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Senate Bill 328 Board of Public Works Public Comment Act
Budget and Taxation Committee
February 8, 2023
Position: SUPPORT

Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) is a nonprofit education and advocacy organization that brings together consumers, families, clinicians, advocates and concerned citizens for unified action in all aspects of mental health and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as behavioral health). We appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony in support of Senate Bill 328.

SB 328 improves the Board of Public Works' (BPW) process for collecting public input. It requires BPW to collect public input electronically and requires that input to be posted online and included in meeting packets prepared for members of the Board.

Decisions made by BPW can have serious ramifications for Marylanders living with mental health and substance use disorders, as evidenced over the past three years by disruption in the delivery of public behavioral health services (PBHS) caused by Optum Maryland. Although BPW members questioned Optum's lack of experience, the Board in 2019 approved the Maryland Department of Health's (MDH) selection of Optum as the state's new PBHS administrator. The three years since that decision have been challenging, to say the least. Optum's IT system failed immediately, and years of chaos and uncertainty have followed.

Many in the behavioral health community were concerned about MDH's selection of Optum for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, although behavioral health consumers, families, advocates and others bring a wealth of knowledge that could prove beneficial in consequential large-scale decisions like this, we were not permitted to participate on the MDH evaluation committee that assessed the various proposals submitted by interested vendors. The public's only opportunity to provide feedback regarding the selection was with BPW after it received the MDH recommendation. But unfortunately, there was no formal process for communicating these concerns or any assurance that these comments would be relayed to the Board members.

SB 328 will better ensure BPW members benefit from input by those who will be impacted by Board decisions. For this reason, MHAMD supports this bill and urges a favorable report.

For more information, please contact Dan Martin at (410) 978-8865