



March 10, 2022

Senate Finance Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

SB 828 Family Investment Program- Eligibility, Work Experience, Community Service, and Reports- Alterations

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 supports SB 828- Family Investment Program- Eligibility, Work Experience, Community Service and Reports- Alterations. This bill adds federally-allowed flexibilities to the Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) program including streamlining work verification paperwork, codifying that 30-hours is the minimum standard work week for able-bodied adults on TCA, codifying that families who newly receive TCA can optionally have 12 months to stabilize before moving into work placements, and re-envisioning the Work Experience (WEX) program so that TCA recipients have more choice in their placement so that they can gain tangible, marketable skills that lead to quality employment opportunities.

The Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) program serves families with children who live in deep poverty. TCA, the cash assistance part of Maryland’s TANF program, was created as part of Welfare Reform in the mid-nineties. Today, over 22,000 Maryland’s families have to rely on TCA to meet their basic needs, and more than 70% of TCA recipients are children. ¹ Families use TCA benefits to purchase housing, food, transportation, and other basic needs.

BHSB supports SB 828 because it begins the critical process of improving TCA-especially the work requirement-to be a more trauma-informed, anti-racist and client centered program. The federal TANF program – particularly the strict work requirement - is rooted in a history of racism that perpetuates false and harmful assumptions about families living in poverty. ² Far too often, TCA recipients are placed into temporary, unpaid work experience activities with little to no opportunity for employment after they have completed their placement. Of all of the types of work activities TCA recipients can be referred to, recipients in these unpaid work experience (WEX) placements have the most difficulty securing employment after TCA, and overall make the lowest earnings post-TCA.³ This leads to continued economic instability for families and caregivers and continuing the cycle of deep poverty.

¹ DHS Caseload Data. FY2021.

² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2022. Improvements in TANF Cash Benefits Needed to Undo the Legacy of Historical Racism. <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/1-26-22tanf.pdf>

³ University of Maryland School of Social Work. Work Activities and Short-Term Employment & Earnings Among TANF Recipients. 2016. <https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/media/ssw/fwrtg/welfare-research/work-supports-and-initiatives/workactivities.pdf?&>

Studies show that children living in deep poverty are five times more likely to experience abuse and neglect and other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which begins a lifelong struggle with negative mental, behavioral, and physical health outcomes.⁴ Improving the TCA Work Experience Program can lead to economic stability for families. Improved job stability and income can mitigate children's exposure to ACEs as it reduces parental stress by helping to provide for their children.

The CDC estimates lifetime costs associated with ACEs at approximately \$2 trillion nationwide, measures that prevent and address childhood trauma not only work to improve the public health of our state, but also have a high rate of return on investment and decrease healthcare, education, and welfare program costs in the long term. Maryland must continue to enact policies such as the one in SB 828 that prevent and mitigate ACEs. **As such, BHSB urges the Senate Finance Committee to support SB 828.**

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html>