

**House Bill 496 Primary and Secondary Education – Mental Health Services – Expansion
(Counselors Not Cops Act)**

Ways and Means Committee

February 3, 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 this **testimony in support of House Bill 496**.

HB 496 redirects \$10 million in annual funding currently used for school resource officers and local law enforcement coverage at Maryland public schools. Instead, beginning in Fiscal Year 2023, the bill would require the funding be used to expand the availability of school-based mental health services, restorative approaches programming, wraparound services, and trauma-informed approaches in public schools across the state.

In the wake of high-profile school shootings, school districts across the country have invested scarce educational funds into putting more police in schools. However, there is no reliable evidence that school police keep students and educators safe. Alternately, educators, researcher and law enforcement have found that strategies to support students' positive behavior and strengthen relationships among students, staff and parents *are* effective for keeping schools safe.

Today's students are experiencing increased levels of depression and anxiety and many forms of trauma. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate among children ages 10 to 17 increased by 70 percent between 2006 and 2016. Approximately 72 percent of children in the United States will have experienced at least one major stressful event — such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one — before the age of 18.

School counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists are frequently the first to see children who are sick, stressed, or traumatized — especially in communities with high poverty levels. The benefits of investing in mental health services are clear: Schools with such services see improved attendance rates, better academic achievement, and higher graduation rates, as well as lower rates of suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary incidents.

Data shows that the presence of school-based mental health providers improves outcomes for students and can also improve overall school safety. For this reason, MHAMD strongly supports HB 496 and urges a favorable report.

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