



February 2, 2021

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION**

HB 29 Health - Standards for Involuntary Admissions and Petitions for Emergency Evaluation - Substance Use Disorder

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 77,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore opposes HB 29 Health - Standards for Involuntary Admissions and Petitions for Emergency Evaluation - Substance Use Disorder. HB 29 would expand the use of involuntary admissions and Emergency Petitions (EPs) to people with substance use disorders.

BHSB recognizes that many people in our communities who are living with a mental illness or substance use disorder do not have access to the treatment and support services they need to recover and lead productive, healthy lives. For some, involuntary admission into treatment is an approach to help people in crisis and engage them into care. However, the practice of involuntary admission and EPs should be used judiciously, reserved only for individuals with serious mental illness and who have not been well served by the behavioral health system.

An effective approach to addressing the need of people experiencing a behavioral health crisis is to strengthen and expand behavioral health crisis response services so that people get the care they need at the exact time they need it.

A comprehensive, integrated crisis response system is the backbone of any successful behavioral health system. It serves as the entry way to help individuals in need of care while reducing harm and overall costs for the system. Like other jurisdictions, Baltimore City is fortunate to have established some key behavioral health crisis response services; however, there are still gaps within Baltimore’s behavioral health crisis response system.

Baltimore City has a 24/7 behavioral health crisis hotline, the Here2Help Hotline. Trained counselors respond to over 46,000 calls annually to counsel and stabilize people who are in crisis over the phone, and help people find treatment or other resources they need for themselves or someone else experiencing a crisis.

The city also has 24/7 mobile crisis response teams that provide services in the community for people in crisis. Last year the city’s mobile crisis teams responded to over 2,500 calls with more than half of those being to emergency departments. Although, mobile crisis teams operate 24/7, the service capacity is not enough to meet the need for crisis care in Baltimore City.

In March 2018, BHSB launch the Maryland Crisis Stabilization Center, which provides 24/7 sobering services to individuals who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Individuals admitted to the center can safely sober under medical supervision and then be linked to ongoing treatment and provided 30 days of case management to support their treatment goals.

Baltimore City has one 21-bed community-based residential crisis unit that provides an alternative to or step-down from hospital-based mental health crisis services for adults. Residential crisis services include intensive behavioral health assessment and observation, medication management, intensive short-term intervention services, and discharge planning. This program receives over 700 admissions annually with an average length of stay of 10 days.

Finally, there is growing evidence that peer support advocates are highly effective at supporting people experiencing a behavioral health crisis or who have a substance use disorder. In Baltimore City, peers follow up with individuals who have experienced an overdose to help them access treatment and support services. Evidence has shown that following up within 24-48 hours after an overdose is an opportune time to engage an individual into treatment. There are opportunities to infuse more peer support positions throughout the crisis response system and this service should be utilized more broadly.

Behavioral Health crisis response services have helped countless individuals overcome life-threatening crises, but there must be broader investment to strengthen and expand these critical services. **As such, BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to oppose HB 29 and focus efforts on strengthening and expanding crisis response services to ensure better access to treatment for people with mental illness and substance use disorders.**