

March 29, 2023

Chairwoman Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and distinguished members of the Ways and Means Committee,

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a statewide network of more than 58,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a non-profit that is dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for persons with mental illnesses, their families and the wider community.

NAMI supports public policies and laws that enable all schools, public and private, to increase access to appropriate mental health services. Undiagnosed, untreated, or inadequately treated mental illnesses in children can significantly interfere with a student's ability to learn, grow and develop. Since children spend much of their productive time in educational settings, schools offer a unique opportunity for early identification, prevention, and interventions that serve students where they already are. School-based mental health services can help students access needed services during the school-day.

School-based mental health services are delivered by trained mental health professionals who are employed by schools, such as school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses. We recognize that serious shortages exist in the mental health professional workforce. By offering loan repayment for school psychologists, resource psychologists, psychologist coordinators, social workers, social worker supervisors, or mental health coordinators through an expansion of the Janet L. Hoffman program, we are incentivizing the recruitment and retainment of mental health professionals in public schools. Offering tuition repayment will allow individuals to enter and stay in the workforce—leading to a better system of care.

Early identification and effective treatment for children and their families can make a difference in the lives of children with mental health conditions. We must take steps that enable all schools to increase access to appropriate mental health services. Schools can play an important role in helping children and youth get help early. Early treatment is effective and can help young people stay in school and on track to achieving their life goals. In fact, the earlier the treatment, the better the outcomes and lower the costs. By retaining mental health professionals in schools, we can offer our children the mental health care they deserve.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.