

Samay Kindra - Written Testimony for HB 573

Committee on Appropriations, February 28, 2023

Access to Mental Health Advisory Committee - Establishment

POSITION: FAVORABLE

I want to begin by thanking Delegate Boafu for introducing this bill and the Committee on Appropriations for reviewing my testimony. The origins of this bill date back to 2019 during my time at the University of Maryland, College Park, where I served as the Director of Government Affairs for the Student Government Association. We knew students on our campus were facing a great deal of struggle with their mental health and receiving adequate treatment. It quickly became apparent that a coordination and transparency gap prevented us from determining where our mental healthcare was failing. From my years of experience working on this issue on college campuses, establishing this committee is necessary to fully understand and address the mental health crisis facing our college students.

For minority communities, the need for accessible mental healthcare on campuses is even greater. The decision to pursue higher education exposes students to new stressors that come with exploring areas of academic interest, developing new personal and professional connections, and experiencing a heightened sense of independence all at once. Minority communities experience additional stressors from being on campuses where they are often underrepresented. Additionally, they may have to rely solely upon their school's mental healthcare system due to the stigma surrounding mental health that persists in their communities. This has led to the current mental health accessibility issue having an exacerbated impact on students from minority communities.

The increased student need for mental health care services in higher education institutions is well documented. According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2019 Annual Report, the percentage of students seeking counseling with symptoms of depression or anxiety has escalated over the past ten years. Further, the number of intake appointments at the University of Maryland's Counseling Center increased by 15% during the 2018 and 2019 academic years and 26% from the previous three-year average, according to the 2018-2019 Annual Counseling Center report. Despite implementing a novel triage-counseling approach, students still struggle to schedule with a counselor promptly.

While we know of our students' ever-growing need for mental healthcare, we still need to fully understand where our current shortcomings are. This is attributable mainly to the lack of a coherent structure or body responsible for mental healthcare practices across our university and college system. This results in a gross disaggregation of data, diffusion of responsibility, and a lack of coherent shared best practices between schools and within individual campuses. When we fail to understand the mental healthcare crisis, our students suffer.

This bill will give higher education officials the tools necessary to better address our structure for mental healthcare for our students, advancing Maryland campuses as environments where mental health is prioritized, and students can thrive. I urge you to support this bill and provide students with this task force necessary for identifying and removing structural inefficiencies that prevent effective mental health care at higher education institutions.