

Good Afternoon.

I want to begin by thanking you, Delegate Henson, for sponsoring this legislation once again. We live in a time when our schools are increasingly violent places, and when the very act of discussing the black experience in school has become a national flashpoint. In that light, it is as important as ever to have the appropriate guard rails in place when a child's well-being is threatened. Despite what some may not want to acknowledge, the effects of systemic racism on the physical health of the Black population are well documented, and the acknowledgement of its effects on mental health is an important next step.

In his 2021 advisory, *Protecting Youth Mental Health*, Surgeon General Murthy observed that, even before the pandemic's onset, "mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people."¹ This statement applies particularly to our youth of color, who experience what psychologists term "adverse childhood experiences" at double the rate of their white peers².

The Surgeon General went on to state that "mental health is no less important than physical health [...] and that must be reflected in how we communicate about and prioritize mental health." Simply put, mental health is health, and mental anguish deserves to be placed alongside physical suffering when considering a person's fitness to continue work, school, or any other pursuit. This bill takes the enormously important step of acknowledging as much, by placing mental and physical health in parity under the umbrella of "extenuating circumstances".

As a parent, sending your child to college is both a time of immense pride and one of profound nervousness as you entrust the University with your child's physical and mental well-being. Just as no parent should be placed in the position of weighing sunk financial costs against their child's physical health, this bill ensures that, when faced with a child undergoing mental trauma, lost educational costs will not be a barrier to addressing mental health concerns when they arise.

As a pastor, I routinely see firsthand the effects of mental illness on those around us, and how even seemingly minor environmental stressors can, when left unaddressed, become ruinous to a person's well-being. And yes, racial disparities in our culture - to say nothing of outright racist acts like those Cameron witnessed - are among those environmental stressors that negatively impact the mental health of our minority populations.

¹ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services; 2021. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK575984/>

² Sacks, V. and Murphey, D. The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, nationally, by state and by race/ethnicity. *Child Trends*, 2018. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACESBriefUpdatedFinal_ChildTrends_February2018.pdf

Thank you, committee members, for taking the time to hear my testimony, and thank you, Delegate Henson, for sponsoring this important legislation. Our students and their families will be that much better able to navigate the challenges and pressures of higher education for it.