

**KATIE FRY HESTER**  
*Legislative District 9*  
Carroll and Howard Counties

Education, Health, and  
Environmental Affairs Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on  
Cybersecurity, Information Technology  
and Biotechnology



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**THE SENATE OF MARYLAND**  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of SB781 - Public Safety and Behavioral Health Improvement Act**

March 3, 2022

Chair Kelly, Vice-Chair Feldman, and members of the Finance Committee, thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 781, which will fund and expand the work of the Behavioral Health & Public Safety Center of Excellence, which this Committee established last session.

We created this Center last year to divert those with mental and behavioral health disorders from the criminal justice system and into more appropriate healthcare services. However, implementation of this vision has taken longer than expected; the Center is still in the process of hiring staff and has not started its county outreach. This year, we are returning to the committee to provide additional specificity to their mission and funding support to achieve these goals. Specifically, this legislation will:

- 1.) Appropriate \$500,000 in the annual budget for the Center of Excellence to contract services from the University System of Maryland,
- 2.) Direct the Department of Health to adopt criteria for certifying peer support specialists, which the Center can leverage towards mental and behavioral health services,
- 3.) Establish and provide one-time funding of \$500,000 for a Behavioral Health Screening Grant Program to assess the severity of disorders and identify appropriate levels of care,
- 4.) Require the Maryland 9-1-1 Board to establish training standards for dispatchers and operators to address mental & behavioral health conditions, and provide \$500,000 of one-time funding for counties to implement these standards, and
- 5.) Require the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services to create a scorecard of safety indicators, as recommended by the Office of Legislative Audits, so that we can measure the impact of the Center's work,

These additional programs are in-line with national trends and recommendations from the SIM Summit Report, which I have submitted for the bill file for the Committee's consideration. With these additional programs and support, we can continue to improve the Center's work. **For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report from the Committee.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Fry Hester".

Senator Katie Fry Hester  
Carroll and Howard Counties