewide and local coordination to improve the safety of our most vulnerable residents.

This bill was drafted with a health equity lens. Not all populations interface with the criminal justice system the same way. Not everyone has the privilege to exit the system by accessing appropriate services. We must be intentional about being culturally competent and provide equitable services that benefit all residents, regardless of their background. In HB 1280, there are specific provisions dedicated toward understanding of racial inequities such as requiring a racial impact assessment.

The Community Online Interactive Network for Safety (COINS) will be a data driven policy center. COINS will become a streamlined, one stop shop for data within the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services. The data requested is already available on Maryland Judiciary Case Search. However, localities have different approaches to how information is shared on case search and at what time the information is shared. This bill creates a timeline for the raw data to be submitted and presents it in an accessible manner. COINS will only use this information for research and analyses purposes.

We know the data won't change just because we are collecting it. The intent is for the data gathered and collected to guide the process by which the Center of Excellence brings about change. We know that what gets measured gets noticed. Through understanding the data, we will be able to bring to light the disparities and inequities in our justice system, thus furthering our ability to address their root causes.

We need to invest in our communities, drive people away from the criminal justice system, and find them the appropriate help so they can lead fulfilling lives. I respectfully request your favorable vote for House Bill 1280.