



## Senate Bill 480

### *Mental Health Law – Assisted Outpatient Treatment Programs*

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Finance Committee

Date: February 28, 2023

From: Sarah Sample

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** SB 480. This bill authorizes counties to establish an Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) program for mental health treatment in their local jurisdictions. Having the option to provide these types of services gives county governments the tools to serve residents in need at a time when the demand has reached record heights.

The pressure for mental health services increased exponentially during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, which effectively overwhelmed existing resources that are available in communities for vulnerable populations. Many private and public programs that provide inpatient and outpatient treatment simply did not have the capacity to care for the number of people in crisis. Staffing shortages have exacerbated this problem. These realities have resulted in the diversion of mental health patients from the appropriate programs into emergency rooms and county correctional facilities, which compromises safety and medical resources for all residents.

The shortfall of bed space in State mental health facilities has multiple dire effects. Local detention centers face a persistent critical backlog of inmates suited for transfer to such a facility, many under court order for such a relocation. But the lack of available space leaves local detention centers housing and trying to care for people who need and deserve proper psychiatric care elsewhere. The flexible and early intervention for these individuals through AOT programs can result in less demand on programs that are becoming *de facto* treatment centers but are simply not equipped to provide this type of care.

Counties applaud the potential expansion of AOT within Maryland, as it has been shown to reduce rates of hospitalization, arrest, and incarceration in states where it has been implemented. Individuals experiencing ongoing mental illness are often met with the unfortunate reality that many communities do not yet have the state-provided programs in place to meet their unique needs. This can lead to their admittance into emergency rooms or correctional facilities, circumstances which could severely aggravate their already potentially dire health condition. These institutions are simply not functionally equipped nor properly intended to serve those needs.

By providing outlets appropriately tailored to this vulnerable population, this legislation could serve to alleviate the mounting pressure that has been hampering emergency rooms and correctional facilities across the state. The benefits are innumerable to staffers and residents alike as more resources will be effectively employed for their expected use rather than overwhelmed by the needs of individuals who require an entirely different type of intervention and care.

Counties can see the obvious, and proven, results these programs have the potential to produce and accordingly urge a **FAVORABLE** report on SB 480.