



February 22, 2023

**House Health and Government Operations Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT**

HB 454 – Health Occupations - Licenses, Certificates, and Registrations - Immigrants

Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) is a nonprofit organization that serves as the local behavioral health authority (LBHA) for Baltimore City. BHSB works to increase access to a full range of quality behavioral health (mental health and substance use) services and advocates for innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery for individuals, families, and communities. Baltimore City represents nearly 35 percent of the public behavioral health system in Maryland, serving over 78,000 people with mental illness and substance use disorders (collectively referred to as “behavioral health”) annually.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore supports HB 454 – Health Occupations - Licenses, Certificates, and Registrations - Immigrants. This bill would require Maryland’s Health Occupation Boards to issue a license to qualified candidates regardless of immigration status. This important bill would address the acute health workforce shortage in the state and allow qualified professionals to practice.

Maryland is experiencing a severe shortage of virtually all licensed health professionals. Nurses, doctors, and support staff are in short supply, and there is higher demand than ever. For behavioral health professionals, the shortage is just as severe if not worse. Maryland has 63 federally designated mental health professional shortage areas, including 15 entire counties.¹ Most behavioral health providers have numerous open positions that are going unfilled and the unmet demand for services is only increasing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, disruptions, and isolation. The state must do more to increase the number of mental health professionals practicing in the state, and this is a strong proposal to do so.

It is important to emphasize that this bill does not dilute any requirements or standards that an individual must satisfy to become licensed or certified. It simply allows individuals to be considered for application who, under today’s rules, are not currently permitted due to lacking a social security number.

HB 454 is a reasonable approach that would allow additional individuals to become licensed or certified under the appropriate health occupation board. **BHSB urges a favorable report for HB 454.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Policy Director Dan Rabbitt at 443-401-6142

Endnotes:

¹ Rural Health Information Hub available at: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/charts/?state=MD>