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To: The Honorable Shane E. Pendergrass  
Chair, Health and Government Operations Committee

From: The Office of the Attorney General

Re: House Bill 78 (Public Health - Maryland Commission on Health Equity (The Shirley Nathan-Pulliam Health Equity Act of 2021): Support

The Office of the Attorney General (the Office) supports House Bill 78 which would meet a vitally important recommendation of the Attorney General's COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force: that a Health Equity Commission be created and charged with adopting anti-racist and anti-discriminatory standards of care throughout Maryland's health care system. As detailed in the COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force report, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that black and brown Marylanders have fared worse than others during the pandemic. Black residents in Maryland make up 31 percent of the population but account for nearly 40 percent of COVID-19 deaths; Hispanics account for 11 percent of the population but 19 percent of COVID-19. Now, more than ever, we must work together to rid our health care system of racism, discrimination and health outcome disparities.

We believe the Maryland Commission on Health Equity would address systemic racism. Members include designees for the Senate President, the House Speaker, and the Secretary of multiple agencies. The Commission would meet 4 times a year to formulate and implement a Plan to improve health equity for all Maryland residents through safe and affordable housing, educational attainment, employment opportunities, economic stability, workplace inclusion and promotion opportunities, transportation accessibility, social justice, environmental factors, and public safety.

Racism will not be eliminated unless we take action, as the Attorney General observed in the COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force's report:

COVID-19 did not create the systemic failings and inequities of our social safety net and civil justice system. Those most vulnerable to any setback have disproportionately experienced the effects of these deficiencies for generations. Yet the pandemic exacerbated and brought to light with painful clarity these deficiencies and the suffering that they cause. We must, therefore, seize this unprecedented chance and collectively work together to fix them. As much suffering and loss as this public health crisis has wrought, let us not compound that tragedy by failing to ensure that it paves the way to progress.

We urge the Committee to give House Bill 78 a favorable report.

cc: Sponsor