



March 19, 2021

House Health and Government Operations Committee

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION

1344 Mental Health Law - Reform of Laws and Delivery of Service

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 1344 Mental Health Law -Reform of Laws and Delivery of Service. HB 1344 would broaden the state’s definition of what is considered to be a danger to self or others when considering the use of involuntary commitment of people with severe mental illness.

BHSB recognizes the intent behind this bill is to help people with mental illness get access to care when experiencing a mental health crisis, however, the approach the use of involuntary commitment should be used judiciously, reserved only for individuals with serious mental illness that the Public Behavioral Health System (PBHS) has not engaged well in treatment.

Often, these individuals end up involuntarily hospitalized or unnecessarily involved in the criminal justice system, resulting in poor overall health outcomes. For some, involuntary admission into community-based treatment can be an effective approach to engaging people into care.

To improve access to emergency mental health services for people experiencing a crisis, we must have a comprehensive behavioral health system that includes robust crisis services to ensure that people get the care they need at the exact time they need it. Behavioral health crisis response services are an essential component of an effective emergency response system. Without them, people end up unnecessarily calling the police and using emergency medical services and hospitals. When used, Baltimore’s behavioral health crisis response system has helped countless Baltimoreans overcome potentially life-threatening crises.

We often take for granted our emergency response system – police, fire, and hospitals – to address these issues, but often they are not best suited for that specialized task. There must be broader, systemic investment in behavioral health crisis services and the other services people need. This is a shared obligation of the city and the state. Maryland’s system has been under-valued and under-resourced for too long.

As such, BHSB urges the House Health and Government Operations Committee to oppose HB 1344 and focus efforts on strengthening and expanding crisis response services to ensure immediate access to these life-saving urgent care services for people with mental illness crisis.