

In Support of the Constitutional Amendment for Environmental Human Rights SB783

Senate Hearing: Mar 9 at 1pm, Judicial Proceedings

Maryland General Assembly

My name is Dr. Heidi Schreiber-Pan; I have a PHD in clinical mental health counseling and am a licensed clinical professional counselor in the state of Maryland. I am the executive director of Chesapeake Mental Health in Towson and founder of the Center for Nature Informed Therapy, a division of Chesapeake Mental Health.

I have investigated the intersection of nature and mental health for the past 12 years, and in particular my research interest has focused on the role of nature on psychological well-being.

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony in support of this amendment which aims to support a person's right to a healthy environment. As a mental health expert, I strongly support this notion which I believe represents an important first step in reclaiming the deep connection between nature and mental wellbeing.

As research studies accumulate, the link between exposure to green and blue spaces and mental health is evidence-based and undeniable. The most robust correlation is on the benefits of nature connection and decrease of anxiety and stress. This is, in part, due to green and blue spaces affecting our physiology. Environments rich in plant life and bodies of water reduce our sympathetic nervous system's response within minutes.

According to new research, connection to nature has helped many people with mental health issues during the pandemic. People who increased their time in nature during the Covid-19 outbreak reported greater psychological well-being than those who spent more time indoors.

In my clinical practice, my expertise lies within the treatment of anxiety and stress disorders, which I have found are frequently a direct response to an over-stimulated mind. Green spaces provide a strong protective factor against stress related issues due to the restorative qualities of the natural world.

Research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that individuals growing up with the least green space nearby had an over 50% increased risk for developing depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

It is important to mention here that environmental degradation such as depletion of air or water quality and habitat destruction have now entered the mental health world. The American Psychological Association has used the term "eco-anxiety" to describe an intense chronic fear regarding the health of our home planet. The APA is going as far as

naming environmental degradation as a source of trauma. Recently two of my patients discussed in therapy their decision not to have children as they fear that their offspring would have to struggle through a climate apocalypse.

In summary, the mental health of our communities is negatively impacted by the lack of healthy green and blue spaces. Anxiety, depression, and violence impacts our lives in big and small ways every single day. Individuals' mental health needs must be taken into consideration as we create new laws and policies. Healthy outdoor spaces have the power to transform our hurting communities in a formidable way: a wholesome relationship to the natural world will give rise to healthy neighborhoods and our society as a whole. That is why I support this Constitutional Amendment for Environmental Human Rights.

Thank you.