



February 14, 2023

The Honorable Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk
Chair, House Health and Government Operations Committee
Room 241, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**House Bill 283 - Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Gender-Affirming Treatment
(Trans Health Equity Act of 2022) - FAVORABLE**

Dear Chair Peña-Melnyk and House Health and Government Operations Committee members,

Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition (BHRC) is an advocacy organization that mobilizes community members for the health, dignity, and safety of people targeted by the war on drugs and anti- sex worker policies. As a certified Overdose Response Program, naloxone distributor, and syringe service program we have provided essential health care services across the state for years. For this reason and more we support HB283, the Trans Health Equity Act of 2022.

Maryland continues to rely on 20-year old standards of care to attempt to meet the needs of its transgender and gender diverse residents. In turn, our state categorically denies dozens of gender-affirming services, all of which are federally approved and reimbursable. Without access to these services we are pushing vulnerable trans and gender diverse Marylanders further into the margins by exposing them to more employment and housing discrimination, harassment, and interpersonal violence.

Increasing access to gender-affirming surgeries is a community harm reduction strategy and supported by public health research. Studies have shown that transgender and gender diverse people with a history of gender-affirming surgery have significantly lower rates of behavioral health concerns such as substance use, suicidal ideation,¹ and sharing non-sterile syringes needed for gender-affirming medical care.² Insurance is proven to be a significant barrier to accessing hygienic supplies and wrap-around health care services to address behavioral and physical health needs. Furthermore, studies and cost benefit analyses show that access to sterile supplies saves money, largely from averted HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C infections.³

¹ Almazan AN, Keuroghlian AS. Association Between Gender-Affirming Surgeries and Mental Health Outcomes. JAMA Surg. 2021;156(7):611–618. doi:10.1001/jamasurg.2021.0952

² Jennifer L. Glick, Katherine M. Andrinopoulos, Katherine P. Theall, and Carl Kendall. Tiptoeing Around the System: Alternative Healthcare Navigation Among Gender Minorities in New Orleans. Transgender Health 2018 3:1, 118-126

³ Australian Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging. Return on Investment in Needle and Syringe Programs in Australia.

The healthcare community needs to eliminate access barriers and support harm reduction strategies. Gender-affirming surgeries should be made available for transgender and gender diverse people who seek them, and Maryland must remove barriers to gender-affirming surgery such as insurance exclusions for such care.

BHRC recently launched an MDH-approved free statewide mail-based syringe service program specifically for transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people who inject hormones for hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This program is meant to address a gap in syringe distribution specifically for the needs of transgender community members whose medical needs are not met by our current system. Our community members experience significant barriers from pharmacies and healthcare providers when attempting to receive health care supplies for life-affirming medication. These barriers are rooted in transphobic policies and practices.

It is time for Maryland to join a cohort of over 10 states and the District of Columbia who provide comprehensive, gender-affirming care under Medicaid. BHRC asks that the House Health and Government Operations Committee give HB283 a favorable report.

For more information about Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition or our position, please contact our Director of Mobilization, Rajani Gudlavalleti at rajani@baltimoreharmreduction.org