



March 29, 2023

House Ways and Means Committee
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT

SB 482 – Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program- Mental Health Professionals in Public Schools

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 SB 482- Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program- Mental Health Professionals in Public Schools. This bill expands the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Assistance Repayment Program to include mental health professionals who work in public schools.

Maryland has faced a behavioral health workforce shortage for many years and the pandemic only made this worse. Maryland has 63 federally designated mental health professional shortage areas, including 15 entire counties.¹ behavioral health providers have numerous open position that are going unfilled, and this is harming access to care for Marylanders around the state. This shortage extends across a variety of settings including school-based behavioral health services.

Mental Illness and substance use among children are important behavioral health issues that significantly impact children, families, and communities. Behavioral health conditions children and youth experience can tie into major problems found in schools such as chronic absence, low achievement, disruptive behavior and dropping out. Early Intervention and access to behavioral health services in Maryland schools provide students with the resources needed to achieve academic success.

The enormity of the student debt crisis is staggering. The Federal Reserve has reported a record-breaking \$1.7 trillion in federal and private student loan debt, which is currently held by more than 44 million Americans.² This burden has enormous repercussions. Recent graduates may experience a narrowed sense of possibility including the career path they may choose. Allowing mental health professionals in public school settings to qualify for the Janet L. Hoffman Loan Repayment program will help schools recruit and retain mental health professionals that will provide critical services to youth. As such, **BHSB urges the House Ways and Means Committee to support SB 482.**

For more information, please contact BHSB Director, Policy and Stakeholder Engagement Stacey Jefferson at 443-813-9231 or stacey.jefferson@bhsbaltimore.org

¹ Rural Health Information Hub available at: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/charts/7?state=MD>

² Harvard Business Review. *Companies Can and Should Help Employees Pay Student Loans* available at: <https://hbr.org/2021/03/companies-can-and-should-help-employees-pay-student-loans>