

House Bill 881 – Sexual Abuse and Harassment - Reporting and Prevention

Health and Government Operations Committee

March 2, 2021

Position: SUPPORT

The Mental Health Association of Maryland is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health, mental illness and substance use. We appreciate this opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 881.

HB 881 expands requirements around the reporting of sexual abuse and harassment in residential treatment facilities/centers (RTC). It requires complaints to be reported to the facility administration, Office of Health Care Quality, the designated protection and advocacy system in Maryland, and the Child Protective Services Unit in the Department of Human Services if the complaint involves a minor.

Under current regulations, abuse and harassment reporting laws do not apply to all RTCs. HB 881 would ensure quick reporting to a range of entities that can ensure an appropriate follow-up and response from the facility when abuse occurs. Such a response may include policy revisions, improved staff training, and ensuring that culpable staff are terminated and prosecuted, as appropriate. HB 881 would also require the facility to adopt a written protection plan to be included in treatment plans based on individual risk of facing abuse or being an abuser.

Many children in RTCs are dealing with severe emotional and behavioral health problems. These youth deserve a safe, supervised treatment environment free from trauma and abuse. Sexually abused children are at an increased risk for mental health problems throughout their life. Trauma during these formative years places children at a greater risk for subsequent psychological problems, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, poor self-esteem, dissociative and anxiety disorders. Long-term adverse effects on development leading to repeated or additional victimization in adulthood are also associated with child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse against vulnerable children should not go unreported because it leads to delayed support for the victim and their families.

HB 881 will ensure that sexual abuse and harassment in state facilities are promptly reported to the appropriate entities. For this reason, MHAMD supports this bill and urges a favorable report.

For more information, please contact Emily Allen at (443) 901-1588